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THE

PROPHETS

HARPERPERENNIAL • MODERNCLASSICS
To the martyrs of 1940–45

All this has come upon us,
Though we have not forgotten Thee,
Or been false to Thy covenant.
Our heart has not turned back,
Nor have our steps departed from Thy way.

... for Thy sake we are slain

Why dost Thou hide Thy face?

—from Psalm 44
For the Lord God is my strength and my song,
And He has become my salvation.

Isaiah 12:2

“We have waited for Him, that He might save us” (Isa. 25:9). And the day will surely come “when the Lord binds up the hurt of His people, and heals the wounds inflicted by His blow” (Isa. 30:26). He hurts, and He heals.

Justice

SACRIFICE

Sacred fire is burning on the altars in many lands. Animals are being offered to the glory of the gods. Priests burn incense, songs of solemn assemblies fill the air. Pilgrims are on the roads, pageantries in the sacred places. The atmosphere is thick with sanctity. In Israel, too, sacrifice is an essential act of worship. It is the experience of giving oneself vicariously to God and of being received by Him. And yet, the pre-exilic prophets uttered violent attacks on sacrifices (Amos 5:21–27; Hos. 6:6; Isa. 1:11–17; Mic. 6:6–8; Jer. 6:20; 7:21–23; Isa. 61:1–2; Pss. 40:7; 50:12–13). Samuel insisted: “Has the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the Lord? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams” (I Sam. 15:22).* However, while Samuel stressed

*A sentence expressing a similar view is found in the Instruction for King Merikare, who ruled Egypt in the second half of the third millennium B.C.E. “More acceptable is the character of one upright of heart than the ox of the evildoer.” (ANET, pp. 417 f.) For other statements in later literature which have a bearing upon the attitude of the prophets to animal sacrifice, see R. S. Gripps, A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Amos (London, 1929), pp. 342 ff.; A. J. Heschel, Theology of Ancient Judaism, I (Heb.; London and New York, 1962), 33 ff.
the primacy of obedience over sacrifice, Amos and the prophets who followed him not only stressed the primacy of morality over sacrifice, but even proclaimed that the worth of worship, far from being absolute, is contingent upon moral living, and that when immorality prevails, worship is detestable. Questioning man’s right to worship through offerings and songs, they maintained that the primary way of serving God is through love, justice, and righteousness.

This is a paradox to be sure, and like every paradox its opposite is a view that is orthodox. It contains both a negation and an affirmation, the negation being more intelligible than the affirmation. It is difficult for us today to appreciate the boldness and defiance contained in these pronouncements. The distinction between the holy and the profane, between the divine and the mundane, is the basis of religious thinking. A line is drawn between the interests of man and the demands of God. What is it that all gods demand? Sacrifice, incense, reverence for their power. Sacrifice, the strength and the measure of piety, acts wherein God and man meet—all this should be called obnoxious?

Of course, the prophets did not condemn the practice of sacrifice in itself; otherwise, we should have to conclude that Isaiah intended to discourage the practice of prayer (Isa. 1:14–15).* They did, however, claim that deeds of injustice vitiate both sacrifice and prayer. Men may not drown the cries of the oppressed with the noise of hymns, nor buy off the Lord with increased offerings. The prophets disparaged the cult when it became a substitute for righteousness. It is precisely the implied recognition of the value of the cult that lends force to their insistence that there is something far more precious than sacrifice.

These feasts and assemblies, offerings and rites, hallowed by the loyalty of many generations, had become the essence of piety. One cannot doubt the sacred authenticity of the cult. It had a place and a procedure of its own, a sacred nimbus, a mysterious glory. It differed from all other pursuits; exceptional, striking, set apart, it conferred unique blessings. In the sacrificial acts something happened, something sacred was evoked, conjured up, initiated; something was released or cast away. The person was transformed, a communion vital to man and precious to God established.

In the sacrifice of homage, God was a participant; in the sacrifice of expiation, God was a recipient. The sacrificial act was a form of personal association with God, a way of entering into communion with Him. In offering an animal, a person was offering himself vicariously. It had the power of atonement.*

How supremely certain ancient man was that sacrifice was what the gods most desired may be deduced from the fact that fathers did not hesitate to slaughter their own children on the altar. When Mesha, the king of the Moabites, was hard-pressed in war, he sacrificed his own son, who would have reigned as his successor, for a burnt offering upon the wall (II Kings 3:27).!

To add paradox to sacrilege: all this grandeur and solemnity are declared to be second rate, or of minor importance, if not hateful to God, while deeds of kindness, worrying about the material needs of widows and orphans, commonplace things, platitudinous affairs, are exactly what the Lord of heaven and earth demands! To give up a thousand fertile vineyards for an acre of barren ground? To find the presence of God in the shape of righteousness?

What they attacked was, I repeat, supremely venerated: a sphere

*The original meaning of sacrifice is obscure; see R. de Vaux, Ancient Israel (New York, 1961), pp. 447 f., and the literature cited on pp. 548 f.

*The sacrificial cult was endowed with supreme "political" significance. It was the chief requirement for the security of the land and may be regarded as analogous to the cult of military defense in our own day. Both have their roots in the concern for security. Cease to appease the gods with offerings on the altars, and their anger will strike you down. Sacrifice is a way of preventing the attack. Even as late as the third century of our era "one of the commonest motives for the popular hatred felt toward Christians was the belief that, neglecting the sacrifices themselves and encouraging others to do likewise, they had aroused the fury of the gods against the Empire. In 410, after the capture of Rome by Alaric and his Goths, this prejudice had such power that Augustinus was compelled to answer it; in the first ten books of the City of God, he is engaged in showing that the Christians were not responsible for Rome's misfortunes." (A. M. J. Festugière, Epicure and His Gods (Oxford, 1955), p. 54.)
unmistakably holy; a spirituality that had both form and substance, that was concrete and inspiring, an atmosphere overwhelming the believer—pageantry, scenery, mystery, spectacle, fragrance, song, and exaltation. In the experience of such captivating sanctity, who could question the presence of God in the shape of a temple?

Let us go to His dwelling place;
Let us worship at His footstool!
Arise, O Lord, and go to Thy resting place,
Thou and the ark of Thy might.
Let Thy priests be clothed with righteousness,
And let Thy saints shout for joy.
For the Lord has chosen Zion;
He has desired it for His habitation:
This is My resting place forever;
Here I will dwell, for I have desired it.
Psalm 132:7–9, 13–14

It is hard for us to imagine what entering a sanctuary or offering a sacrifice meant to ancient man. The sanctuary was holiness in perpetuity, a miracle in continuity; the divine was mirrored in the air, sowing blessing, closing gaps between the here and the beyond. In offering a sacrifice, man mingled with mystery, reached the summit of significance: sin was consumed, self abandoned, satisfaction was bestowed upon divinity. Is it possible for us today to conceive of the solemn joy of those whose offering was placed on the altar?

Then I will go to the altar of God,
To God my exceeding joy;
I will praise Thee with the lyre,
O God, my God.
Psalm 43:4; cf. Deut. 12:18–19;
31:11; Exod. 34:23 f.; Isa. 1:12

GOD IS AT STAKE

Why should religion, the essence of which is worship of God, put such stress on justice for man? Does not the preoccupation with morality tend to divest religion of immediate devotion to God? Why should a worldly virtue like justice be so important to the Holy One of Israel? Did not the prophets overrate the worth of justice?

Perhaps the answer lies here: righteousness is not just a value; it is God’s part of human life, God’s stake in human history. Perhaps it is because the suffering of man is a blot upon God’s conscience; because it is in relations between man and man that God is at stake. Or is it simply because the infamy of a wicked act is infinitely greater than we are able to imagine? People act as they please, doing what is vile, abusing the weak, not realizing that they are fighting God, affronting the divine, or that the oppression of man is a humiliation of God.

He who oppresses a poor man insults his Maker,
He who is kind to the needy honors Him.
Proverbs 14:31; cf. 17:5

The universe is done. The greater masterpiece still undone, still in the process of being created, is history. For accomplishing His grand design, God needs the help of man. Man is and has the instrument of God, which he may or may not use in consonance with the grand design. Life is clay, and righteousness the mold in which God wants history to be shaped. But human beings, instead of fashioning the clay, deform the shape.

The world is full of iniquity, of injustice and idolatry. The people offer animals; the priests offer incense. But God needs mercy, righteousness; His needs cannot be satisfied in the temples, in space, but only in history, in time. It is within the realm of history that man is charged with God’s mission.

Justice is not an ancient custom, a human convention, a value, but a transcendent demand, freighted with divine concern. It is not only a relationship between man and man, it is an act involving God, a divine need. Justice is His line, righteousness His plummet (Isa. 28:17). It is not one of His ways, but in all His ways. Its validity is not only universal, but also eternal, independent of will and experience.

People think that to be just is a virtue, deserving honor and rewards; that in doing righteousness one confers a favor on society.
No one expects to receive a reward for the habit of breathing. Justice is as much a necessity as breathing is, and a constant occupation.

**The A Priori**

Power, omniscience, wisdom, infinitude, are the attributes that man associates with the Supreme Being. Justice is not necessarily regarded as an essential attribute of God, nor is charity considered in all religions an essential part of piety. The holy men of India, for example, stand aloof from moral issues, and the highest goal of Indian philosophy and piety is to shed the fetters of action by overcoming the inclination to be active. Indeed, books on religion in which no reference is made to morality are as common as books on morality in which no reference is made to religion.

Greek religion did not stress the connection between religion and morality.* It offered no precepts for the regulation of human conduct. Each god had his appointed sphere within which he exercised control. The gods were jealous to avenge any infringement of their privileges. But the sinner was punished, not as a moral offender, but as a trespasser against a divine power. In the tragedies the gods were considered guarantors of human justice, which consisted primarily of submission to destiny; but the gods in turn were not required to observe justice in their conduct toward mortals.

Occasionally we find the belief that certain gods who were the sources of the skills and wisdom of man had also given laws to him. In popular Greek religion there was a belief that specific laws were revealed by a god; among Cretans it was said to have been Zeus, and in Lacedaemon, Apollo. According to Homer, Minos, the Cretan lawgiver, “went every ninth year to converse with his Olympian sire”; his laws were derived from Zeus.† The difference, however, is that the laws, like the skills, are not regarded as being an expression of the personal will of the god; they are something that the gods have dealt out rather than something to which they remain personally committed.

There are few thoughts as deeply ingrained in the mind of biblical man as the thought of God's justice and righteousness. It is not an inference, but an a priori of biblical faith, self-evident; not an added attribute to His essence, but given with the very thought of God. It is inherent in His essence and identified with His ways.*

*The rock, His work is perfect; For all His ways are justice. O God of faithfulness and without iniquity, Just and right is He.*

Deuteronomy 32:4

**Righteous art Thou, O Lord, And right are Thy judgments.**

Psalm 119:137

God is the source of right (Deut. 1:17), judge of all the earth. It is inconceivable that He shall not do the right (Gen. 18:25), that He shall pervert justice (Job 8:3), or do wickedly (Job 34:12). “For the

*On the problem raised in Plato's *Euthyphro* and its relation to biblical thinking, see A. J. Heschel, *God in Search of Man* (New York, 1959), p. 17. The concern of the Deity in the administration of justice to the poor is found in other religions as well. Amon-Re, the Egyptian god, is addressed as he “who comes at the voice of the poor man. If I call to thee when I am distressed, thou comest and thou rescest me. Thou givest breath [to] him who is weak; thou rescest him who is imprisoned.” (ANET, p. 380.) A moving prayer for a helpless client in the court of law who is bewildered by the demands of the administrators of justice has come down from Egypt: “O Amon, give thy ear to one who is alone in the court of justice, who is poor.... The court cheats him of silver and gold for the scribes of the mat as well as of clothing for the attendants. May it be found that Amon assumes his form as the vizier, in order to permit the poor man to get off. May it be found that the poor man is vindicated. May the poor man surpass the rich.” (ANET, p. 380.) In a Babylonian hymn, Shamash the sun god is praised for punishing the unrighteous judge, the receiver of a bribe who perverts justice, and for being pleased with him who “intercedes for the weak.” (G. R. Driver, in D. C. Simpson, ed., *The Psalms* [London, 1926], p. 169.) See also J. Ferguson, *Moral Values in the Ancient World* (New York, 1959).
Lord is a God of justice” (Isa. 30:18). “The Lord is righteous, He loves righteousness” (Ps. 11:7). That “God is a righteous judge” is the incontestable premise of Jeremiah’s question, “Why does the way of the wicked prosper?” (Jer. 12:1.)

**MISHPAT AND TSEDAKAH**

The two key terms are *tse'dakah* (tsedek) and *mishpat*. The word *mishpat* means the judgment given by the *shofet* (judge); hence the word can mean justice, norm, ordinance, legal right, law. The word *tse'dakah* may be rendered by “righteousness.” While legality and righteousness are not identical, they must always coincide, the second being reflected in the first.*

It is exceedingly difficult to establish the exact difference in meaning of the biblical terms *mishpat*, justice, and *tse'dakah*, righteousness (which in parallelism are often used as variants). However, it seems that justice is a mode of action, righteousness a quality of the person. Significantly, the noun derived from *shofet* (to judge) is *shofet*, which came to mean a judge or arbitrator; while the noun from *tsadik* (to be just) is *tsaddik*, a righteous man.

Righteousness goes beyond justice. Justice is strict and exact, giving each person his due. Righteousness implies benevolence, kindness, generosity. Justice is form, a state of equilibrium; righteousness has a substantive associated meaning. Justice may be legal; righteousness is associated with a burning compassion for the oppressed. When you extend a loan to a poor man, “you shall not sleep in his pledge; when the sun goes down, you shall restore to him the pledge, that he may sleep in his cloak and bless you; and it shall be righteousness to you before the Lord your God” (Deut. 24: 10–13).†

*The word *mishpat* seems to imply the ability to discern between good and evil. Thus prayed King Solomon: “Give Thy servant an understanding heart to judge Thy people: to discern between good and evil” (1 Kings 3:9; cf. 3:11).

*“Hear my prayer, O Lord . . . Answer me in Thy *tse'dakah*. Enter not into judgment (*mishpat*) with Thy servant; for no man living is righteous before Thee. For Thy name’s sake, O Lord, preserve my life! In Thy *tse'dakah* bring me out of trouble” (Ps. 143:1–2, 11). “He will judge the world with righteousness” (Ps. 98:9), namely,

It would be wrong to assume that there was a dichotomy of *mishpat* and kindness; “Justice was not equal justice but a bias in favor of the poor. Justice always leaned toward mercy for the widows and the orphans.”* Divine justice involves His being merciful, compassionate.

*Therefore the Lord is waiting to be gracious to you;*  
*Therefore He exalts Himself to show mercy to you.*  
*For the Lord is a God of justice;*  
*Blessed are all those who wait for Him.*  

Isaiah 30:18

Justice dies when dehumanized, no matter how exactly it may be exercised. Justice dies when deified, for beyond all justice is God’s compassion. The logic of justice may seem impersonal, yet the concern for justice is an act of love.

**INSPIRATION AS A MORAL ACT**

If intense regard and concern for man is the mark of a moral act, then inspiration of the prophets in which God’s regard and concern for man are disclosed and in which the prophet is entrusted with a mission to help the people, must be viewed as an eminently moral act. The moral aspect sets the prophetic act apart from intellectual, artistic, and mystical experiences.

In archaic religions the relationship between man and his gods and the relationship between man and his fellow men represented two areas unrelated to each other. Man owed certain duties toward the

with kindness. “They ask of Me righteous judgments” (Isa. 58:2) rather than strict justice. “They shall judge the people with righteous judgment” (Deut. 16:18) is hardly a tautology. “O Lord, according to all Thy righteousness [or righteous acts], let Thy anger and Thy wrath turn away from Thy city Jerusalem” (Dan. 9:16). The word *tse'dakah* has often been rendered as *Strafgerechtigkeit*, though nowhere in the Bible is it used in this sense; see D. P. Volz, *Prophetenjüngere* (Stuttgart, 1949), p. 188, n. 1.

*R. Niebuhr, *Pious and Secular America* (New York, 1958), p. 92. It is significant that particularly in later Hebrew the word *tse'dakah* is linked with *hesed*, Jer. 9:29; Ps. 36:11; 40:11; 143:11 f.; see also Ps. 85:11.
gods—he must offer prayer and sacrifice, the neglect of which is sin—but these duties did not concern his relations to his fellow men. In performing the rites, in his search to share sanctity or to attain salvation, the religious man might experience the power and grandeur of the divine, the bestowal of grace, or the assumption of insight, but not the concern of the god for someone else.

Religious experience, in most cases, is a private affair in which a person becomes alive to what transpires between God and himself, not to what transpires between God and someone else; contact between God and man comes about, it is believed, for the benefit of the particular man. In contrast, prophetic inspiration is for the sake, for benefit, of a third party. It is not a private affair between prophet and God; its purpose is the illumination of the people rather than the illumination of the prophet. (See p. 462.)

The phenomenon of prophecy is predicated upon the assumption that man is both in need of, and entitled to, divine guidance. For God to reveal His word through the prophet to His people is an act of justice or an act of seeking to do justice. The purpose of prophecy is to maintain the covenant, to establish the right relationship between God and man.

**PERVERSION OF JUSTICE**

The fact that filled the prophets with dismay was not the absence of adequate laws, but the absence of righteousness. Judges were active in the land, but their judgments were devoid of righteousness. The prophets were shocked not only by acts of injustice on the part of scoundrels but also by the perversion of justice on the part of the notables. When warped and garbled, justice yields strife and distrust.

*Do horses run upon rock?*
*Does one plow the sea with oxen?*
*But you have turned justice into poison,*
*The fruit of righteousness into wormwood.*

*O you who turn justice to wormwood,*
*And cast down righteousness to the earth!*
*Amos 6:12; 5:7; cf. Deuteronomy 29:17;*
*Jeremiah 8:14; 9:14; 23:15; Lamentations 3:15, 19; Proverbs 5:4*

*They utter mere words;*  
*With empty words they make covenants;*  
*So judgment springs up like poisonous weeds*  
*In the furrows of the field.*  
**Hosea 10:4**

Israel was the vineyard that the Lord had planted. He looked for it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes. He looked for it to yield justice, but it yielded perversion of justice; for righteousness, but it yielded outrage (Isa. 5:2).

The prophets consistently singled out the leaders, the kings, the princes, the false prophets, and the priests as the ones responsible for the sins of the community. (See Hos. 4:6, 8 f.; 7:3, 16; 9:15; Jer. 2:26.)

*Hear this, O priest!*  
*Give heed, O house of Israel!*  
*Harken, O house of the king!*  
*For the judgment pertains to you.*  
**Hosea 5:1**

*The Lord enters into judgment*  
*With the elders and princes of his people:*  
*It is you who have devoured the vineyard,*  
*The spoil of the poor is in your houses.*  
*What do you mean by crushing the people,*  
*By grinding the face of the poor?*  
*Says the Lord of hosts.*  
**Isaiah 3:14–15**

After declaring that no one in the streets of Jerusalem did justice or sought truth, Jeremiah added:
Then I said, These are only the poor,  
They have no sense;  
For they do not know the way of the Lord,  
The Torah of their God. 
I will go to the great,  
And will speak to them;  
For they know the way of the Lord,  
The Torah of their God.  
But they all alike had broken the yoke,  
They had burst the bonds.  
Jeremiah 5:4–5

“‘The shepherds are stupid’ (Jer. 10:21). ‘Thus says the Lord God: Behold, I am against the shepherds; I will require My sheep at their hand’ (Ezek. 34:10).

The Sense of Injustice

The prophets’ preoccupation with justice and righteousness has its roots in a powerful awareness of injustice. That justice is a good thing, a fine goal, even a supreme ideal, is commonly accepted. What is lacking is a sense of the monstrousness of injustice. Moralists of all ages have been eloquent in singing the praises of virtue. The distinction of the prophets was in their remorseless unveiling of injustice and oppression, in their comprehension of social, political, and religious evils. They were not concerned with the definition, but with the predicament, of justice, with the fact that those called upon to apply it defied it.

Justice may be properly described as “the active process of remediating or preventing what should arouse the sense of injustice.” What is uppermost in the prophets’ mind is not justice, “an ideal relation or static condition or set of perceptual standards,”** but the presence of oppression and corruption. The urgency of justice was an urgency of aiding and saving the victims of oppression. In the words of the psalmist:

From the heavens Thou didst utter judgment  
The earth feared and was still,  
When God arose to establish judgment  
To save all the oppressed of the earth.  
Psalm 76:9–10

Nonspecialization of Justice

Justice is scarce, injustice exceedingly common. The concern for justice is delegated to the judges, as if it were a matter for professionals or specialists. But to do justice is what God demands of every man: it is the supreme commandment, and one that cannot be fulfilled vicariously.

Righteousness must dwell not only in the places where justice is judicially administered. There are many ways of evading the law and escaping the arm of justice. Only a few acts of violence are brought to the attention of the courts. As a rule, those who know how to exploit are endowed with the skill to justify their acts, while those who are easily exploited possess no skill in pleading their own cause. Those who neither exploit nor are exploited are ready to fight when their own interests are harmed; they will not be involved when not personally affected. Who shall plead for the helpless? Who shall prevent the epidemic of injustice that no court of justice is capable of stopping?

In a sense, the calling of the prophet may be described as that of an advocate or champion, speaking for those who are too weak to plead their own cause. Indeed, the major activity of the prophets was interference, remonstrating about wrongs inflicted on other people, meddling in affairs which were seemingly neither their concern nor their responsibility. A prudent man is he who minds his own business, staying away from questions which do not involve his own interests, particularly when not authorized to step in—and prophets were given no mandate by the widows and orphans to plead their cause. The

prophet is a person who is not tolerant of wrongs done to others, who resents other people’s injuries. He even calls upon others to be the champions of the poor. It is to every member of Israel, not alone to the judges, that Isaiah directs his plea:

Seek justice,
Undo oppression;
Defend the fatherless,
Plead for the widow.
Isaiah 1:17

To the king as well as to the people, the prophet proclaims: “Thus says the Lord: Do justice and righteousness, and deliver from the hand of the oppressor him who has been robbed. Do no wrong or violence to the alien, the fatherless, and the widow, nor shed innocent blood in this place” (Jer. 22:3). “Amend your ways and your doings; . . . execute justice one with another; . . . do not oppress the alien, the fatherless, or the widow” (Jer. 7:5 f.).

In the Iliad gods as well as men are indifferent to wrongs inflicted, not upon themselves, but on others. Quite a number of homicides are mentioned. However, “outside the circle of the dead man’s kinsmen and friends, there is no indication of any popular sentiment against ordinary homicide. Odysseus, in his character of Cretan refugee, had told a tale to Eumaeus in which he represented himself as the slayer of the son of Idomeneus. It would be hard to imagine a more cowardly murder than this. And yet Eumaeus receives the supposed murderer with all the respect due to a stranger in accordance with the prevailing customs. Several murderers are mentioned as living as honored members of communities to which they had come as exiles.”


†R. J. Bonner and G. Smith, *The Administration of Justice from Homer to Aristotle* (Chicago, 1930), I, 16; II, 39 ff.: “Advocates were generally drawn from the litigant’s friends and relatives. In the course of time they tended to become professional, and the practice of paying advocates arose. Yet there was a law which forbade the paying of advocates in private suits. Although the law could not be enforced, it nevertheless embarrassed the advocate who could not claim relationship or close associ-

It was long after the time of the early prophets of Israel that a law of Solon’s (d. 559 B.C.E.) was promulgated in Athens which presupposed the readiness of the citizens to interfere when wrongs were inflicted on others. Solon “believed that the best-governing state was that in which those who had suffered no wrong were as diligent in prosecuting and punishing the wrongdoers as those who had suffered wrong.”† The first appearance of “advocates” was at a trial in 489 B.C.E. It was in Rome that the advocate, more through his oratorical art than through his knowledge of law, achieved outstanding eminence.†

An act of interfering in a case in which a wrong was inflicted upon someone else is reported from the time of David. After King David’s sin with Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah, the prophet Nathan went to David and told him a parable.

There were two men in a certain city, the one rich and the other poor. The rich man had very many flocks and herds; but the poor man had nothing but one little ewe lamb, which he had bought. And he brought it up, and it grew up with him and with his children; it used to eat of his morsel, and drink from his cup, and lie in his bosom, and it was like a daughter to him. Now there came a traveler to the rich man, and he was unwilling to take one of his own flock or herd to prepare for
the wayfarer who had come to him, but he took the poor man's lamb, and
prepared it for the man who had come to him. Then David's anger was
greatly kindled against the man; and he said to Nathan, As the Lord
lives, the man who has done this deserves to die; and he shall restore the
lamb fourfold, because he did this thing, and because he had no pity.
Thereupon Nathan said to David: You are the man.

II Samuel 12:1–6

Ahab, the king of Israel (875–853 B.C.E.), insisted upon securing
the property of Naboth of Jezreel. When the latter refused to sell it,
he was put to death on false accusation. For this outrage, Elijah the
prophet said to Ahab: “Have you killed, and also taken possession? . . .
Thus says the Lord: In the place where the dogs licked up the blood
of Naboth shall dogs lick your own blood” (I Kings 21:1–19).

THE LOVE OF KINDNESS

The demand is not only to respect justice in the sense of abstaining
from doing injustice, but also to strive for it, to pursue it.

Seek the Lord, all you humble of the land,
Who do His commands;
Seek righteousness, seek humility;
Perhaps you may be hidden
On the day of the anger of the Lord.

Zephaniah 2:3

“You who pursue righteousness, you who seek the Lord”—what
greater praise is possible than is given by the juxtaposition of these
phrases?

The imperative includes more than doing; it asks for love,*
beyond justice, it refers to good and evil. “Seek good and not evil. . . .
Hate evil and love good and establish justice in the gate” (Amos
5:14, 15).

“It has been told you, O man, what is good, and what does the
Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness (hesed), and
to walk humbly with your God” (Mic. 6:8)—doing justice as well as
loving kindness. The prophets tried to excite fervor, to make hesed an
object of love.

What the Lord requires of man is more than fulfilling one’s duty.
To love implies an insatiable thirst, a passionate craving. To love means
to transfer the center of one’s inner life from the ego to the object of
one’s love.

THE INNER MAN

Is this all the prophet came to teach us—social justice? Are there
no other demands to be satisfied, no other goals to be attained?

God not only asks for justice; He demands of man “to regard
the deeds of the Lord, to see the work of His hands” (Isa. 5:12; cf.
22:11), “to walk in His paths” (Isa. 2:3).† “If you will not believe,
you will not abide” (Isa. 7:11).

Give thanks to the Lord,
Call upon His name,
Make known His deeds among the nations,
Proclaim that His name is exalted,
Sing praises to the Lord, . . .

“For I the Lord love justice; I hate robbery and wrong” (Isa. 61:8; cf. Ps.
37:28). “He loves righteousness and justice” (Ps. 33:5). “For the Lord is righteous,
He loves righteous deeds” (Ps. 11:7). “You love righteousness and hate wickedness”
(Ps. 45:7). The Lord is called “lover of justice” (Ps. 99:4).

†On Hosea’s demand for daath elohim, see pp. 70 ff.
Shout, sing for joy, . . .
For great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel.
Isaiah 12:3–6

It is not only action that God demands, it is not only disobedience to the law that the prophet decries.

They do not cry to Me from the heart.
Hosea 7:14

This people draw near with their mouths
And honor Me with their lips,
While their hearts are far from Me;
Their fear of Me is a commandment of men learned by rote.
Isaiah 29:13

The fault is in the hearts, not alone in the deeds.

Their heart is false;
Now they must bear their guilt.
Hosea 10:2

Thou art near in their mouth,
And far from their heart. . . .
Break up your fallow ground,
Sow not among thorns.
Circumcise yourselves to the Lord,
Remove the foreskin of your hearts,
O men of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem.
Jeremiah 4:3–4

Amos condemns the rich who revel in luxuries for not being pained or grieved over the afflictions of the people (6:6).

For the fool speaks folly,
And his mind plots iniquity;
To practice ungodliness,
To utter error concerning the Lord,

To leave the craving of the hungry unsatisfied,
And to deprive the thirsty of drink.
Isaiah 32:6

The Lord alone is holy; “let Him be your fear, let Him be your dread” (Isa. 8:13). To fear God is to be unafraid of man. For God alone is king, power, and promise. “Yet even now, says the Lord, return to Me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning, and rend your hearts and not your garments” (Joel 2:13).

Thus says the Lord:
Cursed is the man who trusts in man and makes flesh his arm,
Whose heart turns away from the Lord.
He is like a shrub in the desert,
And shall not see any good come.
He shall dwell in the parched places of the wilderness,
In an uninhabited salt land.
Blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord, Whose trust is the Lord.
He is like a tree planted by water,
That sends out its roots by the stream,
And does not fear when heat comes,
For its leaves remain green,
And is not anxious in the year of drought,
For it does not cease to bear fruit.
Jeremiah 17:5–8

AN INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIP

If justice be the mere relationship of a person to what he deserves,* then why should it take precedence over the relationship of a person to what he desires? Obviously the situation of one who deserves contains an element not present in the situation of one who

*“Justice is the firm and continuous desire to render to everyone that which is due” (Institia est constant et perpetua voluntas insuum eunum unique tribuens) is the opening statement in Justinian’s Institutions.
of the community. Everything in which this kind of judging manifests itself is called mistpah.*

A Grammar of Experience

Why and for what purpose was Abraham chosen to become a great and mighty nation, and to be a blessing to all the nations of the earth? Not because he knew how to build pyramids, altars, and temples, but "in order that he may charge his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice" (Gen. 18:18–19). Righteousness is foremost among the things God asks of man. "Thus says the Lord: Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, let not the mighty man glory in his might, let not the rich man glory in his riches; but let him who glories, glory in this: that he understands and knows Me, that I am the Lord Who does kindness, justice, and righteousness in the earth; for in these things I delight, says the Lord" (Jer. 9:23–24).

This is sublime knowledge, sublime understanding, a new grammar of experience. What we encounter in the world is not neutral, impersonal being, things, forces, forms, colors. What we encounter is full of God's kindness, justice, and righteousness. "The earth is full of the kindness (hesed) of the Lord" (Ps. 33:5). "He is the Lord our God; His judgments are in all the earth" (Ps. 105:7). "The heavens declare His righteousness . . . and all the people behold His glory" (Pss. 50:6; 97:6). "Thy love, O Lord, extends to the heavens, Thy faithfulness to the clouds" (Ps. 36:6).

God's love and kindness indicate a road. It is a road not limited to a particular area in space nor to exceptional miraculous happenings. It is everywhere, at all times.

Kindness, justice, and righteousness are heaven’s part in life. Its perception is the prophet’s daily experience and the spring of joy. And this is why celebration is man’s first response to life and being. Beauty and grandeur are not anonymous; they are outbursts of God’s kindness.

In the passage quoted above (Jer. 9:23–24), knowledge of God is knowledge of what He does: kindness, justice, righteousness. In another passage, knowledge of God is equated with what man does: justice, righteousness. In exhorting King Jehoiakim, Jeremiah contrasts him with his father:

Did not your father eat and drink
And do justice and righteousness?
Then it was well with him.
He judged the cause of the poor and needy;
Then it was well.
Is not this to know Me?
Says the Lord.

Jeremiah 22:15–16

Here knowledge is not the same as thought, comprehension, gnosis or mystical participation in the ultimate essence. Knowledge of God is action toward man, sharing His concern for justice; sympathy in action.

Inner identification with God’s will and concern is the goal of the new covenant:

I will put My Torah within them,
And write it on their hearts;
And I will be a God to them,
And they to Me a people.

Jeremiah 31:32

The world is overwhelmingly rich; the human mind is incapable of paying attention to all its aspects. The painter sees the world in color, the sculptor in form; the musician perceives the world in sounds, and the economist in commodities. The prophet is a man who sees the world with the eyes of God, and in the sight of God even things of beauty or acts of ritual are an abomination when associated with injustice.

The world is overwhelmingly rich, but the prophet perceives the whole world in terms of justice or injustice. (See p. 8.)

**AS A MIGHTY STREAM**

Justice is usually defined as giving every person his due.* It connotes a conformity, a congruence, a proportion of some kind. This is reflected in the numerical symbols employed by the Greeks to express the essence of justice the relation of parity between two contraposed terms: the dyad, also the number 8, which has 2 for its root, because of its peculiar divisibility. The idea of a balancing of two sides against one another is expressed in the most common symbol of justice, namely, the scales.† When the sword is added to the scales, it is a symbol not only of power, but also of precision; it seeks not so much to strike as to cut clearly the matter of controversy into two equal parts.‡

In sharp contrast to these symbols, expressing calmness, congruence, and precision, stands the prophetic image:

Let justice roll down like waters,
And righteousness like a mighty stream.§

Amos 5:24

One is uncertain of the exact meaning of this bold image. It seems to combine several ideas: a surging movement, a life-bringing substance, a dominant power.

A mighty stream, expressive of the vehemence of a never-ending,

*See Simonides in Republic, I, 331c, and Plato’s refutation.
†Cf. Deut. 25:15 f.; 24:17: “You shall not pervert [or: incline] the justice due to the sojourner or to the fatherless.” See also Prov. 16:11.
§R. S. Cripps: “a never-failing stream.” Cf. “Then your peace would have been like a river, and your righteousness like the waves of the sea” (Isa. 48:18).
surging, fighting movement—as if obstacles had to be washed away for justice to be done. No rock is so hard that water cannot pierce it. “The mountain falls and crumbles away, the rock is removed from its place—the waters wear away the stones” (Job 14:18 f.). Justice is not a mere norm, but a fighting challenge, a restless drive.

Balancing is possible when the scales are unimpaired, and the judge’s eyes sound. When the eyes are dim and the scales unsure, what is required is a power that will strike and change, heal and restore, like a mighty stream bringing life to the parched land. There is a thirst for righteousness that only a mighty stream can quench.

Righteousness as a mere tributary, feeding the immense stream of human interests, is easily exhausted and more easily abused. But righteousness is not a trickle; it is God’s power in the world, a torrent, an impetuous drive, full of grandeur and majesty. The surge is choked, the sweep is blocked. Yet the mighty stream will break all dikes.

Justice, people seem to agree, is a principle, a norm, an ideal of the highest importance. We all insist that it ought to be—but it may not be. In the eyes of the prophets, justice is more than an idea or a norm: justice is charged with the omnipotence of God. What ought to be, shall be!

Righteousness is a vast and mighty stream because God is its unfailing source.

**Exaltation in Justice**

*But the Lord of hosts shall be exalted in justice, The Holy One of Israel sanctified in righteousness.*

*Isaiah 5:16*

This is a staggering assertion. Why should His justice be the supreme manifestation of God? Is not wisdom or omnipotence a mode of manifestation more magnificent and more indicative of what we associate with the divine? It would have been more plausible to declare: The Lord of hosts is exalted in majesty, the Holy One of Israel is sanctified in omnipotence. Omnipotence is an attribute which no mortal shares with God, while justice is a quality to which human beings, too, lay claim; it is a quality devoid of sublimity and mystery, elementary and undistinguished.

Isaiah’s declaration is humble compared with the words the Lord spoke to Job out of the whirlwind. How trite and prosaic are justice and righteousness when matched against the transcendent majesty and the crushing mystery of the Creator of the universe; a still, small voice compared with a thunderbolt. Job’s answer to the words spoken out of the whirlwind was:

*I had heard of Thee by the hearing of the ear, But now my eyes see Thee; Therefore I despise myself And repent in dust and ashes.*

*Job 42:6*

In contrast, Isaiah was able to exclaim:

*O house of Jacob, Come, let us walk In the light of the Lord.*

*Isaiah 2:5*

Perhaps this is the deeper meaning of the words, “The Holy One of Israel is sanctified in righteousness.” The holy is all mystery, inscrutable, dwelling in “thick darkness.” Yet beyond the darkness is righteousness. Mystery is not the ultimate. Mystery is surpassed by meaning.

*Cloud and deep darkness are round about Him; Righteousness and justice are the foundations of His throne.*

*Psalm 97:2*

History, what happens here and now, is the decisive stage for God’s manifestation. His glorious disclosure is not in a display of miracles, evoking fascination, but in establishing righteousness, evoking appreciation.
Exalted is the Lord,  
He who dwells on high,  
He has filled Zion with justice and righteousness.  
He will be the permanence of your times,  
Abundance of salvation, wisdom, and knowledge.  
The fear of the Lord is His treasure.  
Isaiah 33:5–6

The grandeur and majesty of God do not come to expression in the display of ultimate sovereignty and power, but rather in rendering righteousness and mercy. "He exalts Himself to show mercy to you" (Isa. 30:18).

For Thou hast been a stronghold to the poor,  
A stronghold to the needy in his distress.  
Isaiah 25:4

Isaiah’s declaration does not speak about values, and its intention is not to assert that holiness and justice are very much alike, or that justice is holy, or that holiness is just.¹ Isaiah speaks about God, and his intention is to say that the Lord of heaven and earth, of nature and history, finds His true exaltation in justice. Isaiah does not pronounce a theory, he proclaims what is to come. He does not teach what ought to be, he predicts what shall be.

The importance of moral ideas was known to people everywhere. Yet linked with the awareness of their importance was an awareness of their impotence. The prophets proclaimed that justice is omnipotent, that right and wrong are dimensions of world history, not merely modes of conduct. The existence of the world is contingent upon right and wrong, and its secret is God’s involvement in history.

History is a turmoil. Survival and perdition are equally possible. But justice will decide; righteousness will redeem.

Zion shall be redeemed by justice,  
And those in her who repent, by righteousness.  
Isaiah 1:27

¹See Plato, Protagoras, 331.

Justice will not fail. Addressing himself to Assyria while she is at the height of her power, the prophet exclaims:

Woe to you, destroyer,  
Who yourself have not been destroyed;  
You treacherous one,  
With whom none has dealt treacherously!  
You will be destroyed.  
When you have made an end of dealing treacherously,  
You will be dealt with treacherously.  
Isaiah 33:1

If justice is but a category, a conformity, then injustice must be regarded as an irregularity, a deviation from a norm. But justice is like a mighty stream, and to defy it is to block God’s almighty surge. The moralists discuss, suggest, counsel; the prophets proclaim, demand, insist.

To sum up, the image of scales conveys the idea of form, standard, balance, measure, stillness. The image of a mighty stream expresses content, substance, power, movement, vitality.

Justice represented as a blindfolded virgin, while conveying the essential thought of the rightful caution of the mind against illusions and partiality of the heart, conceives of the process of justice as a mechanical process, as if the life of man were devoid of individuality and uniqueness and could be adequately understood in terms of inexorable generalizations. There is a point at which strict justice is unjust.

Immutable justice—the principle fiat justitia, perent mundus—raises justice to a position of supremacy, denying to any other principle the power to temper it, regarding it as an absolute; the world exists for the sake of maintaining justice rather than justice for the sake of maintaining the world. Carried to the extreme, the principle sets up a false dichotomy of world and justice, betraying the truth that the survival of the world is itself a requirement of justice. *

*The maxim is said to have been the motto of Emperor Ferdinand I (1503–1564) (T. H. Harbottle, Dictionary of Quotations [London, 1906], p. 70). According to B. Stevenson (The Home Book of Quotations [New York, 1944], p. 1030), the maxim fiat justitia et ruane coelum (let justice be done, though the heavens fall), was used for the
God’s concern for justice grows out of His compassion for man. The prophets do not speak of a divine relationship to an absolute principle or idea, called justice. They are intoxicated with the awareness of God’s relationship to His people and to all men.

Justice is not important for its own sake; the validity of justice and the motivation for its exercise lie in the blessings it brings to man. For justice, as stated above, is not an abstraction, a value. Justice exists in relation to a person, and is something done by a person. An act of injustice is condemned, not because the law is broken, but because a person has been hurt. What is the image of a person? A person is a being whose anguish may reach the heart of God. “You shall not afflict any widow or orphan. If you do afflict them, and they cry out to Me, I will surely hear their cry... if he cries to Me, I will hear, for I am compassionate” (Exod. 22:22-23, 27).

When Cain murdered his brother Abel, the words denouncing his crime did not proclaim: “You have broken the law.” Instead we read: “And... the Lord said: What have you done? The voice of your brother’s blood is crying to Me from the ground” (Gen. 4:10).

**AUTONOMY OF THE MORAL LAW**

For all the centrality of ethos in the prophetic understanding of God, it is incorrect to say, as is often done, that “justice to the Israelit-

ish mind was such an indispensable thing in the universe that it sometimes seems to stand out as some irresistible power independent even of God, as something which God Himself needs obey.”

In an effort to prove the similarity of Judaism and Kantian ethics, it was often maintained that, according to Judaism, “the moral law is autonomous because it originates in the nature of the human mind alone. ... That autonomy implies the absence of every extraneous will in the creation of morality, every external power. ... This exalted purity and this dignity of the moral are independent of every sort of theistic notion, because they spring from the very nature of the human mind.” “Ethical holiness may be thought of detached from religious holiness. It has value and dignity of its own, without reference to God, the ordainer of morality; that is, the moral idea has an existence independent of the recognition that it is actualized in God.”

The prophets did not conceive of the ethos as an autonomous idea, as a sovereign essence, higher in the scale of reality than God Himself, standing above him like a supreme force. God to them was more than a moral principle or a moral exemplar.

The central achievement of biblical religion was to remove the veil of anonymity from the workings of history. There are no ultimate laws, no eternal ideas. The Lord alone is ultimate and eternal. The laws are His creation, and the moral ideas are not entities apart from Him; they are His concern. Indeed, the personalization of the moral idea is the indispensable assumption of prophetic theology. Mercy, grace, repentance, forgiveness, all would be impossible if the moral principle were held to be superior to God. God’s call to man, which resounds so frequently in the utterances of the prophets, presupposes an ethos based, not upon immutable principles, but rather upon His eternal concern. God’s repenting a decision which was based on moral grounds clearly shows the supremacy of pathos.

the judicial process; it follows Exodus 23:3 (“nor shall you be partial to a poor man in his suit”) and Leviticus 19:15. Hegel rephrased the maxim into the very different fiat justitia ne pereat mundus.


†Ibid., II, 13.
Crime is not a violation of a law, but a sin against the living God. “Against Thee, Thee only have I sinned, and done that which is evil in Thy sight,” confesses the psalmist (51:6). “If Thou, O Lord, shouldst mark iniquities, who could stand?” (Ps. 132:3.)

To identify God with the moral idea would be contrary to the very meaning of prophetic theology. God is not the mere guardian of the moral order. He is not an intermediary between a transcendental idea of the good and man. The prophet does not think of Him as a being whose function it is to supervise the moral order and to bring about the realization of an autonomous morality. As love cannot be identified with the values found in it, so the relation between God and man cannot be simply equated with the value of the moral idea. The pathos structure of divine ethos follows from the unlimited sovereignty of God. If the moral law were something absolute and final, it would represent a destiny to which God Himself would be subject. Far from being sovereign, God would then fall into dependence on rigid, objective norms.

THE PRIMACY OF GOD’S INVOLVEMENT IN HISTORY

For a long time the importance of the prophets was seen to lie in the fact that they raised the religion of cult to a religion of morality.* Ethical monotheism was “their contribution to the spiritual growth of their race.”† The religion introduced by the prophets was a sort of protestantism, directed against all sorts of “paganism” and ritualism, with the main emphasis placed upon faith. The image of the prophets was that of preachers of morals and spiritual religion as opposed to ceremonialism and ritual. This view has now been questioned. “The prophets have been isolated in too high a degree, and made makers of ideas which in reality were common Israelite stock, and modern scholars have in a one-sided way stressed certain ideas of the prophets which acquired importance for posterity, and to which there might be found a special connection in the nineteenth century.”*†

Ethical monotheism must not be regarded as the contribution of the classical prophets, since it was known in Israel long before the time of Amos. Nor is “the primacy of morality” to be regarded as the chief characteristic of prophetic thought.

Divine ethos does not operate without pathos. Any thought of an objectivity, or a Platonic self-subsistence of ideas, be it the idea of beauty or of justice is alien to the prophets. God is all-personal, all-subject. His ethos and pathos are one.

The preoccupation with justice, the passion with which the prophets condemn injustice, is rooted in their sympathy with divine pathos. The chief characteristic of prophetic thought is the primacy of God’s involvement in history. History is the domain with which the prophets’ minds are occupied. They are moved by a responsibility for society, by a sensitivity to what the moment demands.

Since the prophets do not speak in the name of the moral law, it is inaccurate to characterize them as proclaimers of justice, or mishpat. It is more accurate to see them as proclaimers of God’s pathos, speaking not for the idea of justice, but for the God of justice, for God’s concern for justice. Divine concern remembered in sympathy is the stuff of which prophecy is made.

To the biblical mind the implication of goodness is mercy. Pathos, concern for the world, is the very ethos of God. This ethical

†This view, based upon the theory that the early popular religion of Israel was polytheistic or monolatristic and that only under the influence of the literary prophets was monotheism established, has been challenged by scholars. If the term “monotheist means one who teaches the existence of only one God, the creator of everything, the source of justice, who is equally powerful in Egypt, in the desert, and in Palestine, who has no sexuality and no mythology,” then Moses was a monotheist. (Cf. W. F. Albright, From the Stone Age to Christianity [Baltimore, 1940], p. 207.) See also Y. Kaufmann, The Religion of Israel (Eng.: Chicago, 1960), pp. 221 ff. On the much debated controversy whether monotheism goes back to Moses or to the prophets, see B. Balscheit, Alter und Aufkommen des Monotheismus in der Israelitischen Religion (Berlin, 1938).

*G. Höscher, Die Propheten (Leipzig, 1914), p. 188.
brother, does not receive the punishment he deserves. Though justice would require that Abel's blood be avenged, Cain is granted divine pardon and protection.*

A father is disqualified to serve as a judge. Yet the judge of all men is also their Father. He would be unjust to His own nature were He to act in justice without being compassionate.

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*Noticing that Gen., ch. 1, has elohim for God, not the Ineffable Name, while in ch. 2 both the Ineffable Name, the Tetragrammaton, and elohim occur, the rabbis remarked that in creating our world, God first intended to rule it according to the principle of strict justice (middath ha-din), but He realized that the world could not thus endure, so He associated mercy (middath ha-rabamin) with justice and made them to rule jointly. Elohim signifies strict justice; the Ineffable Name stands for mercy. It is maintained that when God acts according to mercy, the Ineffable Name is used, while elohim is used to signify His acting according to strict justice. Mercy has precedence over justice. Both justice and mercy as the main attributes of God's relation to man afford an insight into the polarity of God's dominion. Justice is a standard, mercy an attitude; justice is detachment, mercy attachment; justice is objective, mercy personal. God transcends both justice and mercy. See "Talkus Talmud Torah" in J. Mann, The Bible as Read and Preached in the Old Synagogue (Heb.; Cincinnati, 1940), p. 271; Rashi, Commentary on Gen. 1:1; Genesis Rabba, 12, 15.