

Who Rules the Waves?

Sea-storms as motifs establishing *potestas* and *auctoritas* in the Christian tradition

An Egyptian text known as the Wescar Papyrus (1500 B.C.) contains a story purporting to date to more than 1,000 years before its composition, to the reign of pharaoh Khufu (Cheops), and concerns his father Seneferu. Tchatcha-em-ankh, Seneferu's High Priest, is summoned to alleviate pharaoh's *ennui*, and he suggests that his master sail the great lake near his palace and pose before his subjects in a ship laden with his royal possessions and rowed by twenty virgins. This is done, but during the voyage the lead oarswoman loses a valuable trinket in the lake, and the High Priest is charged with solving the problem: "[He] spake certain words of power, and having thus caused one section of the water of the lake to go up upon the other, he found the ornament lying upon a pot-sherd, and he took it and gave it to the maiden ... The magician again uttered certain words of power, and the water of the lake became as it had been ..." (Budge 1901, ii 7-10).

Wallis Budge conjectured that this story was the basis for the later Mosaic account in which the leader of the Exodus parted the waters of the Red Sea (Exod 14:21-29; Kathisma xv Ps 105:7-12 [Septuagint]). In both cases the successful performance of an act clearly impossible according to natural law was evidence of individual power. However, the important difference lay in the fact that whereas Tchatcha-em-ankh had performed his feat of magic as a result of personal power over the elements, Moses had been the instrument of a higher power, thereby establishing not his own influence over water but Yahweh's authority over pharaoh.

This departure from primitive natural magic is hugely significant for the future development of this theme. In true non-Aten monotheism of the Old Testament, and therefore subsequently orthodox Christianity, the sea was governed – to employ a feudal term – as a dependency of the Lord: "Thou art sovereign over the strength of the sea, and the tumult of her waves Thou makest calm" (Kathisma xii Ps 88:9 [Septuagint]), and a concordance reveals numerous instances establishing this new link (1).

Perhaps the finest Scriptural passage appears in one of the Psalms: "They that go down to the sea in ships, doing their work in many waters, these have seen the works of the Lord, and His wonders in the deep. He spake, and a wind of tempest arose, and the waves thereof were lifted up. They mount as high as the heavens, and they go down into the abysses; their soul was meletd with evil. They were troubled, and they reeled like one drunken, and all their wisdom was swallowed up. And they cried unto the Lord in their affliction, and out of their distresses he bought them. And He commanded the tempest, and it was calmed into a breeze, and the waves thereof fell silent" (Kathisma xv Ps 106: 23-29 [Septuagint]). This passage establishing the power and authority of Yahweh was clearly echoed in the synoptic gospels where Jesus's disciples attempted to cross Lake Gennesaret

when a sudden and violent storm threatened to sink their boat (Mk 4:35-41; Matt 8:23-27; Lk 8:22-25). A supplication to Jesus met with a favourable response and they were saved, thus establishing Jesus as the Son of God as intercessor – a new relationship for a new testament.

Medieval piety, bibliolatrous and obsessed with Scriptural allegory, saw the ship on the lake as the Church in the world, storm-tossed by demons and unbelief. Two of the synoptic gospels and John included the celebrated account of Jesus walking on the water, which again involved a ship threatened by a storm, and again calmed by Jesus after Simon Peter almost drowns (Mk 6:45-56; Matt 14:22-36; John 6:15-26). The desire to perhaps create a miracle may have hinged on the translation of a specific Hebrew article of grammar (Schonfeld 1985, 89 n4), and the fact that Jesus never claimed divinity meant that it had to be done for him, apparent in such exclamations as “of a truth thou art the Son of God” (Matt 14:33; Vermes 1993, 152-83), precisely because prior to this time the calming of storms was the sole prerogative of Yahweh.

In an exegetical sermon on the Gennesaret passage, St Anselm of Bec (*ob.* 1109) summed up the medieval interpretation, adding that the central theme was the establishment in the pious mind of Christ’s power over demons who threatened God’s church on earth, and that *only* through recourse to Him was *their* usurpation of storm-control possible (Neale 1856, 88-90). A recent view adds that this passage establishes faith in Jesus as an intercessor, providing the faithful with confidence in this conviction, just as Julius Caesar is supposed to have done during a crossing from Apollonia to Brindisi, only of course in his case the power was inherent (and therefore demonic) as with Tchatcha-em-ankh (Craveri 1967, 109-11). Another interpretation suggests that all these related themes were designed to impose the *auctoritas* and *potestas* of a monotheistic deity over humankind during the complex move away from polytheism (Thisleton 1992, 286).

This was not only a psycho-textual development in the form of confirmation miracles but also a series of theological postulates crucial to appreciating why and how this motif (2) was able to be extended to the secular human sphere, where it has held a formidable place in exegetical and didactic writings until the nineteenth century. At first, natural laws governing natural phenomena could be influenced by natural magic; this subsequently became the sole province of a single deity, acting through his at times intemperate will alone; however, the Incarnation of this (modified) deity then logically assumed the potency of the original source, less the arrogance of Yahweh. But, as this third phase necessarily concluded with the Crucifixion, the motif survived through actions associated with those living out the archetypal life of the Saviour by the process known as *Imitatio Christi*.

These are legion in hagiographical tradition. In the early Church period, a measure of control over the sea and sea-storms was exhibited by SS Clement I, bishop of Rome (*ob.* 99); Gregorius Thaumaturgus, bishop of Pontus (*ob.* 270); Nicolas, bishop of Myra in

Lycia (*ob. ante* 325); Hilarion, bishop of Palestine (*ob.* 372); and Castor, bishop of Apt (*ob.* 425).

St Nicolas was supposed to have saved some sailors from a storm off the Lycian coast, after which he was claimed by sailors as their patron saint (3). Similarly, a mozaic of St Castrensis, bishop of Castel Volturno in about 500, located in the twelfth-century Norman/Byzantine cathedral of Monreale in Sicily, to which the martyred bishop's body was translated, shows him saving six sailors from a tempest. In the side aisle is another mozaic depicting the gospel miracle of Jesus walking on the water and saving Simon Peter from drowning. Medieval stylisation apart, the obvious artistic similarity between the sea, boat, facial expressions, bodily poise, colours, and costumes between these two mozaics demonstrates how the local saint successfully imitated Christ by his piety and actions.

This became contemporary, rather than retrospective, for the first time with St Gregory of Tours (*ob.* 594) who stayed with the Merovingian king Childebert II of Austrasia at Coblenz sometime between 585 and 590: "When the meal was over, I rose from my seat and went down to the river. I found waiting on the bank a boat which had been made ready for me. I went on board, but a motley crowd of individuals followed me. As the boat filled with men it also filled with water. God in his omnipotence performed a miracle, for, though the boat had water up to its gunwale, it could not sink" (Thorpe 1974, 444). This entry is important for the evolution of the motif because it did not to rely on rubrics relating to exercises in divine recapitulation but featured as true personal experience transmitted as history. For those who may have found the gospel accounts incredible (and there were many) such a casual and unsophisticated account may have been impressive.

We can see something of this happening again with the seven-year voyage – part literary archetype and part historical fact – of St Brendan (Brenainn) 'the Voyager', abbot of Clonfert (*ob.* 577/83), whose *Navigatio Sanctii Brendani* dates to the early ninth century: "Now on one occasion when they were on the wondrous azure-rimmed ocean, they saw deep flood-like currents and black, vast whirlpools. Then it seemed as if the boats must be swamped by the greatness of the storm. Each of them began to look in Brendan's face ... Brendan lifted up his voice on high, and said: 'It is enough, O though great sea, that I be drowned, but spare this company'. Then the sea became calm at once, and the boiling of the whirlpool abated, and from that time forth it has never injured anyone" (Plummer 1922, ii 60). The story is again simple and appealing, offered up as history and not a sermon, with Brendan admonishing the sea rather than directly supplicating God. There is no animism here, though, but the notion that the step between a true religious and God is beautifully brief and God knows the desire of the heart.

Such historical examples, in which the motif was presented as directly linked with events fixed in annals that could be theoretically checked by literate investigators, became frequent by the eleventh century, when they almost always served some purpose other than to stupefy. The records of Ramsey Abbey inform us that in 1040 the ambassadors sent to Bruges appointed to return Harthacnut to England, following the death of his ruling

brother Harald Cnutsson, were accompanied by Aelfweard, abbot of Evesham. During the crossing a severe storm threatened both the ship and the mission, but both were saved by the intercession of St Egwin (*ob.* 717) at the prayerful supplication of the abbot, thereby suggesting that both St Egwin and God approved of the mission. Here the mechanism was one step further removed from direct action by God in the shape of the saint, and for a good if complicated set of historical reasons.

St Egwin, as bishop of Worcester, was the founder of Evesham Abbey to which he would be translated as saint in 1183. But since the text in fact describes Egwin as *beati* and not yet *sancti* we may suppose that full approval of his cult had not yet been obtained from the current bishop of Worcester (Lyfing), with whom Aelfweard was involved in a bitter dispute. Aelfweard was also bishop of London (1034), while Egwin was one of a number of Saxon saints whose status had been questioned by Lanfranc, the pre-Conquest Norman archbishop of Canterbury. Thus, when Egwin's relics subsequently went 'on tour' with Aelfweard a number of miracles were conveniently recorded, including the calming of another storm, thereby inspiring the first hagiographical *vita* of the disputed saint – commissioned by Aelfweard (Macray 1886, 149-50). Cynicism aside, it is clear that Egwin was introduced as proto-intercessor on the voyage in order to ascribe another miracle to him and increase his prestige before Aelfweard's Norman master.

When Harald Godwinsson sailed to Normandy in 1064, historical tradition, begun simultaneously by William of Malmesbury (*ob.* 1143) and Henry of Huntingdon (*ob.* 1160), states that the strong wind clearly seen in the Bayeux Tapestry was in fact a storm that blew him off course to land at Valery-sur-Somme where he was captured by Guy, count of Ponthieu. Released by Duke William of Normandy, he swore fealty to the Norman and thereby set in motion the final phase of the Norman Conquest (Stubbs 1887-89, i 279; Greenway 1996, 380-81). The famous tapestry is not explicit (“... et velis vento plenis venit ...”) and even the two chroniclers differ: William claimed that Harald was fishing by Bosham in Sussex when the storm blew in the Conquest; Henry that Harald was on his way to Flanders. Both, however, were antipathetical to the Conquest and happy to see in the storm the inscrutable will of God (though this was not mentioned) rather than the dubious probity of late Anglo-Saxon politics. In fact, this preference was not so far from the historical truth. In September 1066, Duke William was land-locked in the Somme by a severe northerly wind, the same one that enabled Harald Hardrada to set sail from Norway to England. The battle of Stamfordbridge was fought on 25 September, and two days later a sudden change in the direction of the wind enabled Duke William to effect a rapid crossing, thus forcing Harald Godwinsson's exhausting and fatal march south to Hastings. Will of God or not, it is a fact often overlooked that England's historical destiny was radically altered by a storm (4).

A later Mediterranean account provides us with an amusing piece of Cistercian lore. The Catalan zealot St Bernat de Calbo, bishop of Vic (*ob.* 1243), decided to play a more active role in the conversion of the Moors of Valencia in 1238 to supplement the military

intervention of Jaume I of Catalonia-Aragon. Sailing from Salou south of Tarragona, he was immediately enveloped by a violent storm and prayed for salvation. The prayers eventually met with a favourable response, but not before the ship had been carried well beyond Valencia, with no hope of returning to his destination. So Bernat then asked his crew whether he might be taken to Majorca instead, as there were Moors there too. But yet another storm rose up and Bernat spent the entire night in solitary prayer that his ship may again be spared. It was, but once again it had been blown off course, only this time everyone was astonished to find that they were drifting smoothly back into Barcelona harbour (Fort i Cogul 1974, 217). Like his great namesake of Clairvaux, this Bernat was also a Cistercian reformer and a lively supporter of the crusades against the Moors in Spain, but the motif here enabled the hagiographer to explain that although a saintly Cistercian bishop may espouse a military cause he may not allow himself to become confused with the *miles Christi* who fought with real swords for his ideals!

The Tchatcha-em-ankhs of the world did not retire when Yahweh and Christian orthodoxy appeared before them. St Theodore of Tarsus, archbishop of Canterbury (*ob.* 690), prescribed a seven-year penance for those found guilty of storm-conjuring in his celebrated *Liber Penitentialis* (Migne 1841-55, lxxix cap ccclvi). A penitential in the *Decretum* of Burchard, bishop of Worms (*ob.* 1025), rejected the notion that sorcerers could manipulate the elements without God and condemned belief in such acts (Migne 1841-55, cxi 831-54), as had St Agobard, bishop of Lyon (*ob.* 840), in his *Liber contra insulam vulgi opinionem de grandine et tonitruis* in which he came close to heresy himself by denying that even saints could obtain such *potestas* through intercession (Migne 1841-55, civ 147-58). But Serapion, bishop of Valdimir in thirteenth-century Russia, followed the new Thomist view by condemning belief in the independent function of evil in manipulating natural phenomena (Bogert 1984, 280-310); in other words, if demons had done it, they had done so through the permission of God. This Thomism (based on Thomas Aquinas's interpretation of Job 38:8-11 'Hitherto shalt thou come, but no farther') formed the basis of the careful exposition of storm-conjuring by 'witches' in the infamous *Malleus Maleficarum* of 1486 (Part II Qn 1 Ch 15), by which time it was heretical to deny the practice.

In fact, belief in this had never been absent, and 'wind-sellers' were described by the monastic chronicler Ranulph Higden as commonplace on the Isle of Man in the fourteenth century (Babington & Lumby 1865-86, i 42). Christian preaching could not erase a parallel tradition of sorcery in which a pagan, even sometimes criminal, alternative fraternity were arrogating the power of God for *maleficia* once the Thomist exposition made theologically feasible the link between God and such allegedly evil intent through the power of the devil. A celebrated example of this comes from 1590 when the 'North Berwick witches' ('three covens') attempted to raise a storm to wreck the ship carrying Anne of Denmark, recently married to James VI of Scotland. They are said to have succeeded although the new queen escaped with her life. In 1661, the Forfar 'witches' are

also said to have succeeded in raising a storm, only this time allegedly sinking a ship and drowning their victims (Murray 1921, 51-52 & 116).

It is clear that the action allegedly thus obtained (and therefore also the motif along with it) was less effective as a tool for impression than the parallel one concerning the control of the tides (see 'Who Commands the Tides?'). This is because the storm has a detectable origin and conclusion in nature, and any miracle associated with storm-control would have to prove as one of its causative functions that the storm had not naturally begun or abated coincidentally, as of course all of them did. The motif therefore has to be more complicated to include such proofs in the form of detailed spells or supplications.

This can be seen in the parallel operation by *beneficia*, which was equally common but no more effective. On 17 August 1814, Sir Walter Scott felt quite able as a Christian on the verge of the Industrial Revolution to visit a nonagenarian wise-woman named Bessie Miller in the port of Stromness in the Orkney Isles from whom he could purchase a favourable wind to take him to the Shetland Isles and the Hebrides. "Bessie Miller's charm has failed us", he noted dryly in his journal the following day. "After a rainy night the wind has come round to the north-west, and is getting almost contrary" (Scott 1913, 207). Scott's no doubt rather playful indulgence in a relatively harmless form of *sortilegium* nonetheless did betray the steady influence, and also corruption, of the original belief in this secular context already attested to by Ranulf Higden.

But its true life would always be sacred. An eleventh century Irish poem, *The Tempest*, describes the terror a storm induced in the medieval sailor before attempting the orthodox exhortation: "Son of God the Father with almighty hosts, protect me from the horror of rough storms. Pure master of the sacrament, protect me from the great blast from Hell with its furious tempest" (Greene & O'Connor 1990, 129). Indeed, in the High Middle Ages the *Missa Sicca* (Dry Mass) evolved as a means of providing the Sacraments when celebrants were unavailable. This basic framework omitted the canon and all the liturgical duties of the priest and could therefore be used aboard ship to dispose of the dead. This *Missa pro Navigantibus* usually included a simple petition for succour against the 'horror of rough storms'.

Although this type of mass does not seem to have been formed before about 1250, and specific petitions have not survived, the Book of Common Prayer confirms the existence of the tradition to which precisely such supplications were added in 1661 when it was found that earlier versions proscribed under the Commonwealth were still being used by the navy. The words may have been new in 1661, but the sentiment was as old as the sea itself: "O most powerful and glorious Lord God, at whose command the winds blow and lift up the waves of the sea, and Who stillest the rage thereof; We Thy creatures cry unto Thee for help; Save, Lord, or else we perish". The motif was no longer the exclusive gift of the saint but open to Everyman. Although the Christian mechanics of supplication remained orthodox, as with Scott they could also be purely mechanical, available for an ounce of Faith or a few pennies.

Perhaps because of the increasing secularisation of society the classic motif of sea-storm control continued to be expressed in the lives of saints for several generations after the Reformation: SS Hyacintha Mariscotti (*ob.* 1640); Joseph of Copertino (*ob.* 1663); Joseph oriol (*ob.* 1702); and neophytos, bishop of Saidaia (*ob.* 1731).

However, it was the entirely secular use of the motif, emerging during the sixteenth century, that was to set the pattern for the centuries ahead. In his epic poem *Orlando Furioso*, set in the Carolingian era, Ludovico Ariosto (*ob.* 1533) used the motif to underscore the whim of *La Fortuna, Imperatrix mundi*, the new goddess of the Renaissance. For four days Prince Astolfo and his ship are held at bay by a great storm, which cannot be made to abate even with prayer and promises of pilgrimages. Astolfo had planned to sail to Barcelona or Valencia, but:

The tyrant has so fierce a mastery,
So forcefully from his black mouth he blows,
So swift the current of the restless sea,
Which at his bidding fast, yet faster flows,
It bears the vessel on more rapidly
Than ever falcon plummeted and rose;
The pilot fears they may be carried on
To the world's end, or otherwise undone.

(Reynolds 1975, Canto XIX:52)

The vessel is blown across the Mediterranean to the dangerous coast of Syria where an episode germane to the poem occurs, but the ship is powerless to do otherwise:

Yet if in harbour they perforce remain,
They risk to do so at too great a cost,
For death or servitude here lies in wait
For all whom error brings, or cruel fate.

(Canto XIX:55)

This last line with its reference to 'cruel fate' remained a favourite device of Ariosto, who later makes Astolfo again led by the wind to Rouen from London instead of to Calais (Canto XXII:9-10).

Nor is Astolfo the only character to meet with new adventures in this 'neo-pagan' manner. Orlando himself is blown off course to Antwerp while attempting to find the daughter of the king of Cathay (Canto IX:16-17). Shortly afterwards, Duke Bireno of Zealand, on his way to Scotland from Holland after his infidelity to his lover, is blown off course to a small island where he is inspired to maroon her (Canto X:16). But Ariosto also mentions Comachio, a town between the two mouths of the Po river, where "the people seek / the marshy delta and when wild winds blow / haul in the fish in plenty" (Canto III:41). Here sea-storms always presage good fortune by casting fish on the shore.

In *The Tempest*, William Shakespeare (*ob.* 1616) has Gonzalo utter his fear of sea-storms as the king's ship is dashed against the rocks of Prospero's island: "Now would I

give a thousand furlongs of sea for an acre of barren ground ... the wills above be done, but I would fain die a dry death” (Act I scene i). There is no reference here to the will of the one God, but to the wills of the many influencing forces associated with Renaissance thought. Shortly after this, Miranda tells her father Prospero (who had raised the storm in secret with the aid of the water spirit Ariel, whom he had released from captivity by the witch Sycorax): “Had I been any god of power, I would have sunk the sea within the earth or ere it should the good ship so have swallow’d ...” (Act V scene i). Once again, Miranda makes no orthodox Christian wish but one the ancient Greeks would have appreciated. Like Ariosto before him, Shakespeare used the terrible and irresistible force of a storm to set the entire tone of his play, one based on fate, magic, and unseen forces.

The motif had now reverted to its protean form. The composer and dramatist Richard Wagner (*ob.* 1883) left Pillau (Baltiysk) on 10 July 1839 bound for London, but the schooner was soon in danger of being blown off course by a sudden and terrifying storm and had to take refuge in a Norwegian fjord. This experience reminded Wagner of the legend of the Flying Dutchman, and he completed *Der fliegender Hollander* in 1841. This “storm-swept ballad”, as he called it, opens with one of the Dutchman’s septennial disembarkations in a Norwegian fjord, although in the original story a spectral ship was seen only in stormy weather off the Cape of Good Hope (previously Cape of Storms) and was a bad omen for those who saw it. Like Ariosto and Shakespeare, Wagner used the storm at the opening of his opera to set the dark tone of the ensuing drama.

The device was used to great effect by Bram Stoker (*ob.* 1912) in his gothic novel *Dracula* when the *Demeter* sets sail from Varna in Bulgaria to England with the count and his coffins on board. Like Astolfo, the crew suffer “four days in hell” when a tempest, whose waves “rose in growing fury, each overtopping its fellow, till in a very few minutes the lately glassy sea was like a roaring and devouring monster”, thrusts the ship towards the sands of Whitby harbour (Ch vii). Meanwhile, Mr Swales observes the ship struggling in the storm, saying to Mina Murray: “There’s something in that wind and in the host beyond that sounds, and looks, and tastes, and smells like death” (Ch vi). And we may add that there are not many laughs after that.

What of the motif in more recent times? At a popular level little has changed: between the two World Wars it was reported that Catholic priests in Provence could still cultivate a lively faculty for averting storms at the request of the peasantry, even to the jealousy of their bishops (Frazer 1936, I i 232). But probably the most enduring image of the last century in this respect remains the sorcerer from Walt Disney’s *Fantasia* (1940), whipping up a terrifying storm over land and sea to Rimsky-Korsakov’s *Noch’na gore Triglav* (1900). It would seem that the motif has run full circle back to Tchatcha-em-ankh, but without the belief.

NOTES

- (1) Exod 14:16 and 15:1-9; Neh 9:11; Job 26:12; kathisma v Ps 32:7, ix 65:5, x 79:15-19, xiii 94:5, xiv 103:7-8 (Septuagint); Prov 8:29; Isa 50:2; Jer 5:22; Jon 1:4-17; Nah 1:4.
- (2) These are listed in Dean Stith Thompson, *Motif Index of Folk-Literature* (1958), as ‘Waters magically divide and close’ [D 1551] and ‘Sea calmed by prayer’ [D 2151, 1, 4]. Additional individual motifs may be found under ‘Saints’ [V 220ff].
- (3) The *vita* of St Hilarion was by St Jerome (*ob.* 420) who claimed it was told to him by someone who knew Hilarion. The *vita* of St Nicolas was written in the ninth century.
- (4) Guillaume de Jumiege (*ob.* 1070-80) suggested that only a storm had prevented the invasion of England in 1033 by Robert I of Normandy on behalf of Aethelraed’s sons during the reign of Cnut the Great; according to Roger of Wendover (*ob.* 1236) and Roger de Hoveden (*ob.* 1220), Richard I Plantagenet (*ob.* 1199) was blown off course on his return from the Crusades in 1192, which misfortune eventually led to his capture by Duke Leopold of Austria; and some Catholics still lament the severe storms of July 1588 that had so favoured the much smaller English fleet at the time of the Armada.

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