

Poverty and the State in Biblical Thought

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WAS THERE, IN BIBLICAL ISRAEL, ANYTHING ANALOGOUS to the modern development called the "welfare-state"? If so, what were the assumptions that underlay it, and how do they differ from those of the contemporary democratic, socialist one? What was the place of this Biblical "welfare-state" within the structure of the religious tradition of ancient Israel? Finally, what limitations do these structural concerns impose upon efforts in our day to argue from Biblical society to our own situation? These are the questions which we shall address in our study.

I

The structural question cannot be ignored by the responsible modern exegete or, for that matter, by the rabbi in the pulpit. It is not sufficient merely to cite commandments without a concern for the theological and historical matrix in which they are embedded. The historical dimension is especially important, for, in the religion of Biblical Israel, history is the mother of theology. Unlike the teachings of a philosophical school, Biblical teaching develops as a kind of afterthought in the wake of overwhelming historical experience. Except as we keep in mind the historical self-understanding of the people Israel, we cannot hope to comprehend Biblical beliefs and commandments. The norms that emerge in Israelite tradition must not be confused with those of other traditions, even where their substantive content is identical. To the self-conscious adherent of any moral system, there is a necessary distinction between his own and all other moralities, however similar, because the nature of the vehicle of moral injunction is inextricably linked with the identity and origin of his community. This is even more the case where the community understands itself, as does Israel, to be the result of divine action in history, to be of history, and not simply in history.

What is the self-understanding of Biblical Israel? One passage sums it up so well that it has been termed a "Hexateuch in miniature," that is to say, a germinal statement of the major themes of the narrative in the Torah and Joshua.¹ It is the affirmation which a farmer makes upon offering the first fruits of the season:

1. Gerhard von Rad, *The Problem of the Hexateuch and Other Essays*, trans. by E. W. Trueman Dicken (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966), pp. 1-78.

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My ancestor was an Aramean about to die when he went down to Egypt and lived there in meager numbers. But there he became a populous and very powerful nation. The Egyptians dealt harshly with us, oppressed us, and imposed upon us hard labor. We cried to the Lord, the God of our fathers, who heard our plea and saw our plight, our toil and our oppression. The Lord brought us out of Egypt with a strong arm and outstretched hand, awesome power and by signs and portents. He brought us to this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. (Dt. 26:5-9).

Note that, in this confession, Israel sees its origin as being among the poor and oppressed. There is no special national merit, no claim to wealth which is based upon natural right. Instead, life and prosperity are attributed to the act of deliverance by God. Awareness of God here entails awareness of Israel's own poverty, of the death averted only by God's active intervention. Thus, the fundamental self-understanding of Israel gave to the people an indelible sympathy with the poor and abandoned of society, a sympathy which they could lose only at the price of a loss of historical identity. This sympathy extends beyond the bounds of Israelite society even to the point of including the Egyptian:

Do not hold the Egyptian in contempt, for you were an alien in his land. (Dt. 23:8)

This ordinance is all the more remarkable in that Deuteronomy might well have taken the diametrically opposite line, mandating genocide for the descendants of the Egyptians as it does for those of the Amalekites, Israel's next oppressor (Dt. 25:17-19). Instead, Israel's sympathy with the oppressed is here so intense that it does not wish to have its own fate imposed even upon the oppressors. It did not require a "New Israel" to show the world how to renounce the ethic of retaliation.

The social legislation of Israel reflects this aspect of historical experience. Rather than provide a comprehensive view of the laws of the Torah which protect the poor against the rich, let me cite a few examples. Already in the "Book of the Covenant" (Ex. 20:22-23:33), which Biblical scholars who are attuned to the composite nature of texts consider to be Israel's earliest law, it is forbidden to exact interest from a poor man, and if one takes a neighbor's garment in pledge, it must be returned before sundown. Otherwise, "in what else shall he sleep?" (Ex. 22:24-26). In the "Holiness Code" (Lev. 17-26), a compendium of laws compiled, most likely, by the Temple priesthood, it is forbidden to glean the corners of the field, which must be left for the poor and the resident alien (Lev. 19:9-10) and, in the case of the Deuteronomic Law Code (Dt. 12-26), for the orphan and widow as well (Dt. 24:19-22). The Deuteronomic Code, which came into prominence in the generation before the Exile,² also extends the old provisions so as to include the urban day-

2. For a sound exposition of the problems in Deuteronomy and most of the solutions, see E. W. Nicholson, *Deuteronomy and Tradition* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1967).

laborer of its own time. Thus, it speaks not only of the poor, especially the debtor, and the dispossessed, but also of the rights of the working man over and against his employer (*e.g.*, Dt. 24:14-15). It even goes so far as to forbid the return of fugitive slaves (Dt. 23:16-17)!

I have already mentioned one factor which underlies this humanistic tendency—the fact that the Exodus was the prime experience in Israel's self-understanding. There is a second, which chronologically follows the first. The Canaan into which Israel entered was a land of city-states organized according to feudal norms. These city-states were monarchies upheld by armies of charioteers. Israel was not a monarchy, but a mixed multitude with no allegiance to the existing political regimes. The Canaanite sources of the same period, the Late Bronze Age (ca. 1500-1200 B.C.E.) speak of very similar groups, the Hapiru, chronic trouble-makers of the time, and it is hard not to relate them both phonologically and historically to the Hebrews.³ In other words, the Israelites defined themselves not only in opposition to the great empire of Pharaonic Egypt, but, also, against the highly centralized and bureaucratized states that they were to dispossess. The emergence of Israel was a threat to the monarchic principle and, more importantly, a threat even to the idea of the state as the source of law. Israel was not a state like the Canaanite states, but, rather, a collection of riff-raff (*erev rav*, Ex. 12:38) without a central government, a capital city, a professional army, a class of charioteers. It was a group of alienated peasants with no stake in the stratification of Canaanite society. One senses this critical difference in those narratives which speak of Israel's begging the kings of the Edomites and of the Amorites for permission to pass through, never deviating, of course, from the "King's Highway" (Num. 20:14-21; 21:21-25). How such a group came to overwhelm the city-states is an issue that historians of the ancient Semitic world debate. Israel's own confessional answer was that God was fighting in their behalf. No army could withstand the onslaught of the heavenly army (*z'va YHWH*, [Jos. 5:14]). When God fights for a people, they should, as Moses admonishes them (Ex. 14:14), hold their peace. Thus, this idea of divine warfare which could demolish any earthly army gave Israel a profound distrust of mere human warriors and their pitiful weapons.⁴ In fact, numerous Biblical poems assert the superiority of faith in God over trust in one's own arsenal, as for example:

3. A good, popular discussion of the Hapiru problem can be found in John Bright, *A History of Israel*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1972), pp. 92-94. See, also, the creative interpretation of George E. Mendenhall, "The Hebrew Conquest of Palestine," *Biblical Archaeologist* 25 (1962): 66-87; rpt. in E. F. Campbell, Jr., and D. N. Freedman, eds., *The Biblical Archaeologist Reader* 3 (Garden City: Anchor, 1970), pp. 100-120.

4. On divine warfare, see Patrick Miller, *Holy War and Cosmic War in Early Israel*, Harvard Semitic Monographs, 5 (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1973).

A king is not delivered by a large force,
 Nor is a warrior saved by great strength.
 The horse is a false hope for deliverance,
 Strong as it is, it provides no escape.
 Truly, the eye of the Lord is on those who fear him,
 Who wait for his faithful care,
 To save them from death,
 To keep them alive in famine.
 We wait for the Lord,
 Our help and our shield is he.
 For in him our hearts rejoice,
 For in his holy name we trust.
 May your faithful care, O Lord, be with us,
 As we have put our hope in you. (Ps. 33:16-22)

Psalm 147 is no less explicit:

Not the strength of the horse does he prize,
 Not in the thighs of men does he take pleasure.
 The Lord takes pleasure in those who fear him,
 Who wait for his faithful care. (Ps. 147:10-11)

The people Israel, then, not only lacked a state, but lived in a certain tension with the structures of statehood, which they saw as transient and without soteriological significance; they could not save. This is not to say that Israel was other-worldly or a-political. On the contrary, the covenant itself is an idea adopted from the world of diplomacy, where its closest formal analogues are to be found.⁵ In the Sinaitic covenant, Israel became God's vassal and God became Israel's sovereign. Yet the relationship that was thus sealed was not between two states, as is the case in the analogous treaties, but between a ruler and his own subjects. In other words, the covenant is both a kind of treaty (a document specifying the terms of relationship between parties) and a kind of law code (a document which regulates the relationships between men within a single society). Thus, Israel's theology is intensely political, or, I should prefer to say, theopolitical, for, in Israel's case alone, the act of accepting the covenant was an acclamation of God's kingship. In the words of an early poem:

Torah Moses commanded for us,
 The heritage of the congregation of Jacob.
 Then [the Lord] became king in Jeshurun,
 When the heads of the people assembled,
 The assembly of the tribes of Israel. (Dt. 33:4-5)

We have already seen that the concept of God as warrior is a judgment upon human armies. Now we see that God as king is a judgment on human monarchies. In fact, for Israel, the vassal of God, human politics becomes immensely problematic. If God is king, what use is there for a human king? If God rules, what would a king do? Would he not, like

5. The best popular account of covenant is Delbert R. Hillers, *Covenant: The History of a Biblical Idea* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins, 1969).

the arrogant and foolish Canaanite kings, be an insult to God and His rule? These are not contradictions dreamt up in some modern theologian's book-lined study. On the contrary, they were very crucial issues in early Israel, the Israel of the twelve-tribe league. You may recall the remark of the "judge" Gideon when offered kingship:

Gideon said to them, "I shall not reign over you, nor shall my son reign over you, but the Lord shall reign over you." (Ju. 8:22)

And when the Israelites, disgusted with their unique theopolitical situation, demand a king "like all the nations" (*kekhol hagoyim*, [1 Sam. 8:5]), God comforts a spurned and disheartened Samuel by telling him:

They have not rejected you; they have rejected me from being their king. (1 Sam. 8:7)

The idea is simple, but pregnant with meaning for the future of Israel's thought; in fact, for the future of the whole West. Divine kingship and human kingship are incompatible. Human statehood is an affront to divine rule, an act of rebellion against the sovereign with whom Israel is in covenant.

Now do you see why the laws of Israel are addressed to the individual or the clan, but almost never to the bureaucrat or the king distinctively? Early Israel felt a profound reluctance to accept the institution of human kingship, a reluctance not apparent among the contemporaneous peoples of the Syro-Palestinian world and in very sharp contradiction with Mesopotamian, Anatolian, and Egyptian experience. Israel remembered vividly being a people before being a kingdom, a sacral state (*mamlekhet kohanim ve-goy kadosh*, [Ex. 19:6]) before a human state. The Israelites had their laws before they had a central bureaucracy; and that bureaucracy would most likely be an intrusion into what some traditions considered to be the pristine relationship between God and Israel in the wilderness, the era before the settlement in the Land of Israel, when the people Israel "walked behind me in the desert, in a land unsown" (Jer. 2:2). In Israel, all law is considered part of that pure and direct relationship. All Israelite law makes the claim to be divine revelation. In none of the law codes is the human king the law-maker. Here the contrast with the Semitic parallels is very strong, adding much to our understanding of the Bible. Thus, Hammurabi (18th century B.C.E.), of the First Dynasty of Babylon, announces in the prologue of his celebrated code:

When Marduk commissioned me to guide the people aright to direct the land,
I established law and justice in the language of the land thereby promoting the welfare of the people. (V, 12-21)⁶

6. This translation is taken from James B. Pritchard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, 3rd ed., (Princeton: Princeton University, 1969), p. 165.

As was to be the case in the Biblical monarchies, the deity appoints the king. The god Marduk commissions Hammurabi, but Hammurabi gives the law. In Babylon, the state is the source of the law. In early Israel, the state is an affront to the law. In Babylon, human kingship is the great organizing principle of society. As we have seen, this was not the case in early Israel, where rule by God (theocracy) is a better description of the situation. Of course, in the real world of politics, theocracy is unworkable, as the Israelite tribal league was to learn in the eleventh century through a series of devastating defeats at the hands of the Philistines. The urgent need for a central military command more permanent than could be provided by the charismatic "judges" gave rise to the tragic kingship of Saul (1 Sam. 4-31). This concession to worldly necessity was never revoked, but prophets and psalmists continued to sing of the day when God would assume dominion over his people, ruling either through his messiah (*e.g.*, Ezek. 34) or directly, without human assistance (*e.g.*, Ps. 96). In sum, Israel did not forget its youth, but continued to pray for the day when the present order of things would pass away and the reign of God would be manifest and inviolable.

The laws which protect the poor, then, are addressed to the individual and the clan, the local, highly organic unit of social organization. These laws are, thus, religious commandments, rather than state policy. They are obligations established by God and owed directly to the poor and not to the government as a mediator between rich and poor. Rather, that mediator is God, whose control of history sets right the sinful relationships in society, one of which, incidentally, is the arrogance of human government. The laws mandate a special benevolence for the down-trodden, a benevolence which is one of God's central passions. According to Ps. 146, the God of Jacob

Secures justice for the oppressed,
Gives food to the starving,
The Lord sets captives free,
The Lord opens the eyes of the blind,
The Lord straightens up those who are bent over,
The Lord loves the righteous,
The Lord watches over the alien,
To orphan and widow he gives courage. (Ps. 146:7-9)

This concern for the poor, the widow, the orphan, the alien, and all other helpless people is well-known also in extra-Biblical literature, where, especially in Canaanite epics, it is a duty of the human king. To be sure, Biblical thought, too, hopes that the earthy ruler will be just and compassionate, while the prophets praised those who were so and condemned those who were not (*e.g.*, Jer. 22). In fact, it may well have been customary for the king, perhaps at his coronation, formally to promise just such behavior (Ps. 101). Still, Biblical thought does not tend

toward optimism about earthly governments. The psalm cited above prefaces the section that is quoted with the warning:

Put not your trust in princes,
 In mere man who cannot save.
 His breath departs;
 He returns to the dust.
 On that day his plans come to nothing. (Ps. 146:3-4)

Thus, Biblical thought mandates, but does not expect, the abolition of poverty within history. Instead, it expects that these commandments of generosity will continue in force, that they will not triumph over the need for them. This curious relationship between generosity and poverty is succinctly put in Deuteronomy, where it is commanded that there shall be no poor and yet predicts that there will be:

There shall be among you no needy, for the Lord will bless you in the land which the Lord your God gives you as an hereditary allotment. (Dt. 15:4)

But seven lines later, we read:

For there will never cease to be needy persons in your land. (Dt. 15:11)

This is not a justification of the *status quo*. On the contrary, the same line continues:

That is why I command you: You must open your hand to the poor and needy kinsman in your land. (Dt. 15:11-

The existence of poverty, then, is not due simply to the negligence of one generation. It is systemic. Even the best mortal government will not eliminate it. Something in human nature, something in the way that men relate to each other in their collectivities, produces poverty, even where intentions are the best. Cynicism or asceticism is not the Biblical answer to this dilemma. For, although we cannot end poverty, we can diminish it; we can help some poor man get by, perhaps not for his lifetime, but at least for a day, or for one meal, or for part of one meal. God has given us both the commandments and the disheartening context in which they make sense. The commandment does not eliminate the context, but neither does the continuation of the context render the commandment pointless. In the words of Rabbi Tarfon (d. 135 C.E.), "It is not up to you to complete the work, but neither are you free to desist from it" (*Avot* 2:21).

The relationship between the poor and poverty is a curious one. God loves the poor but hates poverty. To be sure, there is a profound issue here, one which Judaism shares with Marxism and those streams in Christianity which neither disparage material wealth nor idealize poverty. Judaism, Marxism and these streams in Christianity all affirm a special redemptive role for the poor which is not fulfilled so long as they exist. Or, to put the paradox in other words, these three systems of thought

are fond of the poor, so fond as to be committed to their disappearance. They attribute a corrupting property to wealth yet wish more people had it. The era in which the poor shall disappear without becoming crass and exploitative is eschatological (occurring at the end of time), or, in the case of Biblical thought, if not eschatological, at least owing to the direct intervention of God into the human arena. There are two reasons for this. First, the eschatological era is the time of justice, when God sets straight the inequities which define historic existence. It is, in Biblical thought, at the end of time (which prophets always considered very near) that we shall learn the meaning of innocent suffering, when we see the whole pattern of which history, so far, is a fragment. Second, because historic existence is perverse, because the order of existence in this world is somehow askew, the final act of God means a radical realignment of proportions. This, in turn, means that those on the bottom of the social order will rise. In fact, this commitment to a radical transformation of proportions, to a victory of God over nature and history, is one of the things for which God is especially praised in hymnic literature, as in the Song of Hannah:

The bow of the warrior is shattered,
 But those who faltered gain new strength.
 Those who were full of bread sell themselves for a crust,
 But the hungry grow fat.
 The barren woman has given birth to seven children,
 But the mother of many sons languishes.
 The Lord kills and brings to life,
 Sends down to the underworld, and brings back up;
 The Lord makes poor and rich,
 Cuts down and raises up.
 He lifts the poor out of the dust,
 From the dunghill he raises the needy,
 To give them a place among princes,
 To make them possess a glorious throne. (1 Sam. 2:4-8)

If this sounds like the "Dictatorship of the Proletariat," there is surely an analogy with Marxist eschatology. Still, we must not lose sight of the theistic nature of Hannah's hymn. It does not speak of a practical political program. The transformation it describes is not effected through any human agency. There is apparently no social group whose hands are so clean that it can accomplish a final and complete victory of justice, a decisive triumph of the "good impulse" (*yezer ha-tov*) over the "evil impulse" (*yezer ha-ra*) which, the rabbis held, co-existed in each of us. The poor in this poem do not fight their way into a place with the princes, nor do the princes or their bureaucracies altruistically reform the society so as to accomplish that goal. Rather, it is God, standing to some extent apart from nature and from history, creating nature and its laws and guiding history, who grants the poor their new place of honor. His doing so is part of a transformation of the very structure of existence

so as to accomplish what is impossible in human history. When God sets the poor on glorious thrones, he also enables weaklings to defeat warriors, barren women to give birth, and even the dead to rise from the underworld. Poverty is obviously deeply rooted in the structure of human existence and its elimination is, in such thinking, a veritable miracle. Only with the abolition of human government as man has always known it can the poor ascend to the rank of princes. Only with that decisive divine conquest of the sinners—and that is everybody—do the poor come into their own. In the words of Psalm 37:

A little longer, and there will be no wicked man;
 You will look carefully at his place, and he will not be there.
 For the meek shall inherit the earth,
 And delight in abundant peace. (Ps. 37:10-11)

Until the meek inherit the earth, they must be protected from the rich and powerful. The laws of charity and of employment, some of which have been referred to, provide some protection from the rich. What about protection from the powerful, principally, the central government? This (as well as protection from the rich) is afforded in the laws of the inalienability of land, which prohibit the final sale of land outright (Lev. 25:23-24). Such laws served to limit the expanse of government at the expense of the governed. In this connection, we must not forget the story of Naboth, the farmer of the Northern Kingdom who refused to sell his ancestral property to King Ahab (1 Kings 21). In cases like this, the traditional law of the inalienability of land provided the humble peasant with protection against a hungry central government. To circumvent such strictures, the government had to resort to confiscatory taxation, something which the traditionalist had good reason to fear. His fear, in fact, is seen quite clearly in Samuel's speech to the people as they demand a king, and he cites the greediness of the central royal administration as one reason to retain the old way:

Your fields, vineyards, and good olive orchards he will take to give to his aides. (1 Sam. 8:13)

This resistance to centrally dictated taxation as a means of redistributing wealth played a significant role in Israelite history a few generations after Samuel's prescient admonition when Solomon's tactless son, Rehoboam, refused to relent on the issue of the amount of corvée owed by the North (1 Kings 12), thus bringing about the secession of the northern tribes. Later, this refusal to grant supreme economic hegemony to the royal administration was a major factor in sustaining the prophetic movement. In large measure, prophetic critique of the state depended upon the existence of private property. Fortunately for the prophetic institution, in Israel the Temple was not the great landlord and employer that it was in Mesopotamia and in Egypt. Even in Israel,

the tendency toward centralization of wealth and power had to be continually checked. Constant vigilance was the price of maintaining a private sector which could afford to criticize the state. Thus, in the document which is the closest to a constitution for theopolitical Israel, the program of restoration of the School of Ezekiel (Ezek. 40-48), the economic basis of the central administration is sharply limited (Ezek. 46:16-18). No true prophet could wish it otherwise. You cannot bite for long the hand that feeds you. Here it is essential to remember that prophets were men of flesh and blood, who had to support themselves. Exactly how they did so is less clear than we should like, but a few passages give us some hints toward an answer. Elisha, who anointed the revolutionary (Jehu) who destroyed the dynasty of Omri, was given a combination bedroom/office in the home of a wealthy landowner in Shunem (2 Kings 4:8ff.). And Jeremiah became a landowner during his prophetic career (Jer. 32:6-15), although the real worth of his estate is unknown. The prophets were not men and women of great wealth—though one can wonder about Isaiah—but they did benefit from traditions of law which denied the state the right to determine the wealth of the private individual. Their ideal is summed up nicely by Micah, who has a vision in which:

Each man shall dwell under his own vine,
Under his own fig-tree,
And there shall be none to terrify him. (Micah 4:4)

Here, the ideal society is one of small free-holders, dependent upon neither the rich nor the government. Is it any wonder that Elijah predicted the vindication of Naboth (1 Kings 21:17-28)?

II

To the committed Jew, the question of welfare and the state in the Bible has more than antiquarian significance. To be sure, the historical inquiry is intrinsically interesting and, at least to the author's not unbiased mind, spiritually invigorating as well. Still, the recovery and investigation of the ancient context cannot answer the question of whether the Biblical material retains a capacity to speak to contemporary problems, whether it is more than purely an artifact of culture with which one may, or may not, be in sympathy. A full answer to the very large question of how the believing Jew should regard the development of the modern welfare-state lies outside of the scope of this study. Still, it is in order to give a few brief points that may help to guide those who do address contemporary issues.

(1) It is essential to recognize at the start that ethics is no substitute for substantive policy. Any number of contrasting public policies can all be ethical. One cannot cite an ethical injunction as a simple endorse-

ment of any social program, tempting though it may be to do so. Every such program confronts us with hard decisions about economic issues, which a life of study of the Bible cannot begin to answer. Thus, Jews must never be allowed to forget that the Bible mandates a special concern for the poor, but their teachers must also remember that the advocates of many dozens of contemporary programs can all claim with complete sincerity to manifest such a concern. There are advocates of the welfare-state who have only their own self-interest at heart, and there are opponents of the welfare-state who have the interest of the poor uppermost in their minds. Ethics is neither irrelevant to policy nor a substitute for it.

(2) We cannot translate the intensely theocentric social thought of the Bible into the terms of contemporary secular, democratic society without grave distortion. It is not valid to cite commandments without concern for the larger theological context which we have explored. Biblical norms are rarely presented as universal, timeless values (and are not necessarily such even when so presented), but, instead, must usually be seen as part of the historical God-Israel relationship. It is essential not to skip lightly over the immense problems that this distinction entails. To give only one example, it is very problematic whether one can make an analogy between Israel's central government, which was a monarchy, and the elected central government of a modern democracy. We live in a time when a-historical exegesis is simply indefensible.

(3) This theocentric perspective means that we must be prepared for demands to be made upon us which a secular, anthropocentric view would consider absurd. In other words, we are the heirs to a tradition which did not discard the Torah when its immediate social context became passé precisely because the tradition saw the Torah as revelation. Revelation, as Abraham learned through the *akedah* (Gen. 22), is not always identical with reason and conscience. As faithful Jews, we must hold fast to the Torah, but as men of integrity and Jews as well, we must also pay heed to reason and conscience. Our reading of sacred texts is, in part, shaped by our values, but our values are, in part, shaped by our reading of sacred texts. There is no abstract resolution of this tension. We must not forget that most of the world does not share it.

(4) We must not lose sight of the eschatological dimension to Biblical religion, wherein the future is partly the accomplishment of man and partly the work of God. Thus, we cannot expect any given social order to be the last word. History always outruns our expectations in a way which should make us humble in whatever we are building, simultaneously hopeful and fearful about the end of things. In a certain way, we long for the end of history, for history in the Bible is the history of sin and suffering. But we must also fear the end of history, for the end of

history is not only promise, but judgment, not only restoration into divine favor, but also the punishment which must precede restoration, if it is to come at all. The prophet Amos makes this point beautifully:

Alas, you who long for the day of the Lord,
What will the day of the Lord mean to you?
It will be darkness, not light.

The day of the Lord is darkness, not light,
A day of gloom with no dawn. (Amos 5:18, 20)

This recalls the death of Yohanan ben Zakkai, leader of Palestinian Jewry after the destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E. To the surprise of his disciples, who knew him to be a righteous man, he wept as death approached. "Before me," he explained to them, "lie two paths, one to the Garden of Eden [Heaven] and one to the Valley of Hinnom [Hell], and I do not know upon which I shall be taken. Should I not weep?" (*B. Berakhot* 28b). In short, if human history is more than any individual or group intends, then, surely, in total history, human and divine, this is even more the case. No practical political program can claim to be the final resolution of the problems of human wealth and human government. We are not free to desist from the advancement of justice. But neither should we let ourselves fall into the self-righteous delusion that we are about to complete the work.

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