

CHAPTER 4

THE FIRST WITNESSES

Life's final sanction is death. If we would know what men really feel and what they live for, we should ask what they are prepared to die for. We have thus a simple pragmatic test for the truth of assertions about the ideals of Judaism. Did its adherents choose to die for them?

Choose to die and not happen to die; and die, not kill. Killing for an ideal is neither unusual nor (apparently) difficult, and the Hebrew Bible offers many deplorable instances of it. But it offers instances of something else too: 'For thy sake we are killed all the day.' There is here a glimpse of another world for man, and of another understanding of God.

Man's ideas of God have a history, and scholars continue to debate the original character of the God of Judaism. In the eyes of some of his worshippers at one time or another (e.g. Jephthah according to Judges xi) he was a tribal leader like the 'god' Chemosh of the neighbouring people of Ammon; and to be driven away from the territory which constituted his sphere of influence was to be driven away from the sole place of his worship and the sole opportunity of gaining his favours. But there was something in Judaism which made it different from other cults. Unlike Chemosh, the God of Judaism was not confined to a tribal boundary; as became evident when the tribal organization was destroyed and the tribal territory laid waste. The God of Judaism is unique among all gods in that his

fundamental character emerged and became recognized not through the victory of his worshippers but through their defeat.

This can fairly be called revolutionary. It is doubtful whether its parallel can be found. It was not a case, as in that of Rome, of *urbs fiebat orbis*, the city expanding and becoming the world and the god of the city becoming the god of the world. The city was destroyed and its people scattered: Sennacherib and Nebuchadnezzar saw to that; and such bits as were saved, however carefully reassembled, were swept up by Titus and Hadrian. This God did not save, and he explained why; and in the explanation he revealed his inmost being:

‘Hear this, O ye that would swallow up the needy, and cause the poor of the land to fail; saying, When will the new moon be gone, that we may sell corn? and the sabbath, that we may set forth wheat? making the ephah small, and the shekel great, and dealing falsely with balances of deceit; that we may buy the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of shoes, and sell the refuse of the wheat. Shall not the land tremble for this?’

In the view of Judaism, it was for this that the land did tremble. Temporal power was struck down for moral sin; and moral sin means cruelty, ill-treatment of the weak, the oppression of the stranger within the gate. When the land was laid waste and its people deported, the messengers of God, the prophets, saw it as a judgement.

This may be read in every part of the Hebrew Scriptures. The Pentateuch already states it clearly. It is entailed in the smallest of its words, a word constantly repeated, the word ‘if’. The Pentateuch is full of promises, but the promises are made *on a condition*: they will come to pass only ‘if thou wilt hearken diligently’. When the condition is not fulfilled (and it was not), the promises fall. Or rather they are held over until the condition *is* fulfilled. The God of Judaism is in no hurry. His salvation is sure but he can wait. He ‘liveth for ever; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, his kingdom from generation to generation. And all the inhabitants of the earth are

reputed as nothing, and he doeth according to his will in the army of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth.'

This is the cry of Apocalyptic, the strange literature which arose in Judaism during the last pre-Christian centuries. But its phrases are associated with the earliest record. The founding father, Abraham, is reported as having 'called on the name of the Everlasting God'; and it was the 'God of Heaven', he tells his servant Eleazar, who took him from his father's house and the land of his nativity. The Everlasting God is the God of the prophets who created the world without weariness and with unsearchable wisdom; and he removes from the land of their nativity not only individuals but whole peoples—Philistines from Caphtor and Syrians from Kir as well as Israelites from the land of Egypt. This God is untouched by the kings of earth. They may 'set their heart as the heart of God', even declare themselves gods; but they are men whose breath is in their nostrils and they will be brought down with the rest of the proud to the pit: 'They that see thee shall narrowly look upon thee, they shall consider thee, saying, Is this the man that made the earth to tremble, that did shake kingdoms; that made the world as a wilderness?'

The King of Heaven is of a different sort. He created the earth 'not for a waste but to be inhabited'; and his Kingdom is in all space and through all time. Like all kingdoms it has a 'yoke', but a yoke which is chosen, not imposed. Other kingdoms have subjects who do what they are told. In democracies there are citizens who (theoretically) are their own rulers. The members of the Kingdom of Heaven stand gladly under a yoke which they undertook freely and placed upon themselves. They are thus more than subjects or citizens. They are witnesses.

The first 'witness' we hear of in the Hebrew Bible is a heap of stones. It was set up by Jacob to attest an agreement. The same word in a different form is used of the 'ark of witness' (R.V. 'testimony') which contained the tablets of the Ten Commandments. But it is not only the tablets of the Commandments

which are a 'witness'. So too is the whole Torah. It is 'perfect, restoring the soul; it is God's testimony, making wise the simple'. If the simple reject wisdom and refuse to have their soul restored, the Torah is there to testify against them. The conception is epitomized in the valedictory song of Moses at the end of Deuteronomy. It is to be a 'witness for God against the children of Israel'.

But there emerged another side to the picture. Just as God and his Law is a witness against man, so man is a witness for God. God's Law is his people's wisdom in the eyes of the nations. It follows that the carrying out of the provisions of the Law is a vindication of God, a public display of his wisdom; just as the contrary, its abandonment, is an insult to God, a spurning of the Way and its Giver. As Ezekiel put it, for the world to see God's people misbehaving is a desecration of God's name. Later Judaism took hold of these and similar phrases and turned them into a moral principle. Since God is judged by the behaviour of his people, his people bears the obligation to behave properly. The Hallowing of the Name (and contrariwise its desecration) became the spring of an ideal standard of conduct demanded in honour by the covenant between God and man.

But the phrase became clouded over (or was it emblazoned?) with darker associations too. The black days drew near and the Witnesses were called upon to seal their testimony with their blood. This ultimate Hallowing of the Name is tersely expressed in the Rabbinic comment on the verse 'and thou shall love the Lord thy God with all thy soul': '*Even if he take thy soul.*' It is against this background that Apocalyptic grew. It is an impatient literature, anticipating and describing what it has not been given to man to see, and it luxuriates in visions and trances and violent readjustments and sudden interventions from on high; justifiably, for it sprang from conditions which obliterated the basis of normal living. It was an appeal to future history to redress the wrong of the political present: but the present fact was so crushing that the history to be any comfort had to be

foreshortened and forestalled. It was catastrophic in the literal sense, depicting a sudden and violent overturning which brings unexpectedly the awaited *dénouement*.

Yet the note of a measured destiny is not completely absent. Sober voices were heard as well:

‘Then answered I and said, I beseech thee, O Lord, wherefore is the power of understanding given unto me? For it was not my mind to be curious of the ways above, but of such things as pass by us daily; because Israel is given up as a reproach to the heathen, and the people whom thou hast loved is given over unto ungodly nations, and the law of our forefathers is made of none effect, and the written covenants are nowhere regarded, and we pass away out of the world as grasshoppers, and our life is as a vapour, neither are we worthy to obtain mercy. What will he then do for his name whereby we are called? Of these things have I asked.

‘Then answered he me, and said, If thou be alive, thou shalt see, and if thou livest long, thou shalt marvel. . . .

‘Then I answered and said, How long? and when shall these things come to pass? wherefore are our years few and evil?

‘And he answered me, and said, Thou dost not hasten more than the Most High: for thy haste is for thine own self, but he that is above hasteneth on behalf of many. . . . For he hath weighed the world in the balance; and by measure hath he measured the times, and by number hath he numbered the seasons; and he shall not move nor stir them, until the said measure be fulfilled.’ (2 Esdras iv)

The literature of the period, produced largely in the second and first centuries before the Christian era, offers us two sides, a rule for life and a rule for death. The rule for life is to renounce geography. It is not the home which makes a people; it is the people which makes a home. And the people too is not so much a genealogical fact as a voluntary self-creation. A people is what it deliberately wills itself to be, and its members are so by conscious choice:

THE PATTERN

*And now, my children, I command you:
Fear the Lord your God with your whole heart,
And walk in simplicity according to all His law.*

*And do ye also teach your children letters,
That they may have understanding all their life,
Reading unceasingly the law of God.*

*For every one that knoweth the law of the Lord shall be honoured,
And shall not be a stranger whithersoever he goeth . . .*

*Get wisdom in the fear of God with diligence;
For though there be a leading into captivity,
And cities and lands be destroyed,
And gold and silver and every possession perish,
The wisdom of the wise naught can take away,
Save the blindness of ungodliness, and the callousness that comes of sin.*

*For if one keeps oneself from these evil things,
Then even among his enemies shall wisdom be a glory to him,
And in a strange country a fatherland.*

This passage (from the Testament of Levi xiii, trans. Charles) with its obvious roots in the Wisdom literature, tells us how we should live. The book of Daniel and the stories of the books of Maccabees attest for what the holy ones of the Kingdom were prepared to die. The first great cause was that of monotheism itself:

‘Nebuchadnezzar the king made an image of gold, whose height was threescore cubits, and the breadth thereof six cubits: he set it up in the plain of Dura, in the province of Babylon. Then the herald cried aloud, To you it is commanded, O peoples, nations, and languages, that at what time ye hear the sound of the cornet, flute, harp, sackbut, psaltery, dulcimer, and all kinds of music, ye fall down and worship the golden image that Nebuchadnezzar the king hath set up: and whoso falleth not down and worshipping shall the same hour be cast into the midst of a burning fiery furnace.

‘Therefore at that time, when all the peoples heard the sound of the cornet, flute, harp, sackbut, psaltery, and all kinds of

music, all the peoples, the nations, and the languages, fell down and worshipped the golden image that Nebuchadnezzar the king had set up.

‘Wherefore at that time certain Chaldeans came near, and brought accusation against the Jews. They answered and said to Nebuchadnezzar the king, O king, live for ever. Thou, O king, hast made a decree, that every man that shall hear the sound of the cornet, flute, harp, sackbut, psaltery, and dulcimer, and all kinds of music, shall fall down and worship the golden image: and whoso falleth not down and worshippeth, shall be cast into the midst of a burning fiery furnace. There are certain Jews whom thou hast appointed over the affairs of the province of Babylon, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego; these men, O king, have not regarded thee: they serve not thy gods, nor worship the golden image which thou hast set up.’

In this case the candidates for martyrdom escaped, although they defied the terrestrial king. But it will be noted that the cause for which they ‘yielded their bodies’ was that they might ‘not worship any god except their own God’. The primary sin is idolatry.

The second cause for martyrdom was the observance of the prescriptions of the Law:

‘And not long after this the king sent forth an old man of Athens to compel the Jews to depart from the laws of their fathers, and not to live after the laws of God; and also to pollute the sanctuary in Jerusalem. . . .

‘But sore and utterly grievous was the visitation of this evil. For the temple was filled with riot and revellings by the heathen, who dallied with harlots, and had to do with women within the sacred precincts, and moreover brought inside things that were not befitting; and the place of sacrifice was filled with those abominable things which had been prohibited by the laws. And a man could neither keep the sabbath, nor observe the feasts of the fathers, nor so much as confess himself to be a Jew. . . .

‘Eleazar, one of the principal scribes, a man already well stricken in years, and of a noble countenance, was compelled to open his mouth to eat swine’s flesh. But he, welcoming death with renown rather than life with pollution, advanced of his own accord to the instrument of torture, but first spat forth the flesh, coming forward as men ought to come that are resolute to repel such things as not even for the natural love of life is it lawful to taste.

‘But they that had the charge of that forbidden sacrificial feast took the man aside, for the acquaintance which of old times they had with him, and privately besought him to bring flesh of his own providing, such as was befitting for him to use, and to make as if he did eat of the flesh from the sacrifice, as had been commanded by the king; that by so doing he might be delivered from death, and for his ancient friendship with them might be treated kindly.

‘But he, having formed a high resolve, and one that became his years, and the dignity of old age, and the grey hairs which he had reached with honour, and his excellent education from a child, or rather that became the holy laws of God’s ordaining, declared his mind accordingly, bidding them quickly send him unto Hades. For it becometh not our years to dissemble, said he, that through this many of the young should suppose that Eleazar, the man of fourscore years and ten, had gone over unto an alien religion.’ (2 Macc. vi)

The most pathetic of these stories is that of Hannah and her seven sons (2 Macc. vii). It is also the most instructive since it shows the issue broadening from the eating of swine’s flesh to the nature of Creation and the hope of Immortality:

‘But above all was the mother marvellous and worthy of honourable memory; for when she looked on seven sons perishing within the space of one day, she bare the sight with a good courage for the hopes that she had set on the Lord. And she exhorted each one of them in the language of their fathers, filled with a noble temper and stirring up her womanish thought with manly passion, saying unto them: ❷

“I know not how ye came into my womb, neither was it I that bestowed on you your spirit and your life, and it was not I that brought into order the first elements of each one of you. Therefore the Creator of the world, who fashioned the generation of man and devised the generation of all things, in mercy giveth back to you again both your spirit and your life, as ye now contemn your own selves for his laws’ sake. . . .

“I beseech thee, my child, to lift thine eyes unto the heaven and the earth, and to see all things that are therein, and thus to recognize that God made them not of things that were, and that the race of men in this wise cometh into being. Fear not this butcher, but, proving thyself worthy of thy brethren, accept thy death, that in the mercy of God I may receive thee again with thy brethren.”

‘He is a witness, whether he hath seen or hath known. If he do not utter it, then he shall bear his iniquity’ (Lev. v, 1):

‘*He is a witness . . .* the reference is to Israel;

‘*Whether he hath seen . . .* “Thou hast been *brought to see* and know that the Lord he is God, there is none else beside him”;

‘*Or hath known . . .* “And thou shalt *know* this day and lay it to thine heart that the Lord he is God, in heaven above and upon the earth beneath: there is none else”;

‘*If he do not utter it, he shall bear his iniquity . . .* If you do not utter my divinity to the Gentile world, I exact punishment from you.’

The words are of a late Rabbinic homily (Lev. R. vi, 5), but the fact itself may be followed through the history of two thousand years. One medieval chronicle of a part of it, available to the modern reader in a French translation (by Julien See, Paris, 1881), bears the title *The Vale of Tears*. The motives remain constant: the Hallowing of the Name, the keeping of the precepts of the Law. There is a sad entry in the old Rabbinic commentary on the words of the second Commandment, *and showing mercy unto a thousand generations of them that love me and keep my commandments*: ‘Why are you being dragged to death by the sword? Because I circumcised my child. Why are you going to the pyre? Because

I studied the Law. Why are you going to be crucified? Because I ate unleavened bread.'

The reference would seem to be to the sufferers in the Hadrianic persecutions, and in days of persecution every precept was held inviolable. Times of crisis apart, however, there is a general Talmudic ruling which is operative for Judaism on all occasions and at all times. It forbids three things absolutely: the worship of idols, the spilling of blood and sexual immorality. All other forbidden things, the ruling goes, a man not only may, but should, do in order to save his life: 'He should transgress and not be killed.' These however he must never do even at the cost of his life: 'He should allow himself to be killed and not transgress.'

These sins, we are told, constitute the 'uncleanliness' or 'defilement' condemned by Scripture of which 'holiness' is the explicit antithesis and repudiation. As such they are specifically distinguished from ritual and social commandments. They are 'the evil thing'.¹ The shrinking from the spilling of blood for whatever reason is particularly noteworthy. 'Forgive thy people Israel whom thou hast redeemed', says the Deuteronomist (xxi, 8), 'and suffer not innocent blood to remain in the midst of thy people'; and the Rabbis comment: '*Whom thou hast redeemed . . . it was for this that thou didst redeem us, that there should not be among us men who spill blood.*' A new type of human being is envisaged to meet a new conception of human ends.

Judaism offers no 'biological' ethics. Although life has high value and the spilling of blood is evil, yet self-preservation is not the supreme law. On the contrary, both for the community as a whole and for individuals, there are 'reasons for' life more vital than living.

¹ Siphre § 254 on Deut. xxiii, 9; Maimonides, *Guide*, iii, 47; and cf. p. 138 below.