

'I HAVE SINNED AGAINST THE LORD'

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ISRAEL encountered the one true living God at Sinai in a manifestation of fire and storm, and when they set out again to take the land he had promised their forefathers, they were bound to him in the living bond of the covenant; as his people and a holy people they were to worship him alone, and to obey the elementary moral law he had established among them. Whatever the religious practices of Israel had been until then and whatever they assimilated from their neighbours in Canaan and further afield, only that was now acceptable which could be used or reinterpreted in the light of this unique revelation and relationship. The golden calf was not acceptable as an image of the living God, because he could not be represented by lifeless images. But altar and sacrifice and the sprinkling of blood could be an expression of devotion to him, offered on behalf of the whole people, of their royal or priestly representative, or of the private individual, and directed in one form, the whole burnt offering, to adoration, in another to the expression of the union between God and his people effected by the covenant, in yet another to the expiation of faults and sins.

'If anyone of the common people sins unwittingly in doing any one of the things which the Lord has commanded not to be done . . . , when the sin which he has committed is made known to him, he shall bring for his offering a goat. . . . And he shall lay his hand on the head of the sin-offering, and kill the sin-offering in the place of burnt offering. And the priest shall take some of its blood with his finger and put it on the horn of the altar of burnt offering, and pour out the rest of its blood at the base of the altar . . . , and the priest shall make atonement for him, and he shall be forgiven' (Lev. iv, 27-31).

In the strata of the old testament which scholars attribute to priestly authorship, or better to the tradition of generations of the Israelite priesthood with their own theological emphasis, we can still see traces of a twilit world of primitive practices which have been half reinterpreted and only half, perhaps, understood. In one such, the high priest is to lay his hands on the head of a

goat, confessing the sins of Israel and so transferring them to the goat, which is then led into the wilderness and dies or is destroyed, and with it the sins of Israel. In another, a red cow is killed and burnt, other ingredients such as hyssop are thrown into the fire, and the ashes are collected and used to make a kind of holy water, which is to be sprinkled with a bunch of hyssop over those who are ritually unclean. It is difficult to estimate the importance of these rites in the worship of Israel or to understand the state of mind in which the breaking of a *tabu* shades into the breaking of a ritual or moral precept. The 'water of purification' hallowed by the ashes of the red cow was used in a context of *tabu*, and yet by the time the ritual was codified and set down in writing the killing of the cow had been assimilated to a sacrifice of expiation. And what were the sins, iniquities, and transgressions which were laid on the scape-goat, and which the high priest had to confess? If they were confessed specifically, it is not likely that they were catalogues of individual misdemeanours; they would rather be outstanding or collective offences against the living God, and probably, if we can judge by a list of offences which an individual had to confess and expiate, they might include matters of social injustice (Lev. v, 1-6).

The old-fashioned and over-simple contrast between priests and prophets does not hold good; both institutions could be and sometimes were overwhelmed by the seductions of Canaanite religion, but both also contributed to Israel's knowledge and experience of the divine. It is a question rather of differing modes of revelation in overlapping spheres. The work of the priesthood at its best was to reaffirm constantly in the day-to-day life of the liturgy the majestic and transcendent holiness of the Lord in contrast with the un-holiness of man. This is of course particularly true of the post-exilic age, of the second temple with its elaboration of worship and multiplication of sacrifices. But this was not a mere materialistic ritualism, it was the response to a profound realization of the spiritual transcendence of the Lord, the symbol of which in the priestly theology was the shining cloud which filled the holy place. Man cannot bear too much reality—it was one of the functions of the priesthood and the temple to prolong the manifestation of Sinai and the visions of the prophets in a mode more suitable to man, to reaffirm through the outward splendour of the temple the holiness of God, which is

one of the poles of the act of contrition. Isaias, looking towards the sanctuary, saw the glory of the Lord and the Seraphim crying Holy, Holy, Holy (Isaias vi); the tax-collector in our Lord's parable, 'standing afar off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast saying, God be merciful to me a sinner' (Luke xviii, 13). The sphere of the priesthood was the temple, with its worship and its sacrifices, its emphasis on the transcendence of God and the sinfulness of man; but it was the growth of revelation through the true prophets that made clear in what that sinfulness consisted, and how it concerned the individual in his own heart.

The people of Israel entered on the covenant with the living God in a mood of awe and exaltation that was for the bulk of them hardly more than momentary. On the one hand they were bound to the worship of a single austere God of whom they were allowed to make no images, and to a stern code of morality. On the other, they moved and then lived among peoples with a multiplicity of little local gods, Baals and Ashtaroth, whose worship was colourful, and satisfied not only the natural craving of the human imagination for expression but also certain baser inclinations, and was deeply ingrained into the kind of peasant life they took up on the conquest of Canaan. For centuries the pendulum swung between apostasy and return; at first, and always, in a context of peasant religion, so that the ritual prostitution which was a feature of the fertility cults became in the end a symbol of the faithlessness of the people—

For long ago you broke your yoke

and burst your bonds,

and you said, I will not serve;

Yea, upon every high hill

and under every green tree

you bowed down as a harlot (Jer. ii, 20);

and later in an age of expanding trade, increasing riches and oppression, and the dangerous game of politics in a buffer state, between the gods and rulers of greater nations and the invisible God whose temple was in Jerusalem. For the historians under the monarchy who compiled the earlier history of Israel it became a formula into which they cast their account—

and the people of Israel did evil in the sight of the Lord, forgetting the Lord their God and serving the Baals and Ash-

taroth; therefore the anger of the Lord was kindled against them and he sold them into the hand of X. . . . But when the people of Israel cried to the Lord, he raised up a deliverer Y . . . (Judges *passim*).

Again and again, through the warrior judges, the action of righteous kings, and the denunciations of the prophets, Israel was reminded of the divine reality to which she was bound. The pendulum swung wider and wider until punishment could no longer be averted, and the writer of Lamentations was left in the desolate land to make acknowledgment—

Why should a living man complain,
a man, about the punishment of his sins?

Let us test and examine our ways,
and return to the Lord.

Let us lift up our hearts and hands
to God in heaven:

'We have transgressed and rebelled
and thou hast not forgiven' (Lam. iii, 39-42).

However, among the threats and denunciations a deeper understanding of the covenant itself was growing, of the nature and the love of God who had of his own accord entered into an alliance with Israel. Osee's vision of the covenant in terms of the bond between husband and wife or between father and son implies not only a closer relationship but a more tender one—

How can I give you up, O Ephraim,
how can I hand you over, O Israel . . .

My heart recoils within me,
my compassion grows warm and tender,

I will not execute my fierce anger . . .

for I am God and not man,
the Holy One in your midst,

and I will not come to destroy (Os. xi, 8-9).

If Israel is the bride of the Lord, then her faithlessness is a refusal to love as well as a rejection of obedience.

Like the people as a whole, the king himself could be misled and blinded by the world and the flesh. David himself did not fall into the laxity of Solomon in his old age, or the outright apostasy of later kings, but he did on one occasion, overwhelmed by desire for Bethsabee, act like any other despotic monarch of his or later times, setting himself above the law, taking the wife and arranging

for the liquidation of another man. This might have passed off without retribution in Moab or Tyre. But David, the anointed of the Lord, was guilty of adultery and murder, of breaking two of the commandments, which was punishable by death. 'The Lord sent Nathan the prophet to David.' Nathan with inspired skill opens the eyes of David to his sin; he does not begin with recriminations, but instead he presents David in his capacity of king and judge with what appears to be a case of injustice among the people, the poor man's lamb and the rich man's greed. David's wrath is kindled against the oppressor and then Nathan exposes the parable. David sees his sin as the Lord sees it. Nathan then in contrast sets out the unmerited mercy of God towards David, the blessings as it were of the covenant in his own case, and David, compelled to see objectively on the one hand the lovingkindness of God towards him and on the other his own sin and the slight to God it implies, cries out: 'I have sinned against the Lord'. David's confession and repentance are accepted, and he is assured of forgiveness by the word of the prophet (2 Kings xi, xii).

'I have sinned against the Lord.' Whether through the reinterpretation of ancient practices by which men tried to appease offended powers, or through the reinterpretation of sacrifices to the transcendent God, or through the prophetic revelation of the love of God for his people, the consciousness of sin was corrected and deepened within the heart of Israel. Psalm I, the *Miserere*, purports to be and perhaps is the act of contrition made by David 'when Nathan the prophet came to him'. Whether it is a psalm of David edited later, or a later poet's work, written perhaps during the exile when temple and sacrifice were in abeyance, it is still the classical expression of penitence of heart. It acknowledges first the loving mercy of God, giver of all blessings including forgiveness, the holiness and justice of his sentence on sinners, the power that is his alone to recreate by his holy action holiness within the heart of man. It expresses on the sinner's part not only his sorrow for the actual transgressions he has committed, an abiding sorrow because 'my sin is ever before me', but also the consciousness of a deep imperfection within, which needs the re-establishment of a divine order in the heart—'Behold thou desirest truth in his inward being'—and it expresses the longing for absolution from the former and the restoration of the latter—

Sprinkle me with hyssop and I shall be clean . . .

Create in me a clean heart, O God.

The sacrifice of animals is insufficient, is not desired by God; it is the sinner's contrition and praise that is acceptable.



PENANCE IN THE EARLY CHURCH

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THE full significance of our Lord's 'Blessed are the clean of heart, for they shall see God' (Matt. v, 8) is only to be understood in a setting of worship. Behind it is the thought of the psalm: 'Who shall ascend into the mountain of the Lord; or who shall stand in his holy place? The innocent in hands, and the clean of heart . . .' (Ps. xxiii, 3f). Man must become pure in his inmost being; and he must do so as a preparation for worship. But the man who conceives such desires discovers within himself impeding faults. These cause him grief; and the acknowledgment of being in such a state is to be penitent. Penitence as a prelude to the sacrifice of worship is the theme of Ps. 1: 'A sacrifice to God is an afflicted spirit; a contrite and humbled heart, O God, thou wilt not despise. . . . Then thou shalt accept the sacrifice of justice . . .' This relation between penance and worship is one of the most evident features of the place of penance in the practice of the early Church.

If the reasons recently put forward by Fr J.-P. Audet, O.P., for dating the *Didache* from between A.D. 50 and 70 and locating its origin in Antioch can be accepted, then its significance is extremely great. It links penance or confession with prayer several times. 'In the assembly, you shall confess your faults, and you will not enter into prayer with an evil conscience' (iv, 14). Whether the formulas used would be general, or whether there would be a spontaneous confession of each individual's sins, we do not know. As it is the last injunction of the 'Way of Life', it is unlikely to refer to 'mortal' sins. In the kind of eucharistic preface which it gives, there are these words: 'May he who is holy come; may he who is not do penance' (x, 6). Then, in a general rubric it