

CHAPTER 1

Providence and Shipbuilding

In the culture and climate of some four centuries B.C.E., shipbuilding played a very significant role in commercial competitions. Seafarers were involved in trading with peoples of various nations. Ship captains would vie with one another as to who has access to the choicest wood and constructed the best trading vessel. Each ship was placed under the protection of a particular god. This took the form of an ornate, carved statuette that served as a guarantee of good luck in business deals. As seafarers set out on trading vessel voyages over wild and threatening waves, sea captains were wont to offer a prayer to one of these carved images, set on the prow of their ship. It was this over-emphasis on human means which prompted the sacred writer to expose the foolishness of idolatry:

They give the name of god to what is made by human art; gold and silver which human workmanship has turned into the likeness of living things, blocks of senseless stone that human hands have carved long ago.

- Book of Wisdom 13:10

Long before the Book of Wisdom was ever written however, the psalmist had already expressed concern over an exaggerated trust in artifacts:

They have mouths but they cannot speak
They have eyes but they cannot see
They have ears but they cannot hear
There is never a breath on their lips
Their makers will come to be like them
And so will all who trust in them.

- Psalm 35

Although the reality of Providence permeates the Bible, the word as such occurs only once, explicitly. It too is found in the Book of Wisdom:

Your Providence, O God, is what steers the ship
Your Providence, O God, is what steers the ship
You have opened a pathway even through the sea
A safe path over the waves, showing that you can save
Whatever happens so that even without skill
A person may sail abroad.

- Wisdom 14:3-4

Michael O'Brien illustrates this message in his icon entitled, "The Angel of Providence".



Early in the history of the Church, one of the Fathers, Theodoret of Cyrus, writing on Divine Providence, returns to the shipbuilding metaphor:

For the Creator directs creation and has not left the ship of His making without a pilot, but is Himself both the shipright and the one who planted the raw material, both causing it to grow and building the vessel, and He continues to hold the rudder. The proof of this is in the circle of so many years and the vast span of time which, far from destroying the ship, has preserved it safe and reveals it not only to primitive peoples but to recent generations.

Although the Hebrews had a highly developed appreciation of a directing providence, the specific name is due to the influence of the Greeks, who did not attribute it to a personal God. They used the term to denote a rational order of things, where a divine reason permeates everything, sees ahead (*pro-videre*), provides for what is coming, and watches over someone's needs. The Bible's Book of Wisdom is closer to the Hebrew source of the word and draws upon a long tradition of salvation history. Written just a few years before the birth of Jesus, it was the last of the Old Testament books to be incorporated into the Canon of the Bible and as such it serves as a link between the Old and the New Testaments. The author could look back on all of the Old Testament and readily assent to the truth that the divine reason that permeates everything is indeed a divine providence, a power rightly attributed to God.

The Greek view of Providence was really a dogma of stoicism: events and things are predetermined and humans can only comply. For the sacred writer, on the other hand, Providence means Emmanuel (i.e. God with us). When the Hebrews adopted the word providence, they took it to mean not just an idea or concept but a reference to God acting in history, God allied with the people, in keeping with the idea that already prevailed in their sacred books. Faith in a Provident God prevails as a recurring theme in the New Testament, culminating in Jesus as the supreme manifestation of God's loving care for us. A non-negotiable element in the Christian view of our relationship with a Provident God is the virtue of humility. We acknowledge that our very lives are gifts received from the Giver of Life and we build our ships with our God-given talents.

To believe in Providence means to transform one's whole conception of the world. It ceases to be the world of natural science. It means that everything in the world retains its own nature and reality, but serves a supreme purpose which transcends the world: the loving purpose of God.

In order to come to terms with the true meaning of Providence we need to be sensitive to levels of discourse. One level speaks to our tangible, measurable human experience. Another level transcends the commonplace, challenges us towards richer meanings. For example, the solicitude of the shepherd is synonymous in the Sacred Scripture with the Providence of God. At one level the word shepherd means a person guarding the sheep and to some ears it has a male connotation. Yet it transcends gender to connote concern and thus becomes a particular expression of the Providence of God. At this level, Providence means that there is a seeing mind behind everything that happens and that I am the object of that seeing.