

Isaiab

THE PROPHET OF THE REMNANT

OUT OF the Arabian desert came the twelve Hebrew tribes and poured over the land of Canaan. This was the land of "milk and honey" promised them by their god Yahweh. They proceeded to make good their divine title. But the inhabitants, known as Amorites, put up a stiff fight in defense of their homeland, for hundreds of years; though the inspired historical account lists them as having been conquered, the fact is they were not.

The invaders were a tough lot, made so by many years of hard going in the wilderness. Out of their experiences came a functional code of ethics which they called *mishpat*, or justice. Among other things, this code forbade claims to absolute ownership of land; Yahweh's gift, unlike human fabrications, was the common heritage. This was a necessary condition for the spirit of brotherhood imposed on them by the divine authority which held them together.

The Amorites, on the other hand, were "civilized." Therefore, they were divided into classes; one consisted of a small number who owned all the natural resources, the other the large mass of tenants. That is, there were a few rich and many poor. Superimposed on this arrangement was a ritualistic religion, characterized by idol worship and sacrifices, and a strong centralized government.

The glitter of Amorite civilization dazzled the simple people from the hills, and in due time they were overcome by it. Though the official record speaks of the destruction of the Amorites by the Heb-

rews, the internal evidence shows that a fusion took place, and that in fact the Hebrews were conquered spiritually. The rule of equal freedom, *mishpat*, which had held them together in harmony so many years, was discarded, and the dissension of economic classes sprang up among them. At the bottom of this was the institution of land monopoly which they borrowed from the "conquered," and along with this they took on the other necessary appurtenances; a strong state implemented with a state-religion. Out of this cauldron came the inevitable civil war, and the nation was split up into the rival dictatorships of Ephraim and Judah.

Things went from bad to worse, as they always do when political power supplants social power. Judah fought Ephraim, and both were attacked by Assyrians, Babylonians, Egyptians, Syrians and Medes. Poverty and war characterized the life of Israel (the generic name of the Hebrews) for many years. And here a most unusual phenomenon took place: the periodic emergence of prophets (soap-boxers we would call them), who went among the people and harangued them on first principles. They were self-elected. They were unorganized and they had no "foundation" to support them. Completely on their own, pure individualists, they wandered up and down the land, always harping on one theme: get back to *mishpat*, the rule of justice, the law of freedom.

The most famous of these was a man of noble birth, the prophet Isaiah. Brooding over the ill-fate of his people, Isaiah had a "visitation" from Yahweh. "And I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, 'Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?' And I said, 'Here am I; send me.'" But Yahweh knew better the way of mobs and he warned Isaiah that "obdurate will remain the heart of this people, and their ears will be heavy, and their eyes will be shut; so they will not see with their eyes nor hear with their ears . . ." No hope. But Isaiah was an individualist; he went.

Telling Them Off

And when he saw what a mess his people were in, he went after them a-plenty. He did not tell them to write to their Congressmen for a law, he did not urge them to organize a pressure group, nor

did he advocate a constitutional amendment. He told them that their troubles came from themselves, and that there was no out for them except a general overhauling of their ways. Every one of them was personally responsible for the general misery; they could not blame it on a "system." That is the essence of Individualism: personal responsibility.

"Woe! sinful nation," he thundered, "people laden with iniquity, seed of evil-doers, children that are corrupt . . ." No shifting the blame to a "dialectic materialism" or an "economic determinism." They were rotten, that's all. "Every head is sick and every heart is faint." And they were just plain stupid, too. "My people! their oppressors are children, and women rule over them. O my people, thy leaders cause thee to err, and the direction of thy paths they corrupt."

Now, these people should have known better. Unlike their oppressors they had a heritage of *mishpat*; they had only to recall this code of common decency, which had served them so well in ancient times, and live by it. What had become of this common sense ethics?

"How is it she became a harlot, the faithful town!

She that was full of *mishpat*!

Righteousness lodged therein; but now murderers.

Thy silver is become dross, thy wine is drugged with water;

Thy princes are rebels and companions of thieves;

Every one loves bribes, and runs after rewards;

To the fatherless they will not do *mishpat*,

And the cause of the widow will not come to them."

Things were not always like this. And Isaiah, knowing the ways of propaganda, gave them a picture of the glory that was Israel, a glory that could be revived:

"I will sing now for my beloved,

The song of my dear one touching the vineyard.

A vineyard had my beloved on a rich hill-top;

And he fenced it in, and cleared it of stones,

And planted it with choicest vines,

And built a tower in its midst,

And also a winepress he hewed out therein;
And he hoped that it should bring forth grapes,
And it brought forth worthless fruit."

The reverse twist of the last line of this poem is artistry of the first water. Anyhow, why this misadventure in social living? Why the "worthless fruit"?

"For the vineyard of the Lord is the house of Israel,
And the men of Judah are the plant of his delight;
And he hoped for *mishpat*, but behold, non-*mishpat*;
For equity, but behold, iniquity."

When you dig down beneath the failure you find that these people have come to their plight by way of institutions which they have allowed to creep into their mores, contrary to the admonition of *mishpat*. They had permitted the monopolization of the land, and along with it came the iniquity of land speculation:

"Woe unto those that cause house to join on house,
Bring field near to field, till there is no more room,
So that you may be left alone
As the inhabitants in the midst of the land."

Was it any wonder that poverty stalked the people? Or that where equality once prevailed, now there were the ruthless and debauched on the one hand, and on the other a mass of miserable wretches?

"Woe unto those that rise up early in the morning,
That they may run after strong drink;
That continue until late in the twilight,
Till wine inflame them!
And there are harp and psaltery, tambourine and flute,
And wine at their drinking feasts;
But the deeds of the Lord they regard not,
And the work of his hands they behold not.
Therefore are my people led into exile,
For want of knowledge; and their honorable men suffer
want from famine,
And the multitude are panting with thirst."

When a people start down a dark alley there is no telling what they will run into. It is not surprising that:

“Every man is a hypocrite and an evil-doer,
And every mouth speaks scandalous words . . .
The daughters of Zion are proud
And walk with stretched-forth necks,
Walking and mincing as they go,
And making a tinkling with their feet . . .”

Also, worst of their sins, they got to worshipping idols, like the Amorites, whose other institutions they had adopted, and substituted ritual for the religion of justice:

“For what serves me the multitude of your sacrifices? said the Lord;
I am sated with burnt offerings of rams . . .
And the blood of bullocks, of sheep and of he-goats
I do not desire; . . .
Continue no more to bring an oblation of deceit;
Incense of abomination is it unto me . . .
I cannot bear misdeed with festive gathering . . .
Cease to do evil;
Learn to do well; seek for *mishpat*.”

And So, the Purge

There was nothing that could be done for these people, they were so far gone, and Yahweh decided to wipe them out and begin all over again. Maybe *mishpat* would prevail with another crowd. He gave them another chance, but then, “I will turn my hand against thee, and purge away as with dross thy tin . . . Zion shall be redeemed through *mishpat*.” As for the politicians, “Woe unto those that decree decrees of unrighteousness, and the writers who write down wrongful things . . . they shall kneel down under the prisoners, and under the slain shall they fall.” The corrupt ladies will get their share, for, “. . . the Lord will smite with leprosy the crown of the head of the daughters of Zion . . . and instead of curled hair, baldness; and instead of a wide garment, a girding of sackcloth, a mark of burning instead of beauty.”

However, you cannot rebuild a civilization without people. Yahweh told Isaiah that the masses were hopeless, and he advised him to talk only to the "remnant"; they alone would understand him. To be sure, those who in every civilization know how to live as free men are few and far between. Yet that is the only kind one can work with.

"And it shall come to pass on that day that the remnant of Israel, and such as are escaped from the house of Jacob, shall not further lean for support on him that smiteth them; but they shall lean upon the Lord, the Holy One of Israel, in truth. The remnant shall return. the remnant of Jacob, unto the mighty God . . . and there shall be a highway for the remnant of his people . . . like as it was to Israel on the day that they came up out of the land of Egypt." *Mishpat* would again prevail.

Even before his death, Isaiah witnessed the dispersal of the ten tribes of Ephraim, the complete destruction of Judah's sister state. But the hopelessness of a society based on *mishpat*, on elemental justice and plain human decency, left him bitter and disillusioned. His arrest and execution by Judah's arrogant King Menasseh was an inevitable denouement. And it is only to the "remnant" of the world that his immortal words ever make sense:

"And he will judge among the nations,
And decide for many people;
And they shall beat their swords into plough-shares,
And their spears into pruning-hooks;
Nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
Neither shall they learn war anymore."