Social Ethics    Psalms

72—This whole psalm is a plea for social justice. There is expressed a deep concern for the needy and the oppressed. The oppressor is looked upon with scorn. He is to be crushed.

This emphasis found its greatest expression, excluding the fine work of the prophets, in the teaching of Jesus. Throughout his ministry he manifested a deep concern for the poor and oppressed people of his day. While somewhat extravagant, there is a healthy warning in the statement, Christianity was born among the poor and died among the rich. Whenever Christianity has remained true to its prophetic mission, it has taken a deep interest in social justice. Whenever it has fallen short at this point, it has bought about disastrous consequences. We must never forget that the success of communism in the world today is due to the failure of Christians to live to the highest ethical tenents inherent in its system.

AD. CSKC.

5. Among the relevant passages in Psalm 72 is the fourth verse: "He shall judge the poor of the people, he shall save the children of the needy, and shall break in pieces the oppressor."

The Martin Luther King, Jr. Papers Project

Final Examination Answers, Religious Teachings of the Old Testament

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In three of the five examination questions for this course, DeWolf asked his students to discuss different conceptions of God in the Old Testament. Affirming that there is rational evidence in the Old Testament to sustain belief in God, King notes that the writer of the book of Job questions that faith. "Why do the righteous suffer? In other words, how can a good God allow so much evil to exist in the world?" For King, the prophets Amos and Hosea offer the "most illuminating conceptions of God." "For Amos God is a God of righteousness who demands ethical actions from his children. . . . For Hosea God is a God of love, and even his justice is but an expression of his love." DeWolf gave King 94 points for the examination and an A – for the semester.

1. Probably the most rational evidence presented for belief in God in the Old Testament is found in Deutero Isaiah. He sets forth arguments to establish the validity monotheism. First he argues that Yehweh is the only being that can adequately predict the future. Secondly, he turns to the testimony of creation. This he feels is a fit testimony to the existence of one God. Evidence for God's existence in creation is a constant argu-
ment in the Old Testament. The Psalmist could cry, “the heaven declare the glory of God and the firmament his handiwork.” Such evidence for belief in God the Old Testament writers felt was open to all. Thirdly, Deutero Isaiah turns to the absurdity of idolatry to establish the existence of God. Nothing can be compared to God.

There is also evidence for belief in God in history. The O. T. writers seem to say that since God controls all nations the rise and fall of nations establishes the existence of God.

The most apparent defiance of evidence for God by faith is found in the book of Job. Job finds himself confronted with the problem of evil. Why do the righteous suffer? In other words, how can a good God allow so much evil to exist in the world? Are not the goodness of good and the existence of evil incompatible ideas? These are the questions which baffle the writer of Job. The existence of evil calls his faith into question.

Maybe I am not to clear on this question. I think not.

2. It seems to me that the most untenable conceptions of God appear in the pre-prophetic period of the Old Testament. Here God is looked upon first as an anthropomorphic being. He walks in the garden in the cool of the evening. He comes down to the tower of Babal. He comes down in the clouds to speak to Moses. (Ex. 19:11)

Also in many of these writings the moral character of God is quite low. He comes down to the tower out of jealousy (Gen. 11:7). He justifies Abraham in a lie. He commands an individual to do something and the scourns him for doing it. (Num 22:20-22)

Also at this period we find Yahweh presented as a tribal deity. He is not a universal father whose love extends to all people. So we often find

1. King refers to Psalms 19:1: "The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament sheweth his handiwork."
2. In the margin DeWolf wrote, "Good."
3. DeWolf commented, "Yes. Yet he affirms that faith. 'Though He slay me . . . '" DeWolf refers to Job 13:15: "Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him."
4. DeWolf commented, "You seem clear enough, though 'I' is not quite finished." King received 9 points for the answer.
5. King refers to Genesis 3:8 ("And they heard the voice of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day"), Genesis 11:5 ("And the Lord came down to see the city and the tower"), and Exodus 19:9 ("And the Lord said unto Moses, Lo, I come unto thee in a thick cloud, that the people may hear when I speak with thee, and believe thee forever").
6. Genesis 11:6-7: "And the Lord said, Behold, the people is one, and they have all one language; and this they begin to do: and now nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do. Go to, let us go down, and there confound their language, that they may not understand one another's speech."
7. King may be referring to Abram and Sarai entering Egypt as brother and sister rather than as husband and wife (Genesis 12:11-20). He also refers to Numbers 22:20-22: "And God came unto Balaam at night, and said unto him, If the men come to call thee, rise up, and go with them; but yet the word which I shall say unto thee, that shalt thou do. And Balaam rose up in the morning, and saddled his ass, and went with the princes of Moab. And God's anger was kindled because he went; and the angel of the Lord stood in the way for an adversary against him."
Yahweh justifying all types of immoral actions against non-Israelites. Even Yahweh himself is often found using deceitful and ruthless methods against individuals outside of his tribal authority.

Finally at this period we find that God is only one among many gods. To be sure, he is the only one worthy of worship, but other gods still exist. At this period the Hebrews were Henotheist rather than monotheist.

Certainly these are the most untenable conceptions of God found in the Old Testament. It is probable that many factor accounted for their appearance at this period. First there was no necessary relation between religion and ethics at this period. Moral values were still at a low ebb. For this reason it was not to difficult to attribute many immoral practices to Yahweh. Moreover the Hebrew had not reached national and international crises at this point which could cause them to rise above anthropomorphism and belief in many gods. Monotheism was a development from national disasters.

One point must be made in passing concerning the above. We must not conclude that all of the untenable conceptions of God are found in this period. Knudson has warned us against such an error in his book. It is certainly true that we find some low conceptions of God in late writings and some high conceptions of God in early writing. But it is certainly true to say that the most untenable conceptions of God on the whole are found in this period.8

3. Certainly the Old Testament rises to its most illuminating conceptions of God in the prophets. The greatest of these conceptions is the affirmation of monotheism. In all of the 8th century prophets we find it implied. For Amos God is a God of righteousness who demands ethical actions from his children. The most elaborate ritual is but an insult to God when offered by the hands of an unethical person. For Hosea God is a God of love, and even his justice is but an expression of his love.

This emphasis on ethical monotheism is found in Jeremiah, Isaiah, Amos, Hosea, Micah and a few others. It is probably true that you don't get an explicit monotheism in these writer, but it is implied throughout. It becomes explicit in Deutero-Isaiah. So the we might conclude that the most illuminating conceptions of God are found in the literary prophets. They stress One God, who is a God of righteousness and love, a God of holiness (meaning ethically pure) and eternality. He is a God "who inhabits eternity, and whose name is holy."9

The Hebrews were lead to this conception through divers experiences of national and international disaster. The prophets had predicted that because of disobedience the nation would fall. Finally this day came when both the northern and southern kingdoms fell. So they concluded that the prophets must have been right. God must be


a God who control all history and all nations. Unlike the Greek who
came to monism through intellectualizing on the unity of the world,
the Hebrew came to monotheism through the realistic experiences of
history.\textsuperscript{10}

4. The suffering servant passage in the 53\textsuperscript{rd} chapter of Isaiah could well be
applied to Jesus. In a real sense Jesus is the only one who fulfills this
prophecy. Certainly Jesus was a lowly man. A man of sorrow and ac-
quainted with grief.\textsuperscript{11} Certainly the real meaning of the atonement
is that Christ died in order that sinful men might be incited to rise out
of their sinfullness and be reconciled to God. In other words through
his suffering and moral influence men are reconciled to God.

There has been much debate as to whether this passage refers to the
nation or to an individual. Jewish scholars have inclined toward the for-
mer while Christians scholars have inclined toward the latter. It is my
opinion with that the passage refers to an individual, and, Jesus more
than any other fulfills its descriptions. Jesus fulfills it in a way that Isaiah
could never have conceived of.\textsuperscript{12}

5. I would say that Old Testament religion is primarily social. We may point
to at least three Old Testament doctrines which would support this con-
clusion. First we may cite the doctrine of sin. In most instances when
individuals sin the whole nation or the family is held responsible. For an
instance Achan's whole family is punished for his sin (Jud 7:10–26)\textsuperscript{13}
The idea of individual of individual responsibility is rather late in He-
brew thought. It is Ezekiel who says "the soul that sinneth it shall die."\textsuperscript{14}
Traces of this idea appeared earlier in Hebrew thought, but the idea as
a whole was late getting hold of Old Testament religion.

Second we may take the idea of immortality. There is no explicit doc-
trine of personal immortality in the Old Testament. Indeed the doctrine
is explicitly denied by many writers (cf Job, Ecclesiastes) If there is any
immortality in Old Testament it religion it is social or national immor-
tality. The individual survives only through the nation or the group.

The above in not to be interpreted as saying that the Old Testament
has no personal religion. There can be no gainsaying of the fact that we
find a great personal element in the writing of Jeremiah and Ezekiel.
But withall the primary emphasis of Old Testament religion is social
rather than personal.\textsuperscript{15}

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\begin{enumerate}
\item King received 10 points for the answer.
\item Isaiah 53:3: "He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with
grief."
\item King received 10 points for the answer.
\item The story of Achan is told by Joshua (7:16–26).
\item Ezekiel 18:20: "The soul that sinneth, it shall die."
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