

3. The Duty of Man

Numbers 31:7, Joshua 6:20-21, Micah 6:6-8

In the old view, God was tribal, and gave Israel victory in war:

And they warred against Midian, as Jehovah had commanded Moses,
and they slew every male. (Numbers 31:7)

So the people shouted, and blew the trumpets; and it came to pass . . . that
the wall fell down flat, so that the people went up into the city, every man
straight before him, and they took the city. And they utterly destroyed all
that was in the city, both man and woman, both old and young, and ox,
and sheep, and ass, with the edge of the sword. (Joshua 6:20-21)

*But time passed, and ideas changed. In the later Book of the Prophet Micah,
after a passage in which God recounts all that he has accomplished for Israel,
there suddenly occurs this passage, not spoken by God:*

Wherewith shall I come before Jehovah,
and bow myself before the high God?
Shall I come before him with burnt offerings,
with calves a year old?
Will Jehovah be pleased with thousands of rams,
with ten thousand rivers of oil?
Shall I give my first-born for my transgression,
the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?
He hath showed thee, O man, what is good,
and what doth Jehovah require of thee,
But to do justly, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with thy God? (Micah 6:6-8)



Reflections

This is one of three passages in the Scriptures where the sacrificial tradition is rejected in favor of an ethical idea of the duty of man. All are interpolations, and we do not know who wrote them, or when. Here are the other two:

What unto me is the multitude of your sacrifices, saith Jehovah.
 I have had enough of the burnt-offerings of rams, and the fat of fed beasts,
 and I delight not in the blood of bullocks, or of lambs, or of he-goats.
 When ye come to appear before me,
 who hath required this at your hand, to trample my courts?
 Bring no more vain oblations: incense is an abomination unto me.
 New moon and Sabbath; the calling of assemblies –
 I cannot away with iniquity and the solemn meeting
 Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hateth;
 They are a trouble unto me; I am weary of bearing them.
 And when ye spread forth your hands, I will hide mine eyes from you;
 Yea, when ye make many prayers, I will not hear:
 your hands are full of blood.
 Wash you, make you clean,
 put away the evil of your doings from you.
 Learn to do well:
 seek justice, relieve the oppressed,
 judge the fatherless, plead for the widow. (Isaiah 1:11-17)

And:

I hate, I despise, your feasts,
 And I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.
 Yea, though ye offer me your burnt-offerings and meal-offerings,
 I will not accept them,
 Neither will I regard the peace-offerings of your fat beasts.
 Take thou away from me the noise of thy songs,
 For I will not hear the melody of thy viols.
 But let justice roll down as waters,
 And righteousness as a mighty stream. (Amos 5:21-24)

In the long war between the priestly and the human understanding of life, which has been fought out on many a continent and in many a sacred writing, here is one climactic Palestinian moment.

John's disciple Jesus, thinking on these prophecies, and on John's failure, will have understood why the sacrificial piety preached by John had been wrong, and why John himself had been executed. The whole basis was faulty. The ritual laws were not only beside the point, *they were not the point at all*. Something entirely different was needed.

The contribution of Jesus was to remember what that different thing was.