MISSING THE MARK

By BRUCE VAWTER

ETYMOLOGIES are handy things. They frequently tell us what our fathers, who first coined the words that we nowadays use so casually, really meant by what they said, which is sometimes a little different from what we mean. On the other hand, etymologies can just as often be misleading, since it is use that really determines a word's meaning for those who use it, and use may have parted company with etymology even from the very beginning. Ordinarily we will find that it is at least instructive to examine etymologies, even though in the end we may not have to treat them too seriously. The classic Scholastic approach to a new term has always been through *quoad nomen* and *quoad rem*, the etymological definition first, then the real meaning.

At the outset, then, it is interesting to observe that none of the words used in the Bible for 'sin' has of itself that exclusively moral association to which hundreds of years of Christian use have accustomed us. It is interesting, because this fact throws some light on certain aspects of the biblical idea of sin and especially on some attitudes adopted by later Judaism. It cannot, however, give us any adequate appreciation of the biblical theology of sin.

In the Hebrew Old Testament the word most commonly used for sin, the word that we customarily translate 'sin' in our Bibles, is *hattah*, which literally means 'to miss the mark'. The mark that is missed need not be a moral mark, nor need it be missed immorally. The author of Prov 19, 2 uses 'missing the mark' of the hasty traveller who loses his way through inadvertence to road signs.

The Hebrew word used most commonly after *hattah* in the biblical vocabulary of sin, *pesha*, is entirely of the same order. It means 'overstep' or 'rebel'. In 2 Kg 8, 20, when the author states that Edom successfully rebelled against the rule of Judah, he is passing no moral judgement on the revolt but simply recording a political fact. Other Hebrew words that are used on occasion to signify a moral lapse – such as 'err', 'wander', and the like – also have of themselves no necessary moral application.

The same must be said of the Greek word *hamartano*, used in the

Greek Old Testament to translate *hattah*, and in the New Testament in its own right as the word for 'sin'.

Hamartano is the exact equivalent of *hattah*. It, too, means 'miss the mark', and in profane Greek it often refers to a man's losing his way on the road. For that matter, the Latin *peccare, peccatum*, with which our own liturgy has made us so familiar and which have as their root meaning 'stumble', originally did not necessarily connote anything moral. When the Italian says *che peccato!*, he is not saying 'what a great sin!' but rather, 'what a pity!' Thus it is that terminology alone cannot tell us a great deal about the biblical theology of sin. We must see, rather, how the terminology is used. The terminology doubtless assisted what was a tendency of the later Judaism, to make of the notion of sin something purely formal and legalistic. Wellhausen was able to assert that what the Law of Moses demanded was not rightdoing, but rather the avoidance of wrongdoing. With respect to the later legalism, Wellhausen's charge was well founded. He was certainly wrong, however, in extending this indictment to the Law itself and to the way it was understood in the biblical period. This much we can easily see, I believe, by examining a few of the passages that go to make up the biblical theology of sin.

See, for example, how the word *pesha* is used by the prophet Amos, one of the earliest of our biblical authors. If we read his first oracles we find that the 'transgressions' of which he repeatedly speaks embrace inhumanity, cruelty, social injustice, violation of contract, acceptance of bribes, violation of the public trust, greed, lust, and hypocrisy, on the part of Gentiles as well as of Israelites.[1] There is obviously no question here of sin as the merely formal, mechanically computed, violation of a law. Rather, it is clear that for Amos *pesha* is a transgression of the moral law, a rebellion against God's moral will, a will that had been made known to the Gentiles as the norm of rightdoing. Amos does not, it is true, elaborate any doctrine of natural law, to explain how Israelite and Gentile alike were under the same moral obligations; no such doctrine is anywhere elaborated in the Hebrew Old Testament, which addressed itself always and exclusively to the people of God who were recipients of his revelation. Yet in 6, 12 Amos does state that the rejection of the justice and rightdoing which God required of Israel – here in specific reference to the corruption that had taken

[1] Amos 1, 3–2, 8.

place in Israelite courts of law – was as absurd and unnatural as tracking horses over rocks and ploughing the sea with oxen. Sin for the Israelite, certainly, was the violated will and law of the Lord. But it was will and law that found a response in man's mind and heart; it was never arbitrary whim or caprice.

This conception of *pesha* that we first encounter in Amos is common to the rest of the prophets. It is not incorrect to do as we are doing, to find the spirit of the Law expressed in the prophets. The criticism of the past century tried to oppose the two, as though the spiritual, prophetic religion and the priestly religion of the Law had been separate, mutually antagonistic developments in Israelite history and tradition. Criticism now recognizes that in this attempt it, too, had taken the wrong track and missed the mark. Prophecy and Law were, of course, two different emphases of Israelitic religion, which correspondingly spoke two different languages. But they were emphases of the same religion and were directed towards broadly the same ends. If we do not expect to find the moral and devotional teaching of Catholicism in the Code of Canon Law or the Roman Ritual, neither do we oppose what we do find there to the *Summa* of St. Thomas or the *Introduction to the Devout Life*. In much the same fashion, it is now agreed that we rightly interpret prophetic teaching as supporting in its way a doctrine that the Law upheld in its own.

In the Law the favoured word for sin is *hattah*. The 'mark' or norm that was 'missed', in the mind of the Israelite authors, was that of the Covenant of Sinai, of which Israel's Law was the spelling out of the people's obligations with respect to its covenant God.

Here, too, if we would understand rightly in what this covenant duty consisted, we must have a clear idea of what covenant meant, first and foremost, in the ancient Near East. The closest analogy to covenant in our own society is the bilateral contract; but while the analogy is valid as far as it goes, we have sometimes tended to overlook the fact that analogy is not identity. In other words, covenant was *like* a contract in some ways, but covenant was not precisely a contract. Specifically, whereas the binding force of a contract consists in legal justice, the covenant obligation was not conceived primarily as one of justice but as one of love.

The word customarily used in the Old Testament to convey the notion of the covenant bond is *hesed*, translated variously as 'mercy', 'loyalty', 'devotion', 'lovingkindness', or simply 'love'. It was in *hesed* that God had chosen Israel and bound it to himself; *hesed*,

correspondingly, was the duty of every Israelite in return, towards God and towards the other members of the covenant community. The covenant idea, therefore, was modelled after a family rather than a legal relationship. When an Israelite committed *hattah*, sinned, his offence was not terminated by the letter of the law which he had violated, but by the familial piety which he had ruptured, the *hesed* of which the Law was a formulated norm and expression.

Sin and evil to the Semite were not the negation, the 'deprivation of good' that they have achieved in our thinking under the influence of other thought-forms. Sin was a positive thing that had been done, that therefore continued to exist until done away with. What we think of as 'guilt', the condition of the sinner as the result of sin, and the punishment that we conceive of as a kind of act of reciprocity on the part of God or offended authority taking vengeance on the sin, were to the biblical authors hardly distinguishable from the sin itself. In Num 32, 23 'sin' and 'the consequences of sin', as we would have to render the thought in English, translate the same Hebrew word, and this is typical of the biblical viewpoint. It is from this viewpoint that we must understand the Old Testament conception of sins committed in ignorance, for which expiatory rites and sacrifice were provided by the Law. From this viewpoint, too, we can see how a whole community could share in the guilt of one of its members, or generations yet unborn in the guilt of their progenitor. It was not that they were being 'held' guilty of another's wrongdoing, but that they were caught up in the consequences of an act that were actually the continued existence of the act itself. The Deuteronomic law of personal responsibility[1] that was laid down as a necessary rule in the human administration of justice, and its application by Jeremiah[2] and Ezekiel[3] to the divine dispensation under the new covenant, were restrictions placed by God on the 'natural' extension of guilt.

Similarly, punishment was not so much a retribution 'visited' upon the sin (though this idea of retribution is also, at times, the biblical conception) as it was the inexorable running of sin's course. God, it is true, could forestall this consequence – there is nothing in the Bible akin to the fatalism of Greek tragedy. For sins of ignorance he did so by accepting the expiatory sacrifices of the Law. For other sins there was the recourse of prayer, coupled with the con-

---

[1] Deut 24, 16. [2] Jer 31, 29f. [3] Ezek ch. 18.

trition and the confession of the sinner, of which we have so many examples in the Psalms. But God's forgiveness of sin did not automatically entail his remission of punishment, as can be seen from the famous judgement passed on David's sin with Bathsheba.[1] The Catholic teaching on the temporal punishment of sin is a true echo of this biblical doctrine.

Finally, we can see from this 'objective' nature of sin as it was understood by the Old Testament why that which is sinful was broader in its extent than that which is immoral. Legal purity, by which was meant the external holiness of a people consecrated to God, a reminder, in turn, of the need of interior holiness,[2] could obviously be violated without the performance of any immoral act. A woman had to make a 'guilt offering' after the 'uncleanness' of childbirth because legal purity had been offended; but no question whatever of morality was involved in the matter.

Here we may pause to note the difference between the world of the Old Testament and that of the New. While most of what has been said above applies equally well to the thinking of the Old and the New Testaments, there is in the New Testament, for reasons that we shall explain more fully later on, no trace of the conception of purely legal holiness. The old formulas are used, but they are used within the new dimension of a salvation and a regeneration of which the former figures were but a type and a foreshadowing. The 'holy ones' to whom St. Paul writes are not those merely consecrated to God, but those of whom personal holiness is expected as a consequence of the indwelling Spirit. With the entire apparatus of formal sanctity superseded in a new and spiritual covenant, sin and immorality are fully identified. The law of Christians is the code of conduct that befits those removed in principle from this world and joined to the Source of all that is holy and to Holiness itself. Charity is the *hesed* of the new covenant.

The nature of sin in the Bible can aptly be perceived in the effects that are attributed to it. These are described in various ways and under various figures, but the idea that emerges is much the same. In the Law, sin is represented as an *obex*, an obstacle that stands between God and people – once again we see the relevance of the 'objective' conception of sin. The rites of expiation are not directed to God in the thought that he is to be placated or changed from an unfavourable to a favourable disposition; God

[1] 2 Sam 12, 10–14. [2] Cf. Lev 11, 44 ff.

is never the object of the verb that we translate 'expiate'. Expiation, rather, has sin for its object. Sin must be removed, this obstacle in the path of man's approach to the Holy. Man, not God, must change. When sin has been wilful, committed 'with a high hand', a sin of mind and heart, then the mind and heart of man must be changed. This is contrition or repentance.

In the famous sixth chapter of Isaias we find this same notion of sin as it was experienced by the prophet at the time of his call to prophesy. If this chapter is read attentively, it is apparent that, despite the awesome and grandiose terms in which God is described in theophany, it is in the moral order rather than in the order of being that man is seen to be most separated from God. Sin, in other words, the sin that Isaias confesses of himself and of his people, is what lies behind his recognition that he is 'lost' in the presence of the Holy. Much the same idea must be in the background of the English word 'sin' (cf. the German, *Sünde*) that has been formed by Christian thinking, namely that it *sunders* one from the other.

One of the most fruitful sources of the biblical theology of sin are the penitential psalms of the Old Testament. The New Testament would certainly open up a wider vision of the riches of God's salvation and his grace, but not even the New Testament can tell us more about the sense of sin and of the lostness and meaninglessness which are its inevitable concomitant. Among the penitential psalms none is richer in its content than Psalm 50(51), the well-known *Miserere*.

This psalm begins with a plea to God, the covenant Father, to honour his *hesed* in responding to the sinner's appeal. Three words are used for sin throughout the psalm: the two of which we have already spoken above, together with *awon*, 'guilt', the state of a sinner who has transgressed the will of God and who now stands in a condition of disharmony with that will. Sin, in other words, appears as a rebellion, an offence against the covenant bond, and therefore a state of aversion from the God of the covenant. Correspondingly, three different words are used to express the sinner's conviction of what God alone can and must do with regard to his sinful state.

It is important to see precisely what these words mean, since all of them involve vaguely the same figure, and it would be easy to conclude mistakenly that they are more or less arbitrary synonyms. 'Blot out', 'wash', and 'cleanse' are their usual English equivalents. The 'blotting out' in question is a ritual obliteration

or washing away: in this sense the same verb appears in Num 5, 23. The 'washing' that the psalmist has in mind does mean this, certainly, but we need to recall the type of washing with which he was familiar. The washing of clothes,[1] not of the hands or feet, is what the verb denotes. More literally still, it could be rendered 'tread out' – the Oriental flung his soiled clothing in a stream and stamped on it enthusiastically. The 'cleansing', finally, to which the psalmist refers is a ritual or declaratory cleansing of the kind provided for in Lev 13, 6.

The psalmist petitions of God, therefore, what a later theology would distinguish into a forensic and a real justification. Justification is forensic: God must simply forgive, declare the sinner to be a sinner no more. There is a simple truth preserved in this conception, for the committed sin, of course, is a reality that is never annulled or annihilated. The historical fact that is a past human act cannot be done away with as though it had never occurred. But justification is also real: the guilt that has remained in the sinner and that prevents his access to the God of holiness must be stamped out and obliterated.

The nature of this real justification is brought out beautifully and profoundly twards the middle of the psalm. The psalmist calls upon the Lord to *create* in him a clean heart, and to *renew* within him an upright spirit. The same word (*bara*) is used that we translate 'create' in the creation narrative of Gen 1, 1. It is a word reserved in the Old Testament exclusively for the wonderful, unique action of God alone. For the Israelite, 'heart' was much more than a metaphor for the emotions or, as we sometimes use it, for a kind of better self or good will. The heart was conceived as the seat of *all* emotion, will, and thought; for the Semite, we must always remember, thought or 'said' things in his heart, not in his head. The heart was the Self. The 'spirit', or breath, was the power residing within man, a power that could come from God only, by which he was able to think and will in his heart. It, too, therefore, might be called the Self. The psalmist clearly knew, as a consequence, that the justification of the sinner entailed a divine work of re-creation, the renewal of a personality that had been distorted and turned aside from its true purposes by the act of sin. Create, he says, a new *me*. Such an idea is boundless in its commentary on what he believed the effect of sin to be in the sinner, an effect which obviously far

[1] Cf. Exod 19, 10.

transcends any notion of purely formal or legal rectitude. Sin was, in his eyes, an involvement from which man could not emerge without an alteration in his inmost being.

Because of the similarity of this passage to the language of Jeremiah[1] and Ezekiel,[2] some authors have concluded that the psalmist must have been dependent on the teaching of these great prophets. In their preaching about the new covenant, however, Jeremiah and Ezekiel seem merely to have articulated an ancient Hebrew conception. Similarly, the psalmist's conviction (expressed in v. 6) that every sin is a sin against God, contains nothing that was new in Israel, as can be seen from the ancient Joseph story[3] and David's confession at the finding out of his sin with Bathsheba.[4]

One other value Psalm 50 has in setting forth for us the biblical theology of sin. In v. 7 the psalmist declares, 'Behold, I was brought forth in guilt, and in sin did my mother conceive me'. He makes this utterance as a motivation to God to be merciful, as a reminder that man's proclivities are sinful – Gen 8, 21 has God himself acknowledge this and accept it in his announced plan or his economy of dealing with man. The biblical authors were well aware that the introduction of sin into the world and its continuation were the achievement of human malice against the will of God. They testified that man's disposition to sin was not of God's designing, but was part of a consistent history in which the will of a saving God had from the first been resisted and thwarted.[5] It was this belief that St. Paul would further develop[6] and which we understand more comprehensively as the doctrine of original sin. The Bible does not profess this belief, of course, to excuse man's continued sinfulness; it merely seeks to explain it.

As we have mentioned above, most of the Old Testament theology of sin is discernible in the thinking of the New Testament authors, who had been formed completely in the tradition of their biblical fathers. There is, however, a decisive difference that results from the new and definitive revelation of Christianity. For while sin was taken for granted and elaborately provided for in the life of the old covenant, the New Testament Church saw in itself the fulfilment of the prophets' prediction of a new covenant,[7] which was to be an everlasting covenant in which sin should have no part.

---

[1] Jer 24, 7; 31, 33; 32, 39.
[2] Ezek 36, 25 ff.
[3] Gen 39, 9.
[4] 2 Sam 12, 13.
[5] Cf. Gen 3 ff. and similar passages.
[6] Rom 5, 12 ff.
[7] Cf. Jer 31, 31–34; 32, 37–41.

The New Testament writers were well aware, of course, that Christians could and did commit sin – the apostolic epistles and the letters to the churches in the first chapters of the Apocalypse testify to a refreshing and total lack of naïveté in this respect. Sin, however, together with the Law, and the 'flesh', and death, and everything imperfect, belonged to this sinful world in which the Christian by rights no longer had any share. It was only by returning to this sinful world or to any of its works – and hence St. Paul's polemic against the attempt of the 'Judaizers' to impose the Mosaic Law on Christians – that the Christian could become guilty of sin. Sin was, therefore, always a kind of apostasy. The salvation achieved by Christ, the new covenant ratified in his blood, had freed mankind in principle, through grace, from the reign of sin and this world. Because what was done now in principle would be accomplished definitively only at the end of all, in the final fulfilment of the divine economy[1]; because, therefore, the Christian though freed of this world continued to live in it and could always relapse into its ways, sin was an ever present possibility. Yet he could sin only by abandoning the total commitment involved in Christian faith, which he could regain only through the new heart and spirit that must once more be bestowed on him by divine grace.

The sense of horror and of enormity in the presence of sin[2] never deserts the New Testament, even though it is under no illusion as to the weakness of Christians and to their consequent recurring need of the forgiveness of Christ and the ministration of his Church. If we today can summon a somewhat more casual attitude to the function of the confessional in the sacramental life of the Church, undoubtedly this is partly due to the fact that modern man, even Christian man, has to a greater or less extent forgotten what sin really is.

Probably man can never really lose his sense of sin, though today he seems to have great difficulty in defining for himself what he means by it. When we look about us at a world in which men give witness, by action far more eloquently than by word, to a feeling of rootlessness and purposeless existence, to a life bereft of meaningful experience in which event follows event in witless sequence and where men can achieve no community together, we perceive, in a groping sort of way, what biblical man understood as sin.

---

[1] 1 Cor 15, 53–56.

[2] Cf. 1 Cor 6, 13–20.