



PART 1

Biblical Influences



The ethical vocation of the people of Israel and the Christian community that followed is grounded in and takes its life from the intimate relationship God has chosen to establish with humankind. Genesis 1:26-27 tells us that humanity is created in the very image of God. It is a special relationship that human beings enjoy among all creatures. In the creation account of Genesis 2, we see God molding the first human being from the dust of the earth like the potter molds the clay and then breathing into that form the life-giving divine breath. As images of God, human beings are dependent beings, dependent upon God for life itself. God not only creates humankind but gives them the fruits of the creation for their flourishing (Genesis 1:29 and 2:16). Humanity's relationship to God is constitutive of its being. Thus, when Adam and Eve yield to the temptation of the serpent to eat the forbidden fruit and be "like God," (Genesis 3:5) they step outside the circle of their true being. In their lost innocence they must now live out the struggle between good and evil (Genesis 3:22). The ethical themes of the Hebrew Scriptures find expression in the history of this conflict of good and evil from Cain's murder of Abel forward into the New Testament.

God does not abandon a wayward humanity or the promise of creation for the harmony of all things. God's actions in history continue to reveal God as the One who desires that humankind flourish along with the whole of creation. The covenant with Abraham (Genesis 15), the deliverance of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt, the giving of the Law in the covenant of Sinai (Exodus 19–24), the covenant with David (2 Samuel 7), and the delivery of the promised land of Canaan to the tribes of Israelites are all actions in history by which God raises up a people set apart as a witness to the nations (42:6). God is at work in the world through this covenant people to bring reconciliation among the peoples (Isaiah 2:2-3; 60:1, 3) and peace throughout the creation (Isaiah 11:6-9). It is the ethical vocation of Israel to reflect these divine purposes in their conduct as a society with a special, intimate, relationship with God that echoes the promise of humankind's creation in the divine image sustained by God's active presence in history.

The prophets continually call the people to faithfulness to their covenant vocation through the practice of justice and works of mercy. As God acts with steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth (Jer. 9:23), so Israel is to do likewise. The prophet Amos admonishes the people for their shallow piety and calls on them to "let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream" (5:24). As God has been merciful in delivering the people from slavery and giving them their land, so they are to reenact those divine actions in their own practice of mercy (Zechariah 7:9). The well known passage from Micah 6:8 is a succinct statement of Israel's calling: "He has told you, O mortal,

what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?"

Selection 1: Exodus 20:1-17; 21:1-11, 22-25, 33-36; 22:21-27

These selections are from what is known as the "Book of the Covenant," beginning with the reminder that is the basis of Israel's ethical vocation, God's merciful deliverance of the people from slavery in Egypt. There follows the apodictic (unconditional) law that becomes known as the Ten Commandments. In time the tablets of the law would come to rest inside the Ark of the Covenant, the sign of God's mercy, as another reminder that God's grace precedes and sustains the call to obedience as a response to divine favor. That call to obedience also involves ordinances that set forth the sort of casuistic or case law illustrated in these selections. Casuistic law recognizes that social life is often complex and motives and circumstances must be sorted out. Some examples also display characteristics of that ancient culture having to do with slavery and the status of women that we would find disturbing and ethically unacceptable. When we juxtapose that with the ordinances expressing God's compassionate concern for aliens, widows, orphans, and the poor, we are alerted to a distinction biblical scholars often make between what is at the core of God's self-revelation and what is part of the cultural scenery.

^{20:1}Then God spoke all these words: ²I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; ³you shall have no other gods before me. ⁴You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. ⁵You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, ⁶but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments. ⁷You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not acquit anyone who misuses his name. ⁸Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. ⁹Six days you shall labor and do all your work. ¹⁰But the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. ¹¹For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it.

¹²Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you. ¹³You shall not murder. ¹⁴You shall not commit adultery. ¹⁵You shall not steal. ¹⁶You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. ¹⁷You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.

^{21:1}These are the ordinances that you shall set before them: ²When you buy a male Hebrew slave, he shall serve six years, but in the seventh he shall go out a free person, without debt. ³If he comes in single, he shall go out single; if he comes in married, then

his wife shall go out with him. ⁴If his master gives him a wife and she bears him sons or daughters, the wife and her children shall be her master's and he shall go out alone. ⁵But if the slave declares, "I love my master, my wife, and my children; I will not go out a free person," ⁶then his master shall bring him before God. He shall be brought to the door or the doorpost; and his master shall pierce his ear with an awl; and he shall serve him for life. ⁷When a man sells his daughter as a slave, she shall not go out as the male slaves do. ⁸If she does not please her master, who designated her for himself, then he shall let her be redeemed; he shall have no right to sell her to a foreign people, since he has dealt unfairly with her. ⁹If he designates her for his son, he shall deal with her as with a daughter. ¹⁰If he takes another wife to himself, he shall not diminish the food, clothing, or marital rights of the first wife. ¹¹And if he does not do these three things for her, she shall go out without debt, without payment of money.

²²When people who are fighting injure a pregnant woman so that there is a miscarriage, and yet no further harm follows, the one responsible shall be fined what the woman's husband demands, paying as much as the judges determine. ²³If any harm follows, then you shall give life for life, ²⁴eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, ²⁵burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe. ³³If someone leaves a pit open, or digs a pit and does not cover it, and an ox or a donkey falls into it, ³⁴the owner of the pit shall make restitution, giving money to its owner, but keeping the dead animal. ³⁵If someone's ox hurts the ox of another, so that it dies, then they shall sell the live ox and divide the price of it; and the dead animal they shall also divide. ³⁶But if it was known that the ox was accustomed to gore in the past, and its owner has not restrained it, the owner shall restore ox for ox, but keep the dead animal. ²¹You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt. ²²You shall not abuse any widow or orphan. ²³If you do abuse them, when they cry out to me, I will surely heed their cry; ²⁴my wrath will burn, and I will kill you with the sword, and your wives shall become widows and your children orphans.

²⁵If you lend money to my people, to the poor among you, you shall not deal with them as a creditor; you shall not exact interest from them. ²⁶If you take your neighbor's cloak in pawn, you shall restore it before the sun goes down; ²⁷for it may be your neighbor's only clothing to use as cover; in what else shall that person sleep? And if your neighbor cries out to me, I will listen, for I am compassionate.

Selection 2: Leviticus 25:8-9

In this tradition of the jubilee year, Israel was commanded to forgive debtors, set free those sold into slavery for their debt, and restore lands to families who had to sell them due to economic hardship. Families would then be reunited on their lands. Here we have an image of biblical justice in which people are set free from oppressive social and economic circumstances to begin life anew. It demonstrates that justice was viewed from the vantage point of those in need. Justice begins with the mercy of God and the merciful actions God demands of the people and for the people. There are echoes of the jubilee tradition in Isaiah 61:1, which Jesus read in the synagogue and applied to his own person and work (Luke 4:18-21). In both Isaiah 61 and Luke 4, elements of the jubilee are incorporated in the messianic hope for God's future reign.

^{25:8}You shall count off seven weeks of years, seven times seven years, so that the period of seven weeks of years gives forty-nine years. ⁹Then you shall have the trumpet sounded loud; on the tenth day of the seventh month—on the day of atonement—you shall have the trumpet sounded throughout all your land. ¹⁰And you shall hallow the fiftieth year and you shall proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you: you shall return, every one of you, to your property and every one of you to your family.

Selection 3: Prophetic Accents

Amos 5:6-24

Amos prophesied the middle of the eighth century BCE, during the prosperous and peaceful reign of Jeroboam II. Things seemed good. However, Amos was harsh in his criticism of reliance on military might and of a self-congratulatory complacency mingled with immorality, injustice and shallow piety. Jesus is quoted in Matthew 9:13, “I desire mercy not sacrifice,” though Hosea 6:6 shares in this same spirit, as does the epistle of James. Amos’s passionate cry for justice and disdain of meaningless ritual has remained a constant summons throughout subsequent generations.

^{5:6}Seek the LORD and live, or he will break out against the house of Joseph like fire, and it will devour Bethel, with no one to quench it. ⁷Ah, you that turn justice to wormwood, and bring righteousness to the ground! ⁸The one who made the Pleiades and Orion, and turns deep darkness into the morning, and darkens the day into night, who calls for the waters of the sea, and pours them out on the surface of the earth, the LORD is his name, ⁹who makes destruction flash out against the strong, so that destruction comes upon the fortress. ¹⁰They hate the one who reproves in the gate, and they abhor the one who speaks the truth. ¹¹Therefore because you trample on the poor and take from them levies of grain, you have built houses of hewn stone, but you shall not live in them; you have planted pleasant vineyards, but you shall not drink their wine. ¹²For I know how many are your transgressions, and how great are your sins—you who afflict the righteous, who take a bribe, and push aside the needy in the gate. ¹³Therefore the prudent will keep silent in such a time; for it is an evil time. ¹⁴Seek good and not evil, that you may live; and so the LORD, the God of hosts, will be with you, just as you have said. ¹⁵Hate evil and love good, and establish justice in the gate; it may be that the LORD, the God of hosts, will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph.

¹⁶Therefore thus says the LORD, the God of hosts, the LORD: In all the squares there shall be wailing; and in all the streets they shall say, “Alas! alas!” They shall call the farmers to mourning, and those skilled in lamentation, to wailing; ¹⁷in all the vineyards there shall be wailing, for I will pass through the midst of you, says the LORD. ¹⁸Alas for you who desire the day of the LORD! Why do you want the day of the LORD? It is darkness, not light; ¹⁹as if someone fled from a lion, and was met by a bear; or went into the house and rested a hand against the wall, and was bitten by a snake. ²⁰Is not the day of the LORD darkness, not light, and gloom with no brightness in it?

²¹I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.
²²Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon. ²³Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. ²⁴But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everflowing stream.

Isaiah 11:1-9

Isaiah prophesied in Judah during the latter part of the eighth century BCE, a worrisome time for Judah sitting as it did adjacent to the Northern Kingdom that had just been annexed by Assyria. If Amos seems to have offered no hope for escape from God's judgment, Isaiah by contrast engenders the hope of a coming messiah and a proleptic (or anticipatory) vision of a peaceable kingdom marked by harmony throughout creation and the end of "hurt and destruction." The early verses have been applied to Jesus as the Messiah. The text has been an inspiration to peacemakers and, of late, a way to connect concern for the health of the planet with God's plan of salvation.

- ^{11:1}A shoot shall come out from the stock of Jesse,
 and a branch shall grow out of his roots.
- ²The spirit of the LORD shall rest on him,
 the spirit of wisdom and understanding,
 the spirit of counsel and might,
 the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD.
- ³His delight shall be in the fear of the LORD.
 He shall not judge by what his eyes see,
 or decide by what his ears hear;
⁴but with righteousness he shall judge the poor,
 and decide with equity for the meek of the earth;
 he shall strike the earth with the rod his mouth,
 and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.
- ⁵Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist,
 and faithfulness the belt around his loins.
- ⁶The wolf shall live with the lamb,
 the leopard shall lie down with the kid,
 the calf and the lion and the fatling together,
 and a little child shall lead them.
- ⁷The cow and the bear shall graze,
 their young shall lie down together;
 and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.
- ⁸The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp,
 and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den.
- ⁹They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain;
 for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD
 as the waters cover the sea.