

# LAND OF THE LIVING

A Theology of the Last Things

By

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*Foreword by*

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## I

## WHAT EYE HAS NOT SEEN, GOD HAS REVEALED BY HIS SPIRIT

For I know that my Redeemer lives,  
and at the end He shall stand upon the dust; . .  
and from my flesh I shall see God.  
I myself shall see Him;  
my own eyes will look upon Him, and not another.  
My innermost self is consumed with desire (Jb 19:25-27; *New  
Vulgate*).<sup>1</sup>

**T**ODAY there are significant numbers who would not share afflicted Job's certitude. Many of us live in a society so empiricist that even the imagination is overloaded, gorged into saturated sleep. As a result, talk of what is as unlikely as seeing God in the flesh tends to be dismissed as chimerical or merely pious (*read unreal*) opinion. Even among Christians there are those who, like St. Thomas when Jesus spoke of His coming departure, would say, "Lord, we do not know where You are going, or the way." Others, in the midst of pain or the loss of a loved one, follow Tennyson in his questioning, unable to arrive, as he ultimately did, at an answer capable of giving assurance.

*Are God and Nature then at strife,  
That Nature lends such evil dreams?  
So careful of the type she seems,  
So careless of the single life.*

*"So careful of the type?" but no.  
From scarped cliff and quarried stone  
She cries, "A thousand types are gone;  
I care for nothing, all shall go.*

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<sup>1</sup> The translation of the Hebrew for these verses is very difficult, yielding differences in the various versions.

## IV

### THE NEW GENESIS

**S**PEAKING of Abraham, Sarah and the patriarchs, the author of the Letter to the Hebrews observes:

They . . . acknowledged themselves to be strangers and aliens on earth, for those who speak thus show that they are seeking a homeland. . . . They desire a better homeland, a heavenly one (Heb 11:13-16).

The faithful of the Old Testament beheld with obscured vision the country that awaited them, and so God, in guiding them, strove to keep alive their hope for that better homeland. To encourage the Israelites during their captivity in an alien land, He said through Isaiah: "Your eyes will see a king in his splendor, they will look upon a vast land" (Is 33:17). The prophet was referring to the return from the exile in Babylon, a going home that would let the people worship the Lord in a restored temple in their beloved country. For Christians, that land and the temple wherein the Lord dwelt among the Jews so that His beauty could be contemplated (cf. Ps 27:4) foreshadow (cf. 1 Cor 10:6) the homeland where those who have imitated the meekness of Christ shall inherit the whole earth (cf. Mt 11:29 and 5:5).

The Lord Almighty is the creator of all things visible and invisible, Who made them to exist and have life. "For God did not make Death, he takes no pleasure in destroying the living. To exist—for this he created all things" (Wis 1:13-14; *NJB*). This giving of being, the New Testament writers tell us, was done in and through Christ, "through whom all things were made" (cf. Jn 1:3; 1 Cor 8:6; Col 1:16; Heb 1:2).

The Book of Revelation appropriately thanks the Lord for the creation: "Worthy are you, Lord our God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things; because of your will they came to be and were created" (Rv 4:11). So marvelous is what He has brought to existence that, in a singularly profound sentence, Alan of Lille (died around 1202) has nature say,

## VII

### TO GAZE ON THE BEAUTY OF THE LORD

Sunset and evening star,  
And one clear call for me!  
And may there be no moaning of the bar,  
When I put out to sea,

But such a tide as moving seems asleep,  
Too full for sound and foam,  
When that which drew from out the boundless deep  
Turns again home.

Twilight and evening bell,  
And after that the dark!  
And may there be no sadness of farewell,  
When I embark;

For though from out our bourne of Time and Place  
The flood may bear me far,  
I hope to see my Pilot face to face  
When I have crost the bar.<sup>1</sup>

THESE are words of hope, based on faith. They are also the final thoughts of that same man who penned the Job-like challenges of the *In Memoriam*. By his own instructions, this poem was to be placed at the end of all the editions of Tennyson's works, even though it was not chronologically the last. The pain of the *In Memoriam* had given way to, was subsumed by, serenity. *Crossing the Bar* expresses the conviction that, despite the collapse of all around us and the death of loved ones and our own impending demise, we do not navigate alone. The journey in exile is always being guided; the pilgrimage is not without its Pilot. The One Who leads, moreover, is not merely a Guide; He is Himself the End and the reward of the journey.

#### The Apocalyptic Promises

To give us comfort during the passage and assurance of the good things that await its completion, this Steersman, Who is

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<sup>1</sup> Tennyson, "Crossing the Bar," *Tennyson: A Selected Edition*, edited by Christopher Ricks, Univ. of California Press, 1989, p. 665.