CHAPTER FIVE

Amos and the God of Justice

As the religion of Israel is based on the intervention of God in the past, so it aspires toward His intervention to come in the future. It is, and it is increasingly, the religion of hope because it is dominated by the expectation of a day, the Day of Yahweh.

The idea of the day thus awaited is determined by the idea of the judgment. The tension that sustains the faith of Israel arises from a profound conviction of divine justice in the fact of the injustice actually reigning. The union of this unshakeable idealism and this immediate realism gives to the faith of Israel both the aspect that makes it so powerfully concrete, so matter-of-fact, and also its irrepressible lack of satisfaction with this world as it actually is. From this also comes the incomparable human quality of this religion, yet also the aspiration which it communicates towards something more and better than the too humanly human.

The God in whom Israel believes is the God who is expected, and the God who is expected so that at last justice will be done. No other religion plunges its roots more profoundly in the simplest experiences of humanity, nor seems so closely bound up, from its very beginning, with the most demanding sense of morality. If for us today it seems entirely natural to represent the moral conscience as a divine voice, it is because the Word of God from which we received the faith mingled its fundamental expressions in Israel with the primary intuition of morality, with the sense of justice, as this appears inborn in the heart of every man.

God of vengeance, Yahweh,
God of vengeance, appear!
Rise up, judge of the earth;
render to the proud according to their deeds.

How long, Yahweh, shall the wicked,
how long shall the wicked triumph?...

This cry of Psalm 93, in its frankness that is almost brutal, is as much the cry of the awakening human conscience as the first call of the divine voice.

In these original formulations, it cannot be denied that the sense of justice, just as that of the divine call, arose in a feeling of opposition between Israel and other peoples. This happened in the natural line of the evolution of conscience, and it would be quite foolish to be scandalized by it. Just as each developing personality discovers justice in the experience of the first wrongs that are done to itself or that it thinks have been done to it, so it is in this experience, so simple that we are tempted to accuse it of egoism, that humanity as a whole made the same discovery. And Israel, who formulated it with a clarity never reached elsewhere, only arrived at it by becoming aware of being the elect of God, in opposition to the error of those who had not understood, or had not heard the Word.

The numerous oracles spoken against foreign nations that we find in almost all the prophets set out clearly this basic opposition. Israel is the elect of God, facing a world which has been rejected. Israel hopes in the justice of God as being the justice which will be rendered for it against its enemies or its oppressors.

Thus—and it is doubtless inevitable in a humanity plunged in sin—it was in the hope of its own triumph that Israel began to grasp, for all mankind, the hope of the final triumph of justice, of the justice of God, or, if one prefers it, of the God of justice.

This foundation was necessary to a religion which found man where he was, and took him as he was; but it was not any the less necessary that he should go beyond it. The first effort of the Word of God that we can perceive throughout the prophetic tradition will bear on this point. And, conversely, nothing will be more characteristic of the Israel according to the flesh, at the mo-
ment when, with Christ, the Israel according to the Spirit was about to separate itself from it, than the return effected by a work like the Psalms of Solomon to the primitive confusion between divine justice and the justice of man, a partial justice because basically an interested one. Just as it was natural, once again, that the first spark both of moral conscience and of consciousness of the divine call should spring from this naturally egotistical centre of the preoccupations of fallen man, so it was urgent that this first intuition should go beyond itself. After the whole cycle of the experience of the prophets, it was a misunderstanding of the meaning of the divine call to return, by a literalism which was to be the death of Judaism, to the starting-point from which they had set out. When this journey was turning back into a cul-de-sac, the Gospel of Jesus appears entirely beyond and entirely above it, as the divine Word breaking out of and leaving behind its first coverings, which had artificially hardened, in order to resound at last in its own purity and fullness.

The man to whom we owe the beginning of the evolution which was finally to reach this point is the prophet Amos. Just as he adheres to what is truly and always fundamental in the primitive intuition in which were born to the world at the same time the divine Word and the human conscience, the divine Word in the human conscience, so he is bold enough to go beyond this same intuition by transfiguring it. Nothing is more interesting than to follow this first transmutation. It causes us to encounter, in a simple and primordial example, this constant process of continual transposition which we have described as being the passage from the Old Testament to the New. Nothing is lost in this passage of the primary religious reality. But neither is anything left to a literalism fixed in death.

When the Word of God was spoken in Israel by the mouth of Amos, the expectation of the divine judgment seems to have been general. But what was expected but a revenge? Israel would surely rejoice to see God triumph in the future over all enemy powers, simply because it identified this triumph with its own. Let us remark upon this at once; it was exactly this same state of mind that Christ was to encounter later on. These ideas "of the flesh" concerning the Kingdom and the Judgment of God were the motive for His refusing the title of Messias until the hour when it would become clear that to accept it would mean nothing like this for Him.

Amos came, then, to reverse the too earthly ideas of the people. He did not hesitate to express himself in a way which is so paradoxical as to seem blasphemous. Israel placed its joy in its hope: in its expectation of the day of Yahweh. Amos, on the contrary, would teach it to fear this day. He denied that it would be a day of light, and declared that it would be more the day of supreme darkness.

Woe to them that desire the day of Yahweh: What will it be for you, the day of Yahweh? It will be darkness and not light. It will be like man who flees from a lion, and see, a bear comes to meet him; he goes into his house, and leans his hand on the wall, and the serpent bites him! . . . Is it not darkness, the day of Yahweh, and not light, obscurity in place of splendor? 1

We thus see for the first time that the fear of God, which occupies such a great place in the Old Testament, in no way represents therein the primitive foundation of undeveloped religion. Entirely on the contrary, we must understand that this fear is the first stage of the development which the divine Word wishes to bring about. Doubtless, at a further stage, fear in turn will be put to flight by love; but we learn here how to clear up a confusion too current today. The religion which considers confidence and security as entirely natural to the worshipper of the true God is not in the least a progress beyond the religion of fear. It is a regression or a simple retardation. It is this which is an entirely human religion, a too human religion. The religion of fear is the first step beyond this elementary level. Only with this step do we reach the supernatural. And if it is true that a still higher level will cause us to rest in the conviction of divine love, this always presupposes the previous journey by way of fear. Far from neglecting it, it presupposes it, as we shall see. And if we

should deceive ourselves in this matter we should not reach the
authentic charity of the Gospel. We should only fall back, from
a first stage of revelation, into the humanity as yet untouched by
the demands of the Word.

What, however, is exactly the meaning of the paradox of Amos?
Why this apparent contradiction of the basic hope of the human
conscience enlightened by the first touches of the divine Word?
Because the assurance on which Israel based the joy which it
found in hoping for the divine Day was deceptively confused.
Israel confounded the justice of God with its own cause. But
it could not have done this if it had not interpreted the Covenant
the wrong way around. Israel believed that the Covenant bound
God to the people, instead of seeing that first of all it bound
the people to God. In other words, it misunderstood God’s demand,
without which the divine promises evaporate. It believed that,
provided it gave Yahweh the payments of an external worship,
He would be satisfied and even enchained, like any vulgar baal
of the Canaanites. It misunderstood the fact that the demand of
justice, which it still felt to be connected with the promises of
the Word, applied first of all to those who had received these
promises. It is just on this point that the attack of Amos comes
in.

I hate and reject your festivities:
I have no pleasure in your solemn assemblies.
If you offer me your holocausts and your oblations,
I will take no pleasure in them,
and your sacrifices of fat calves—
I will not even look at them.
Take away from me the noise of your canticles,
that I may not hear the sound of your harps.
But let judgment flow like water,
and justice like an unfailling torrent.
Else I will send you into captivity beyond Damascus, says Yahweh,
the God of armies is His name.5

In other words, in this assurance that the people maintained of
being God’s elect, there was a vice, a radical error. The idea that
thereby Israel was placed in a privileged situation is denied in
phrases so abrupt that they seem to negate the very idea of the
Covenant.


Are you not in my sight like the sons of the Cushites,
O children of Israel—oracle of Yahweh?
Did I not bring Israel up from Egypt,
like the Philistines from Caphtor and the Syrians from Kt?
Look! the eyes of the Lord Yahweh are on the sinful kingdom
And I will destroy it from the face of the earth.8

But in fact, for the prophet himself, these words do not in the
least imply the destruction of the Covenant. They signify in
reality its deepening, but a deepening that goes as far as a re-
turn. Since Israel persists in seeing nothing in the Covenant but
the promise Amos will place, or replace in the forefront, the
Lord’s demand:
Hear this Word that Yahweh has pronounced on you,
children of Israel,
that is, on the whole family
that I brought up from the land of Egypt.

You only have I known
among all the families of the earth;
This is why I will punish you
for all your iniquities.4

Nothing could be clearer: the reality of the Covenant and there-
fore of the election of Israel, is integrally safeguarded. But its
very grandeur makes it first of all a responsibility. To know God
as others do not know Him, to be joined with Yahweh by a bond
utterly unlike any other, far from making Israel automatically
right and secure with Him, engages the people in obligations
also without parallel. They are not justified all at once simply
by being in the Covenant; they are, on the contrary, all the more
obligated by the Covenant to obey the entire demands of divine
justice. And for Amos, certainly, the first texts that we have
quoted are categorical: to these demands, the people of the
Covenant, the chosen people, have shown themselves completely
unequal. The Judgment, then, takes on, as we have already seen,
this second meaning of a condemnation, a meaning which it will
keep to the very end of biblical revelation. But the central point
is that this condemnation, henceforth, is not primarily to be the
condemnation of those who are strangers to the chosen people,

3. Amos 5:7–8a.
of the goyim: it is the condemnation of the chosen people themselves.

When we thus summarize the message of Amos, the first and decisive turning point of biblical revelation, it is vain to deny that he seems inexorable. This oldest, the fundamental prophetic preaching which has been preserved for us in his present text, not only arouses fear: we must admit that it is a terrible fear which it tends to produce.

Nevertheless, two footholds for a complementary teaching are already to be found in Amos. Without denying anything in his positive statements, without correcting anything in them, properly speaking, still a way is pointed out by which hope will be restored, though, certainly, this is a hope transfigured.

(1) In the first place if Amos considers the mass of Israel as condemned in advance by the divine judgment, yet he perceives therein a remnant, however weak in numbers, which will emerge victorious from the trial.

Behold the eyes of the Lord Yahweh are on the sinful kingdom, and I will destroy it from the face of the earth: yet I will not completely destroy it, the house of Jacob—oracle of Yahweh.

In fact, the prophet hopes for a conversion as the effect of the punishment, even if this is only the conversion of a few:

Seek good and not evil, so that you may live; and that Yahweh, the God of Armies, may be with you, as you say. Hate evil and love good, and bring back justice to your gates: perhaps Yahweh, the God of Armies, will have pity on the remnant of Joseph.

We have already mentioned the future part in the prophetic teaching of Israel to be given to this idea of the remnant, now appearing for the first time. For the moment, let us note that


it is connected here with the second germ of hope included in the inexorable teaching of Amos: we mean the primarily medicinal character of the punishments of God. To this other characteristic is attached an idea that is already clearly evident in the prophet Amos. The “last times,” the intervention of God at the close of history, are not reduced to the final period placed at the end of history. They are, rather, a period before the end, in which are offered the ultimate possibilities which will irreversibly determine the future. In consequence, a kind of extension of the Day of Yahweh becomes possible. In a certain way, without actually being the end of the world, the catastrophes of the present already participate in this end. But, instead of cutting off the line of history forever, they offer it the possibility of a final redress. This is why, though he speaks of a judgment and a condemnation that are quasi-universal, Amos does not shut the door to hope. Only man himself can exclude himself from hope by refusing to hear, by hardening his heart against the Word which, itself, never ceases to call him.

In all your cities, I have put nothing between your teeth, want is all that I have procured for your dwellings, and you did not return to me—oracle of Yahweh. I have withheld rain from you when there were still three months to the harvest, and you did not return to me—oracle of Yahweh. I struck you with mildew and with blight; your many gardens, your vines and your olive trees, the grasshopper has devoured them; and you did not return to me—oracle of Yahweh. Prepare to meet thy God, O Israel.

The deceptive importance of Amos’ message remains in the union, henceforth to be permanent, which he established between the worship of God and the practice of justice between men. Once again, in this he was not entirely an innovator. The idea of seeking in Yahweh the avenger of a justice that has been misunderstood or scorned goes back to the earliest religious and moral resentiments of Israel. But Amos took the decisive step of identifying the cult of Yahweh with the practice of justice. And so he brought about what we may think of either as a divinization

of morality or a moralization of religion. Christ, in His parable of the Last Judgment, did nothing more than use Amos’ teaching without adding anything to it except one unforgettable image: God judges our relations with Him according to what our relations have been with our brothers. There is no hope of being pleasing to Him except by being just in the society of mankind.

Hear this, you who swallow up the poor, who make the needy of the land disappear, saying: When will the new moon be over so that we can sell our wheat, and the sabbath, that we may open our stores of grain, that we may loosen the ephah and increase the shekel, falsifying the balance to deceive? We shall buy the needy for silver, and the poor for a pair of sandals, and we shall sell the refuse of the corn! Yahweh has sworn by the pride of Jacob: I will not forget to end all their works.⁹

Henceforth, and up to the very summit of the revelation of the Gospel, the worship of the God Who has spoken will not be separable, not even discernible from this practice of justice. But the grandeur of Amos consists in the fact that this moralization of religion, as we have called it, is to his eyes in no way a rationalization nor any reduction of the mysterium tremendum without which nothing remains truly religious. Amos, indeed, more clearly than anyone else, made his hearers grasp the fact that there is no demand made on man more to be feared than this simple requirement of justice. To demand of man, for any worship of Yahweh, that he be just, is not to bring down religion from heaven to earth, as it might seem. It is not, above all, to reduce it to a practice which is easy because it is entirely on the human level. It is, rather, to bring to light the mystery of iniquity which is at the basis of the drama of mankind: it is to force man, and more than any other, the man who would know God, to recognize his radical unworthiness.

⁹ Amos 8:4-7.
generosity; a love which does not go out toward a value in the beloved which attracts it, but which creates by its own power the value of that which it loves.

Thus imagery which is truly nuptial—that is to say, which is not merely erotic symbolism closely attached to sexuality in the narrow sense, but a symbol of the life of two lovers pursued in complete union of hearts—this imagery will come to surround the highest reaches of the religion aroused by the Word, and, from thence return to the human level to purify and ennable the sexual union itself with a reflection of sacred realities.

It is difficult to calculate all the riches henceforth to be included in the mysticism first appearing with Osee. Let us take up again one element which we have already mentioned, for it is the first: this is the new idea of sin which he introduced. Sin is no longer the simple transgression of a rule: it is infidelity, the lack of response to love.

Starting from the basis for the whole relationship of man with God set forth by Amos: the initial recognition of the state of sin, of injustice in which man finds himself—in this light proper to Osee, which now renews our understanding of this state, we see more clearly also the attitude of God. Here we find already everything included in the Christian term grace—and the bessed of Osee can as well be translated by this word as by ‘mercy’ or ‘love’. God does not wait until man has ceased to be unjust in order to love him; He loves him already in his unjustness. As St. Paul will say: ‘It is in this that God has shown the greatness of His love for us: that His Son died for us while we were still sinners.”

All the same, this does not include—and here is the essential point—any break with the demands once proclaimed by Amos. However paradoxical this seems, it is here, on the contrary, that we find the unhoped-for way in which to satisfy them. If God does not wait for us to be just in order to love us, it is because His love is precisely the only force that can make us just. If the love of God is unmerited, it is because He is the creator. And His creative power is such that He can make a just man out of the most guilty. He can render virginal a soul or a nation that has prostituted itself. At the same time as the love of God reveals it-

7. Romans 5:8.
