

JUSTICE *VERSUS* HEATHENISM

The struggle for justice among the Hebrew people grew out of the peculiar circumstances of their national evolution. Like all races that have accomplished much on the field of history, the Hebrews came into existence at the point of contact and assimilation between earlier races which disappeared in the process.

These parent races were chiefly two—the Israelite clans which emerged from the desert of Arabia, and the earlier Amorite inhabitants of Canaan. The ancient Hebrew Books of Judges and Samuel show us that the Israelites occupied the highlands of Judah, Ephraim, and Gilead, leaving the Amorites in possession of many walled cities in the lowlands and valleys. The two races at length united under the house of David, and lost their identities in the new, composite, Hebrew nation. The unique religious development of the Hebrew nation is directly traceable to the conflict of social usages inherited from the Israelites and from the Amorites respectively. Let us, then, examine briefly the ideas and institutions pertaining to these earlier, parent races.

THE ISRAELITES

Before invading the land of Canaan the Israelites were a nomadic, or wandering, people, whose home was in the wilderness of Arabia. Their life was very similar to that of the roving Arabs of the present day. Nomadic people are much alike the world over. The same fundamental conditions lie at the basis of unsettled society everywhere.

As a rule, each wandering group is restricted, or limited, to a certain area, within which its migrations are confined. It cannot move unchallenged outside this district, and its possession may even be disputed by some stronger tribe. The migratory community, then, has its own portion of the earth's surface, which is regarded as its home land. Every Arab tribe has its recognized wandering-ground and cannot leave its territory without incurring the penalty of war. It was the same among the American Indians before the coming of the English. Certain tribes inhabited Massachusetts; others roamed in Michigan; some lived in Alabama; others in Iowa; and so on. The United States today is largely covered with Indian names coming down from the nomadic period of social evolution.

Bearing these facts in mind, we are prepared to see that in all unsettled social groups there is no

private, or individual, ownership of *land*, such as there is in stationary communities. The migratory social group, as a whole, is regarded as the corporate owner of the district over which it roams in search of subsistence. Each group has to maintain itself in the best possible fighting trim, so as to be able to withstand the attacks of hostile neighbors. Every man of the tribe has an equal right with every other man to what their own district yields in support of life.

This condition of justice and brotherhood prevails among wandering races all over the world. There are no upper and lower social classes, in our sense of the word, among nomadic peoples. They have no problem of rich and poor. The tribes of the Arabian wilderness today, for instance, are described as follows by Doughty, an English physician who lived and traveled among them, and knew their ways of thought:

The nomad tribes we have seen to be commonwealths of brethren. They divide each other's losses. The malicious subtlety of interest [on money] is foreign to the brotherly dealing of the nomad tribesmen. Their *justice* is such that in the opinion of the next governed countries the Arabs of the wilderness are the justest of mortals. Seldom the judges and elders err, in these small societies of kindred, where the life of every tribesman lies open from his infancy and his state is to all men well known.¹

¹ *Arabia Deserta*, I, 249, 318, 345.

The great ideal of the wandering social community, then, is that of justice and brotherhood. This ideal, to be sure, is rather narrow, and applies at first only to each clan, tribe, or people by itself. We find that all the so-called "lower" races of the world are kinder, within the limits of their own communities, than are people of more sophisticated and civilized ways of life. Our word "kind," in fact, is derived from the same root as the word "kindred." The life of primitive men everywhere emphasizes justice, brotherhood, kindness, kinship. The ancestors of all nations were wanderers. Thus come into view the original ideas and usages that underlie the common life of humanity, controlling the most powerful springs of action.

The Israelites emerge from the Arabian wilderness into biblical history with the marks of their primitive nomadism strong upon them. As in the case of all primitive and ancient peoples, religion was a close and intimate part of their life. To use a modern expression, church and state were one and the same in the Israelite community. We who have grown up in a social order which recognizes the principle of separation between church and state find it difficult to grasp the full meaning of the ancient union of religion and life. It meant, in brief, that religion was the reflection,

or mirror, of the conventional usages and views of society. To recognize, worship, or swear by the god of a tribe or nation was the same as assenting to the social ideas and usages of that particular community.

Carrying these facts with us, we are now prepared to take another important step. The Israelites in the Arabian desert worshiped a deity whose name is given in modern English Bibles as "Jehovah." The real name itself is very different from this, and we find the first syllable of it in Ps. 68, thus: "His name is Yah." The same syllable occurs in the well-known Hebrew word *hallelu-jah*, which means "Give praise to Yah." It is also found in the names of hundreds of important characters in biblical history, such as Isaiah, Elijah, Josiah, Hezekiah, Jeremiah, etc. The full name of this ancient Israelite deity is "Yahweh."

We can hardly emphasize too strongly that the early religion of Yahweh, as reflected in the writings of such men as Amos, the shepherd of the Judean wilderness, was a very simple matter. The whole message of Amos can be condensed into the well-known exhortation "Let justice roll down as waters" (Amos 5:24). Another highland prophet says, "What doth Yahweh require of thee, but to do justice, and to love kindness,

and to walk humbly with thy god?" (Mic. 6:8). This early religion was not a theological, or doctrinal, matter at all. No primitive religion is ever theological, in the modern sense of that word. Yahweh was worshiped as the protector of the tribal brotherhood and the god of popular justice and morality. The influence of the prehistoric, tribal usages appears in the Bible in the frequent denunciation of interest on money, foreclosure of mortgages with adding of house to house and field to field, and also in the tradition that Yahweh had given the *land* of Canaan to the Israelites to be held in their families forever as a fixed possession that should not be sold. Amos and the other prophets appeal to the fundamental law of brotherhood-justice which derives its force from the primitive clan conscience. They do not base their authority upon the so-called "Laws of Moses," for the reason that these laws, as now found in their present shape in the Bible, were not current during early Hebrew history.

THE AMORITES

Carrying with us these important considerations, and holding them in full view, let us turn to the other main branch of Hebrew ancestry. We now enter a different world, which is very unlike that of the nomadic tribe. The Amorites,

having lived in the land of Canaan for many generations before the coming of the Israelites, occupied the crossroads of the trade routes in ancient oriental civilization. Lying between the Egyptian empire on the one side and the Babylonian empire on the other, these Amorites had long ago left the nomadic life behind, and were firmly settled in their walled cities and neighboring country villages.

The social system of the Amorites had but little in common with that of the invading Israelites. Like the Egyptians, Babylonians, Phoenicians, and other settled peoples of the ancient world, the Amorites had already reduced land to the category of private, individual property, subject to sale and exchange. They had a wealthy upper class and a poor lower class. They not only followed agriculture, but they were commercialistic and capitalistic. Their laws recognized the institution of human slavery. Their economic usages included the circulation of money, the making of loans at interest on real estate, and the foreclosure of the mortgage when the obligations of the contract were not fulfilled. Amorite life came to a center in those fortified cities which, according to the ancient Book of Judges, the Israelite invaders were unable to reduce when they came into Canaan from the wilderness of Arabia.

The principal members of the upper social class among the Amorites were called by the name *baal*. This word means property-owner and slaveholder. It carries with it something of the sense of "big business." *Baal* was a very common word among certain oriental nations. The head of the family was not called the "husband" of his wife, but the *baal* of his woman, because he bought her for money, and she was regarded as his possession. A man could have as many such wives as his financial resources permitted. The *baal*, then, was the legal owner of his women, children, slaves, cattle, houses, lands, etc.; and this highly important word passed over directly into the composite Hebrew language, appearing in the manuscripts of the Bible with the force here indicated. "The ox knoweth his owner, and the ass the stall of his *baal*" (Isa. 1:3).

Among the Amorites, as in the case of the Israelites and other ancient peoples, church and state were one and the same; religion and life were closely identified. The term *baal* was carried straight up from the men of power and applied to the *gods* of the Amorites. The divine Baals of the land of Canaan were deities whose worship centered in the various fortified cities. All the important and solemn things of life—plowing and planting and reaping and selling land, etc.—

were transacted in the name of the Baals. Swearing by the name of Baal meant recognition of the native Amorite ideas and institutions. The Baals were the patrons and protectors of a social system based on land monopoly, slavery, aristocracy, special privilege, and graft.

We now have before us the elements of the early evolution of church and Bible. Israelites plus Amorites equal Hebrews. This formula needs to be burned into our minds with red letters if we are ever to be prepared to understand the mighty religious development which gave rise to the churches around us in the world today. At first glance, the double ancestry of the Hebrew nation appears to have no bearing on the great question of social justice. But when we turn this interesting fact over and examine it from all sides, we find the most remarkable consequences flowing from it.

THE HEBREW KINGDOM

The foregoing survey shows that the two principal races which united to form the Hebrew nation were far apart in their social ideals and usages. When some of the Israelites in the hill country of Canaan proposed to establish a government with a king over it, there was opposition to the plan. According to one account, the prophet Samuel, who lived in the hills of Ephraim, warned

the people that if they set up a monarchy it would bring them face to face with the social problem which pressed upon the surrounding nations of the oriental world: The ownership of the soil would concentrate in the hands of a few nobles. There would be a small wealthy, upper class, and a vast lower class living in poverty. The people would be heavily taxed to meet the expenses of the royal government; and the children of the poor would be reduced to slavery (I Sam. 8: 11-17). The underlying theme of social justice now begins to emerge clearly into relief.

The earlier days of Samuel's public activity lay within the period of the "Judges." The Israelite clans were living in the hill country of Judah, Ephraim, and Gilead, while the Amorites lived in Jerusalem and other walled cities of the lowlands. The Israelites, on their part, proceeded to form a monarchy by electing as king a certain Saul, the son of Kish. It is to be noticed that Saul's kingdom was merely a fighting organization of hill folk. He had no fortified capital city.

Saul's royal successor, David of Bethlehem, was also an Israelite of the hills; but after the new king had consolidated his power among the highlanders of his own race, he captured and occupied an Amorite fort called "Zion," which dominated the hitherto foreign city of Jerusalem. The king

took wives to himself out of this city, and the fusion of Israelites and Amorites went forward in his reign. The Hebrew race was coming into existence. By the time the half-Israelite Solomon succeeded to the throne, the administrative centers of the new kingdom were established, not only in Jerusalem, but in a number of other Amorite cities which the earlier Israelites had been unable to conquer (I Kings 4:1, 2, 9, 11, 12, 15; cf. Judg. 1:27-33).

The reason why the name "Israel" survived in the Hebrew nation is very simple: The monarchy was founded by highland Israelites, and then extended to include the Amorites of the lowlands. The Amorites themselves, as the Tell-el-Amarna tablets prove, had no national organization in the pre-Israelite period, but only a number of city districts, each worshiping its own local Baal. This condition of things agrees precisely with what we find in the Books of Judges and Samuel. It was the Israelites, the descendants of the desert nomads, who gave political organization to the new Hebrew people. Such being the case, it was but natural that the name of Israel should be applied to the community which arose at the point of assimilation between these two parent races. Properly speaking, there were no "Israelites" after the time of Solomon.

Within a few generations after the establishment of the monarchy, the great mass of the Hebrew people entirely forgot the Amorite side of their ancestry. Presently the mistaken idea became current that the Israelites had actually exterminated the Amorites at the time of the invasion of Canaan. It is here that the writings ascribed to Moses and Joshua have assisted in confusing the minds of subsequent generations. We should carefully remember that the *earliest* Hebrew books are Judges and Samuel, and that the works ascribed to the names of Moses and Joshua were compiled after the Babylonian exile, when the Hebrew nation was no longer in existence, and when its early history was overgrown with a mass of conflicting traditions.

The founding of the Hebrew kingdom by David, not only made the Israelite tradition conspicuous in the new community, but, by the same token, it made the worship of Yahweh the symbol and rallying-point of the whole national movement. Every social group in ancient times had to have a common object of worship. The work of David, in uniting Israelites and Amorites and in defeating their enemies, the Philistines, caused the Hebrew nation to worship Yahweh, the God of David. Thus, we find ourselves looking at the situation once more in a *religious* light; and we

now advance to considerations of the utmost importance.

While the Hebrew people were coming into existence at the point of assimilation between Israelites and Amorites, the social ideas and usages of the parent races continued to prevail in different parts of the country. The inhabitants of the walled cities in the lowlands retained aristocratic institutions, while the farmers and shepherds, living in the hill country and out toward the desert, followed the more primitive, democratic customs. In other words, *while the two original races disappeared within the mass of the new Hebrew kingdom, their opposite points of view remained as distinctions attaching to social classes within the nation.*

This vitality of social ideas and usages had the effect of carrying Amorite Baal-worship and Israelite Yahweh-worship along together in the same stream of national history. A most intensely interesting drama develops before us. Yahweh became the general deity of the nation, while the local Baals remained as the gods of the various districts. And so the "established church" of the Hebrews embraced the worship of many gods. The legal religion of the nation was polytheism.

A highly significant fact calling for notice here is that the Amorite name Baal was even applied to Yahweh himself. Soon after the capture of

Jerusalem, David defeated the Philistines, whereupon he said, "Yahweh hath broken mine enemies before me like the breach of waters. Therefore he called the name of that place *Baal-perazim*" (II Sam. 5:20). This phrase, which means "breakings forth of Baal," was applied to the breaking forth of Yahweh upon the Philistines. The Ark of Yahweh, at this time, was kept in a place called "Baal-Judah" (II Sam. 6:2). One of Saul's sons was called "Esh-baal," and one of his grandsons "Meri-baal" (I Chron. 9:39-40). One of David's captains was named "Baaliah," which means "Yahweh is Baal" (I Chron. 12:5). The application of the term Baal to Yahweh was continued for many generations, as the prophets Hosea and Jeremiah testified (Hos. 2:16, 17; Jer. 23:27).

All the essential factors of one of the most intense and vivid complications in the history of mankind thus appeared in conjunction upon the stage of Hebrew life. In order to appreciate the meaning of the biblical fight for justice, it remains for us only to draw out briefly the developments which unfolded after the rise of the Davidic monarchy.

THE HEBREW STRUGGLE

Whether or not Samuel delivered the speech of warning attributed to him in the eighth chap-

ter of the first book that bears his name, the speech condenses the economic phase of Hebrew life within a very small compass: The plain people were heavily taxed and reduced to slavery, while the best lands in the country came into possession of the rich nobles who surrounded the throne. Under the monarchy, indeed, the social problem of wealth and poverty soon overshadowed the nation.

A great revolt against David, in the latter days of his reign, was put down by the help of hired soldiers known as Cherethites, Pelethites, and Gittites (II Sam. 15:18; 17:8; 20:7, 23). It was by the power of these mercenaries that the throne was seized for Solomon (I Kings 1:8, 43, 44). The oppression of the people during the reign of Solomon became so bitter that, when he died, a popular uprising broke out, in which the larger part of the nation cast off the house of David forever, leaving his family a foothold only in Judah, the little kingdom of the south. Subsequently, the people continued to set up and pull down governments. One dynasty after another was elevated to the throne and presently destroyed.

After the people had exhausted themselves in blind revolts, there began to appear among them the most remarkable characters the world has ever seen—the great Hebrew prophets. It should

be noticed particularly that these men came, not from the walled cities which the nation inherited from the Amorite side of its ancestry, but mostly from the highlands and from the wilderness beyond the frontier, where the community reproduced the primitive ideas and customs of the old, nomadic, desert life. The great Elijah was from the hills of Gilead, east of the Jordan. Elisha lived at the village of Abelmeholah, in the highlands of Ephraim. Amos was a shepherd, whose home was at the little hamlet of Tekoa, far up in the wilderness of Judah. Micah lived in the village of Moresheth, in the Judean hills. Jeremiah came from the village of Anathoth, in the northern part of Judah. It was by such men as these that the platform of Hebrew prophecy was constructed. And, parenthetically, it may be well to add here that the prophets were preachers rather than foretellers of the future. The element of prediction was a minor part of their messages.

Amos, Micah, and Isaiah constituted what may be called the "eighth-century Judean school of prophecy." According to their view, the Hebrew problem was very simple: It consisted merely in the breaking of the desert law of brotherhood-justice by a nation which had once followed that law, but which, through perverseness, had turned

aside from the good old paths of the wilderness forefathers. In brief, the people had forsaken the moral customs of Yahweh, and must be recalled to their old allegiance. The nation as a whole had once done right; it now did wrong; it ought to repent and do right again. To the early Judean school, then, the national sin was a purely ethical matter.

These prophets denounced the adding of house to house and field to field. They perceived that land monopoly was crushing out the life of the people. But they failed to see that the problem of their time lay, not merely in moral perversity, but in a collision between two different sorts of legal institutions (democratic and aristocratic), inherited from the double ancestry of the Hebrew nation, and preserved in the form of class distinctions within the community. One of the mistakes of the early Judean prophets, of course, was their persistent application of the term "Israel" to the *Hebrews*. Amos, for instance, thought that his countrymen were all Israelites by descent, and that the *Amorites* had been destroyed, root and branch, at the time of the original invasion by the desert clans (Amos 2:9, 10).

As a consequence, Amos, Micah, and Isaiah failed to raise the question of the Amorite gods. Search their books, and you will find no reference

to the Baals. These prophets not only took the view that the nation was of pure Israelite descent, but they were no doubt blinded by the apparently innocent custom, dating from David's time, of applying the Amorite name Baal to Yahweh himself. The worship of Yahweh and the worship of the Baals had now gone forward side by side for several generations; and by this time the two were pretty well mixed and confused. The Hebrew prophets were, indeed, confronted by a situation which the human mind had never before encountered; and they were struggling in the dark. A very complicated social, ethical, and religious problem was raised by the evolution of the Hebrew people; and the men who undertook to solve it were slow in stating the case clearly.

A firmer grasp on the essential factors in the situation was gained by the prophet Hosea, whose interest centered, not in Judah, but in *Ephraim*—the region of the so-called "Ten Tribes," which lay north of Jerusalem and composed the larger part of the nation. With revolutionary boldness he insisted that the Amorite term Baal should no longer be applied to the national deity of the Hebrews. Speaking in the name of Yahweh, he says, "Thou shalt no more call me Baal, for I will take away the names of the Baals out of her mouth, and they shall no more be remembered by

their name" (Hos. 2:16, 17). This prophet urges with strong emphasis the distinction between the deity whose worship the Israelites brought with them from the wilderness, and the Baal-gods that have come down from the Amorites. He declares that it is not the Baals who cause the crops to spring up, and who give grain, oil, and wine to the people, but Yahweh himself. Hosea labored to detach Yahweh from the Baals in the minds of the people; and his work represents a new stage in the evolution of Bible religion. It is very instructive to notice the differences between his book and the writings of Amos, Micah, and Isaiah, the Judean prophets already mentioned.

Hosea's thought, however, is obscure as compared with the message of one who preached a century later in Judah. Jeremiah stands at the very summit and crown of Hebrew prophecy, and brings us out of the tangle and confusion into clear daylight. He refers to the fact that earlier generations of Hebrews had forgotten the "name" of Yahweh "because of Baal" (Jer. 23:27); and, in the teaching of this remarkable prophet, "walking after other gods" becomes the figure for breaking Yahweh's law of brotherhood-justice which prevailed in the wilderness among the nomadic Israelite clans. According to his view, then, the conflict of social usages in the Hebrew nation is

to be treated as a rivalry between Yahweh and Baal. He states plainly, as no prophet before him had done, that the struggle between justice and injustice, freedom and slavery, common rights to the earth and private land monopoly, is really a contest in which Yahweh appears as the champion of the people against the Baals who seek to enthrall them.

We have seen that the warning attributed to Samuel refers to the concentration of landed property in the hands of the wealthy, and we have heard the prophets crying out against the adding of house to house and field to field. This process was accomplished, not as a bare piece of robbery, but as a *legal* matter, through the machinery of the *courts*, and under the sanction of *religion*. The dreadful, agonizing business of depriving a man of his ancestral inheritance, because of his failure to pay interest or principal of a loan, was conducted in the name of that ancient Baal-cult which was bound up with aristocracy, private land monopoly, and graft.

Jeremiah goes into the heart of this tragedy in Hebrew social life to get his most emphatic figure. The concentration of property made a very deep impression upon him, as it did on all the prophets. The masses were taught to swear in the name of Baal by men of wealth and power, who "touched

the inheritance of the people," plucking up the poor from their homes and casting them out. Startling indeed is the black threat made by Jeremiah in the name of Yahweh: Unless the nation cease to swear in the name of Baal, then, even as the poor are plucked off their land, *so will Yahweh pluck up the entire nation and hurl it away* (Jer. 11:17; 12:14-17).

In the generation before Jeremiah, a king by the name of Manasseh had reigned in Jerusalem. According to the Book of Kings, this monarch reared up altars for Baal and acted like an Amorite (II Kings 21:3, 11). But during the early life of Jeremiah there was a great reaction against the policies of Manasseh, the Baal-worshipping monarch. The people of the country districts rose up, and put a new king, Josiah, on the throne (II Kings 21:24). Under this king a reformation took place. The vessels that were made for Baal-worship were brought forth from the temple, carried out beyond the city to the Kidron valley, and there burned; while those who offered incense to Baal were put down (I Kings 23:4, 5). Nevertheless, old practices and ideas were so powerful that Baalism presently came back in full force. It was in the midst of this Baalistic revival that Jeremiah's preaching campaign was conducted. His denunciations were

more bitter and severe than those of the earlier prophets. For saying that the temple would be destroyed and the city of Jerusalem laid waste he was charged with high treason and brought to trial for his life.

It was one of the most thrilling scenes in Hebrew history: Jeremiah on the one side; his accusers on the other; the judges in solemn session at the entry of the temple gate; an excited mass of people watching the progress of the case. The democratic, or popular, party was so strong, and the prophet had so many friends, that the judges did not venture to condemn him, but ordered his release on the technical ground that, whether he was right or wrong, he had spoken in good faith in the name of Yahweh, the national deity (Jer., chap. 26).

TRIUMPH OF MONOTHEISM

Jeremiah's prediction came true. Already the Ephraimites, to whom Hosea preached in vain, had been taken away into an exile from which they were never to return—the so-called "Ten Lost Tribes." And now the little kingdom of Judah was conquered; and most of its inhabitants were carried away into the great Babylonian captivity. The temple at Jerusalem was destroyed, and the city was laid in ruins.

Thus Jeremiah was vindicated. Baalism perished forever; but faith in Yahweh survived. The force which destroyed the worship of many gods, and enthroned the One God, was the wrath of the plain people as expressed in political and religious uprisings, and in the preaching of the great Hebrew prophets; while the awful catastrophe of the Babylonian exile drove the lesson home for all time. *And so we see how the victory of monotheism was the first great triumph of democracy in the history of the world.*

Conventional interpreters of the Bible have led us to suppose that the struggle between the worship of the One God and the worship of many gods was a kind of theological, or philosophical, or metaphysical, contest. On the right side were the wise, enlightened people, who believed that only *one* deity had a real, true, actual existence; while on the wrong side were the ignorant, benighted, foolish people, who believed in the real, true, actual existence of a lot of imaginary, fictitious gods.

But as a matter of fact, the campaign against the "false" gods was very different from this. In reality, it was a war on graft and monopoly. This is made clear by a great mass of conclusive evidence. The false gods were false because they stood for injustice and a false moral system.

Yahweh was "true" because he stood for the idea of justice and a true moral system. It is not that the Bible offers a set of perfect moral rules applicable to modern conditions; but rather that the fight for monotheism was an item in the progressive emancipation of the race. On the whole, Baalism looked *backward*; while the Yahweh religion, as interpreted by the great prophets, looked *forward*.

Religion, on its human side, is a matter of unfolding spiritual perception. On the other side of the process, the Divine Spirit, which guides the circling stars and planets, made use of Hebrew evolution to lift the hearts of men up to the exalted platform of faith in a true and holy God, whose laws of justice and righteousness, when discovered and applied in human life, are seen to be the expression of his character. The laws and conditions of morality are as truly an expression of the nature of the universe in which we live as are the laws of chemistry and physics and astronomy; and they are equally matters of gradual discovery.

This, of course, is a new way of looking at the Bible. But it is the way of modern scholarship. It represents an angle of approach and a method of interpretation which are not yet familiar to the people at large, but whose presuppositions have already struck root in the popular mind.

Great multitudes today are already prepared for the new economics and the new spirituality of the Bible. Modern scholarship offers the only method which will give the Bible continued hold on the world and insure the religious appeal of Scripture to the progressive intellect.

We can see the higher type of religion being produced, or created, before our eyes on the pages of the Bible. Hebrew prophecy got a long start in the primitive, nomadic ideal of brotherhood-justice. Hebrew religion itself was evolved through the play of prophetic convictions against the evils of Baalism, action and reaction succeeding each other until at last the prophets had climbed up to the idea of Yahweh as a Redeemer and Savior from injustice and sin.

This, however, is only the beginning of the story. But now that we have got our bearings and entered on the path of a new interpretation, the other chapters will unroll more quickly before us.