



Divine Lockout

-Rev. George F. Dole



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*“The goods of life open the interiors of the mind, and these being opened,
truths appear in their own light, whence they are not only understood, but also loved.
It is otherwise when doctrinals are regarded primarily or in the first place.
Truths may indeed then be known, but they are not seen interiorly and loved from spiritual affection”¹*

-Emanuel Swedenborg, *Apocalypse Revealed* §82

The Bible tells the story of a relationship between divinity and humanity, a story that begins with creation and ends with the descent of the Holy City. Like parentheses, in a way, the beginning and the ending hold the story together. We might think of them as marking it off from the rest of the world’s literature, as establishing the boundaries within which its particular meaning is contained. A great deal happened in the world outside those boundaries—far more, certainly, than happened within them; but here is where we are called to focus our attention. There is a rabbinical tradition that carries part of this message in quite a charming way.

The first letter of the Old Testament is the letter beth, the first letter of the word b’reshith, “in [the] beginning.” It is shaped rather like a backward “C,” and since Hebrew is written from right to left, it is open toward what follows and closed to anything before it. We could say the same of an English text that began with the letter “C.” A rabbinical explanation of this is that what happened before the story started is beyond our knowing. What we need to know is contained in what follows. In a way, the closing words of the Book of Revelation serve a parallel function. What happens after the descent of the Holy City? “Let anyone who will take the water of life at no cost. . . Even so, come, Lord Jesus! The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all. Amen” (Revelation 22:17, 21-22).

The story may close with an invitation, with a promise, but it is decisively closed. There is a further symmetry to be seen when we lay the beginning and the ending side by side. The long tale does not end with a return to the garden but with the descent of a city. We are simply structures that

¹ Swedenborg, Emanuel. *Apocalypse Revealed*. Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1919.

are organized in such a way that they receive life. from the garden, though, they are both enclosures of blessedness. Everything that God made in the beginning was “very good” (Genesis 1:31), and nothing that in any way defiles will enter into the city (Revelation 21:27). In both garden and the city there are rivers (Genesis 2:10, Revelation 22:1), and in both garden and city we find the tree of life (Genesis 2:9, Revelation 22:2). It is a little like coming home after a lifetime in other lands and finding that home has changed a great deal while we were away, but somehow it is still home. The Holy City is what we were born for when we were born in the garden. The mixture of sameness and difference between the garden and the city is quite beautifully caught in one pair of details.

We read in Genesis (3:24) that after the expulsion from the garden the Lord God “placed the cherubim and a sword flaming and turning to guard the way to the tree of life.” There is no going back to the state of primal innocence once we have left it. On the literal level, some few individuals may succeed in going back to a pre-technological simplicity of life and living off the land, but for the vast majority of us there is no realistic prospect of turning the clock back. The Book of Revelation, though, tells us in effect that the cherubim guard only one of the ways to the tree of life. That same tree is found in the Holy City, and “its gates will never be shut by day, and there will be no night there.” The problem presented by the cherubim is resolved by the openness of the New Jerusalem. Just what is that tree of life, though? Perhaps the most concise explanation in our theology is found in Divine Providence (241): “We may conclude, then, that the tree of life in Genesis means the Lord as to his divine providence, and that the tree of knowledge means us as to our own prudence.” If we take seriously the statement that “our own prudence is nothing” (Divine Providence 191), we are at least intellectually aware that we are totally dependent on the Lord, as dependent as newborn babies. We are simply structures that are organized in such a way that they receive life, which is the essential theological meaning of the word “organisms.”

The door we left by has been forever closed to us. the growth of a will to take charge. This makes for difficulties, to be sure, but we know that without it there can be none of the acceptance of responsibility that is central to maturity. When Jesus said that we are to become as little children (Matthew 18:3), he did not mean that we are never to grow up. He was talking about a kind of

humility that does not take on full meaning until it coexists with the awareness that the Psalmist expressed in the words, “I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made.” The humility the Lord wants of us is not some abject recognition of worthlessness, but a recognition of the nature and source of our pricelessness. Each of us might say, “Yes, I’m wonderful, but it’s not my fault.” As a matter of fact, when we try to redesign ourselves we tend to make a mess of it. The description of the Holy City includes something like a paradox that begins to complete our sense of symmetry between the beginning of the story and its end. What is the point of the great, high wall if there are gates on every side and the gates are never shut? Or to put it another way, if no one enters in who “practices abomination or falsehood, but only those who are written in the Lamb’s book of life” (Revelation 21:27), what keeps such people out? Probably the simplest and most obvious answer has just been given: “And the city had no need of the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb” (Revelation 22:23).

The light of God’s glory is that one light that shows everything in its true colors. In that light abomination looks abominable and falsehood looks false. In that light, deception vanishes the way night vanishes when the sun rises. How are we judged? The Gospel of John says it most concisely: “And this is the judgment— that light has come into the world and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light”—and why?—“so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God” (John 3:19-21). This is what our reading from Swedenborg is saying when it says that “the Lord never consigns anyone to hell. Rather, we consign ourselves.” The context in which it says this calls for our close attention. It is said in explanation of one item in the self-description of the risen and glorified Lord: “and I have the keys of hell and death.”

The Lord, and only the Lord, has the key. I suspect that most of us instinctively read this as a statement of the power to keep the hells confined, but that is not the way our theology reads it. Here, it says, it means “the power to open hell,” to open hell “so that we can be brought out, and the power to close it” for one reason only, “so that we do not go back in once we have been brought out.” There

is a way of reading this that may complete the symmetry between beginning and ending. Let us imagine simply that ever since leaving the Garden of Eden, we have been on the wrong side of the door. The door we left by has been forever closed to us, but there are other doors, the gates to the Holy City. To enter one of these gates is to leave hell behind, so to say that these gates are always open is just another way of saying that the Lord is constantly opening the gates of hell to let us out. The Lord, and only the Lord, has the key. The Lord is the key, because the essence of hell is our belief in the illusion that we are self-sufficient, that we do not need the Lord. Here, though, we need to proceed with some care. The essence of hell is not the illusion itself, but our refusal to recognize that it is an illusion, or in more careful theological terms, “an appearance.” Our own prudence is nothing, we are told, but it does seem to be something, and it should seem to be something (Divine Providence 191). We are to shun evils as if of ourselves.

A friend in Germany recently sent me an article in which a German neurologist argues insistently that our freedom is an illusion, that all the workings of our minds are determined by what has happened in the past; but the neurologist then goes on to say that this is not a belief we could live by. We need a sense of freedom in order to have the sense of accountability on which human society depends for its survival. We are not, then, “evil people” because we are on the wrong side of the door. That is where we find ourselves, not where we have consciously chosen to be. The invaluable merit of the appearance that our own prudence is something is that it is the basis of a sense of responsibility. The problem with it—or one problem, at any rate—is that it all too easily mushrooms into a sense of total and absolute responsibility, a burden so great that our only alternatives are denial or despair. If the first law of divine providence is that we should act in freedom according to reason (Divine Providence 71ff.), this can be read as another way of saying that the Lord is constantly making sure that there is a way open to us out of the denial or despair that comes when we believe in the illusion of self-sufficiency. It is the way to the tree of life that is a way forward and not backward, a way to the recognition that the Lord is life itself and that we are designed as receptors of that life. That, surely, is the logic behind the statement in our third reading, “The reason ‘having the keys of hell and death’ does not mean the power to consign us to hell but the power to save us is that this follows immediately after the statement, ‘See, I am living for ages of ages,’ which means that he alone is eternal

life.”

Does all this make sense? It certainly leaves unsaid vastly more than it says. It does not cross all the ts or dot all the is, and it may actually put dots on some of the ts and crosses on some of the is; but there is surely a kinship between beginning and ending. After all, the One who has the keys of death and hell calls himself Alpha and Omega, Beginning and End, the First and the Last. Amen.