"Justice in the Bible"

BY RICHARD J. CLIFFORD, S.J.

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It is a pleasure to take part in a symposium that takes seriously the Bible including the Old Testament / Hebrew Scriptures. I want to thank Father Fitzmyer for his thorough analysis of the vocabulary of *justice* in the Bible and in the translations that served as official texts in the Latin Church and the Greek Orthodox Church. I have little to add to his treatment, and will strike out instead on a less lexical and more impressionistic path. I will be speaking mostly about social justice, that is, justice among human beings, especially the members of the holy community.[1]

Justice in the Bible, all agree, is relational--how a thing, act, or person relates to a standard of justice, in this case God. In biblical religion there is no *order* or *fate* beyond God to which things conform; Yahweh, the Most High, is the standard of justice and those properly related to God become just.[2] I will talk about three major "founding moments" in the Bible, for in them the standard of divine justice is especially clear: the origin of the world in Genesis 1-11, the origin of Israel in the Book of Exodus, and the origin of New Israel in the Gospels.

Origins were important in the ancient Near East and in the Bible, for it was then that the imprint and purpose of the Creator was freshest and most visible. Ancient authors used cosmogonies and stories of origin to explore the purposes of God or the gods; such stories were the *philosophy* and *theology* of the time. Those ages did not have our discursive essay (narrative was for them the vehicle of serious thought) nor did they assume historical development from simple to complex. The world was *given* whole and entire at the beginning. To know the *origin* of something was, in some sense, to know its *essence*.

The First Founding Moment: Genesis 1--11

Genesis 1-11, it is widely agreed, consists of two cosmogonies (cc.1and 2-11). The first (the familiar seven-day creation account) is also an introduction, providing a lens for viewing the second creation account (cc. 2-11). The whole section, despite its deft treatment of human psychology, is profoundly theocentric, highlighting two aspects of God that are indispensable for understanding biblical justice: God is generous and God is just. I will say a word about each aspect.

God Is Generous

In the seven-day creation account in Genesis 1, God's generosity finds expression in the two defining imperatives given to the human race in 1:28: (1) be fertile and multiply; (2) fill the earth and subdue it. The chapters that follow tell how human beings fulfill these imperatives: they "multiply" (the genealogies with their famous "begats" in cc. 4, 5, and 11) and they "fill" the earth and subdue it" as they move out to their diverse lands and take possession of them (cc.10-11).In other words, human beings are commanded to participate in the rhythms of the *good* universe, a point that is very clear with regard to land. Parenthetically, the command "Subdue [the earth]" does *not* command people to exploit the earth but to take possession of the territory God has given them. In Genesis 10, each of the seventy nations is to have its own land. Later, when Israel takes its own land, the prophets insist that every Israelite family have its land over which God alone has domain.3 God intends that people enjoy and be *satisfied with* the bounty of creation; *be sated* is a favorite verb in the Bible4 as in Ps 22:26, "The poor shall eat and be satisfied." The prophets condemn land grabbing as rebellion against God's generous will that all members of the Israelite community be *sated*. Woe to those whose greed keeps others from enjoying what God has given to all.

God Is Just

The same chapters show God *acting* justly, affirming righteous behavior (e.g., rescuing Noah) and frustrating wicked behavior (Adam and Eve, Cain, Lamech, etc.). God is not

capricious or volatile like the gods in comparable literatures, but responds *predictably* (albeit mysteriously) to human actions, seconding what is right and bringing to naught what is wrong. In assessing these chapters, it is all too easy to focus on the sins (Adam and Eve, Cain, the illicit marriages, the human race building *their* city) to the neglect of God and God's blessing. Many Christian commentators have read the chapters too pessimistically, ending up with a "low anthropology" that forgets the God-centered perspective. Jewish tradition can instruct us here, for it has generally focused on the transmission of the blessing in the face of human resistance to receiving it.

We cannot leave these chapters without commenting on the most quoted Genesis verses on social justice (1:26-27): "So God created humankind in his image, / in the image of God he created him (*adam*='them')." The image of God is an important concept even within Genesis. Gen 5:1 shows that the image is transmitted to succeeding generations, and 9:6 uses it is as the basis of the prohibition against murder (you can slay animals in the post-Flood world but not human beings). What does the image of God mean? A historical comparison may help. Comparable ancient creation accounts invariably depicted human beings as slaves of the gods, created to build their temples, observe their rituals, and carry out their commands. In some creation accounts, the king was created separately as the gods' representative on earth, a kind of lieutenant making sure that human labor benefited the gods. In a sense, the king represented the god(s) as a statue represented a person. Genesis borrows this language about the privilege and role of kings but extends it to *all* human beings: all human beings are made in the image and likeness of God. In the Genesis text, the author seems to say two things: (1) human beings share in the *dominion* of God over the rest of creation (1:28), furthering the *goodness* of the world; (2) human beings have value in themselves, for human blood may not be shed because of the image of God (Gn 9:6).

The Second Founding Moment: The Exodus as the Originating Moment of Israel

The Exodus is not only the "going out" from Egypt, but the whole narrative of the oppression of the Hebrews, God's defeat of Pharaoh their oppressor, and the journey to Sinai, where they agree to be God's people and accept his covenant and law.

Norbert Lohfink5 has pointed out that the misery of the poor Hebrews is expressed in terms of economic exploitation and social degradation (Dt 26). According to Exodus 1-6, it is system-related and produced by human malice. God addresses the evil in a new and unexpected way. Instead of alleviating the Hebrews' distress through the time-honored means of giving to the poor, Israel's God Yahweh removes the slaves from the impoverishing situation; he leads them out from the Egyptian *system*. God's work here is a new creation. What is created is a society having all the usual institutions of a nation of that time: a God (with a house), a leader, a land, and laws. But because Israel has been liberated from Pharaoh and led out from Egypt, it becomes, in the phrase of Lohfink, a "contrast-society." Because it is different from the nations, it becomes something for them to watch--a model. The point is succinctly and memorably made in Exodus:

"You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, / how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. / Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, / you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. / Yes, the whole earth is mine, but you shall be my priestly kingdom and a holy nation" (19:3-6).

Israel agrees and God forms their society. Israel, shaped by the just God, will show the nations God's generosity and power. The holy community has a mediating role regarding divine justice.

The Third Founding Moment: The Work of Jesus as a New Exodus and Foundation of a New Israel

New in New Testament should not be taken in a supersessionist sense, i.e., the replacement of something "old and worn out," but something like "the latest and best form of the ancient

tradition." Jesus' work was interpreted as a new exodus, a reform or refounding of Israel, as one can see by his choosing the Twelve, feeding the people in the wilderness, fulfilling Moses' law giving, making a new covenant and sealing it with blood, etc. The greatest symbol for his reform, however, was the kingdom of God,6 a formulation from the turbulent centuries preceding Jesus that expressed God's rule over Israel in the present and eventual triumph over all evil powers, including the oppressive Roman empire. The phrase echoes the kingship of the Lord in the exodus (cf. Ex 15, esp. v.18). Jesus' program included such emphases as care for the poor, reliance on God, de-emphasis on honor and human authority, just relations within the community. Though the bare list of virtues might sound safely traditional, they in fact had political implications both for the ruling class and for the Roman occupiers.

Jesus' work is the third of those founding moments when God's justice is on clear and compelling display. That's why Christians study the New Testament! There are many contemporary implications of the justice of the New Testament, but let me single out three points: (1) Jesus' solidarity with the poor and his bringing those at the margin (including women) to new roles, especially in Luke (note that Jesus actually *associates* with poor people and does not simply talk about them!); (2) the New Testament underlines the eschatological dimension of justice, telling us that the work of justice one does in one's lifetime is linked somehow to the just world that God will build in the future; (3) the most provocative legacy, however, may be the powerful analogy it provides for interpreting our world: the just God liberates people from oppressors or false gods, and forms them into a just community.

Notes

1. [back] See John R. Donahue, S.J., "Biblical Perspective on Justice," *The Faith That Does Justice: Examining the Christian Sources of Social Change*, John C. Haughey, S.J., ed. (New York: Paulist Press, 1977), 68-112, and his annotated bibliography in "What Does the Lord Require?: A Bibliographical Essay on the Bible and Social Justice," *Studies in the Spirituality*

of Jesuits 25/2 (March 1993). For the ancient Near Eastern context, see Leon Epsztein, *Social Justice in the Ancient Near East and the People in the Bible*, trans. John Bowden (London: SCM, 1986); Moshe Weinfeld, *Social Justice in Ancient Israel and in the Ancient Near East*(Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995).

2. [back] A point made effectively by Y. Kaufmann, *The Religion of Israel*, trans. and abridged by M. Greenberg (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1961), 22, 32-33 among other places.

3. [back] See further R. Coote, *Amos among the Prophets: Composition and Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981),24-39.

4. [back] E.g., Dt 6:11; 8:10, 12; Ps 37:19.

5. [back] See further Norbert F. Lohfink, *Option for the Poor: The Basic Principles of Liberation Theology in the Light of the Bible* (Berkeley: BIBAL Press, 1987).

6. [back] See further John Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus* (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 2.243f.