

THE JUDGE OF ALL THE EARTH¹

By JOHN L. MCKENZIE

IT is a curious accident of language that Hebrew has no single word which can be translated as 'justice'. Like other accidents of language, this defect in the Hebrew vocabulary reveals a deep difference between the mind of the Israelites who wrote the Old Testament and our own ways of thinking. We have inherited our ideas of law and justice from Greece and even more from Rome; these two ancient civilizations have given us the ideas and words. In our political thinking justice is the supreme virtue of civil society from which all other virtues flow; and a government which fails to render justice to its citizens is so corrupt that it ceases to be a legitimate government which can claim the allegiance of its citizens. Hebrew has several words for law, perhaps none of which correspond in meaning and use to our English word law; one of the most commonly used words we translate literally 'judgment', the verdict of the judge. If we wish to translate 'justice' into Hebrew, we shall do it best by combining two words. Where we think of justice, the Israelite thought of 'righteous judgment'. The phrase does not imply juridical positivism, as a modern reader could easily infer. It does imply the absence of an abstract idea of justice. Justice was produced by the verdict of the judge, who is the source and defender of justice. There is no 'higher justice' above the law and the judge to which the Israelites would think of appealing. Nothing is just until it is judicially declared. For justice had no reality for the Israelites unless it was, as we should say, effectively realized; and only the declaration of the judge could give to justice concrete reality.

In spite of the intense activity of our courts, most of the citizens of our country have never had a personal encounter with the majesty of the law incarnated in the person of the judge on the bench. The novel, the theatre, and the cinema have made us all familiar with the most awesome judicial action of English law; the judge puts on the black cap and pronounces the words which terminate the

¹ Gen 18, 25.

earthly life of a human person. This is total justice, and we can conceive of no greater judicial power. The judge is merely the officer of society; but when he pronounces the sentence of death, many feel that he assumes an attribute of God. It is not, I fear, for this reason that so many are convinced that neither society nor its officers have the right to pronounce this sentence. But this is our idea of the judge; behind the judge who imposes a fine for a traffic violation stands the hangman. Nothing keeps the judge from summoning the hangman for the traffic violation except abstract justice, embodied in written law.

When we join ourselves to the prayer of the priest with which the sacrifice of the Mass begins, we take a phrase from the Psalms and ask God to judge us. Most of us feel that this is an extremely bold approach; we hope that he will not take our prayer seriously. In our ways of thinking the good citizen is one who never has any occasion to encounter a judge; to invite the judge to pronounce a verdict is to invite the officer whose minister is the hangman. But this prayer was not written by a citizen of England or the United States, and it means something altogether different. Where the judge is the source and defender of justice, he is the saviour and the deliverer. To render judgment is to vindicate a claim. In the primitive thought and speech of early Israel a claim is righteous when it is mine; and the judge renders righteous judgment when he delivers a verdict in my favour. In the oldest conceptions of God judgment is an attribute of salvation.

This is evidently a rather primitive idea of justice, and we shall see that the growth of Israel in its faith and its knowledge demanded a growth likewise in its conception of justice. But in Psalm 7,7; 9,5; 42,1 and other prayers, the Israelite candidly asks God to judge him where it is clear that he is asking God to defend him. The judgment of God is the attribute by which he redeems Zion from the attacks of its enemies.¹ Because God is a God of judgment Israel can await in confidence the works of his grace and pity.² Because of the sins of Israel judgment is remote;³ judgment here is evidently deliverance, for we would say that sins bring judgment near. The man who announced the defeat and death of Absalom declared that God had 'judged' David from his enemies.⁴ Solomon's prayer at the dedication of the temple appeals to the judgment of God to forgive the

¹ Isai 1,27.

² Isai 30,18.

³ Isai 59,9.

⁴ 2 Sam 18,31.

sins of His people – surely a paradoxical expression.¹ In this quality of judge God is frequently called the defender of the judgment of the poor, the orphan and the widow.²

Where the judge is conceived as one who is on your own side, he is evidently not on the side of your enemies. To the enemies of Israel God is the vindictive judge. He is the judge of the world and of nations; in his appointed judgment he rises in anger against the enemies of Israel.³ The judgment which he passes on the world in righteousness and on peoples in equity is a condemnation.⁴ When he judges nations he shatters kings on the day of his anger.⁵

Why is God the judge-defender-avenger of Israel and the judge-adversary of the nations? Simply because he is united to Israel by a covenant of his own election and establishment. Between God and Israel, in the unsophisticated thinking of early Israel, a relationship arose like the relations of the members of the family and clan. These groups preserved themselves from extinction by solidarity against all other groups; the individual demanded and received from the group the protection of his person and his claims, as he accepted the responsibility of defending the persons and claims of others. God is the 'judge' of Israel because he is the kinsman and the avenger.

The prophetic revolution of the eighth and seventh centuries B.C. in Israel raised the question of this relationship. What happens if one of the parties is unfaithful to the obligations of the covenant? The relationship is like the relationships of family and clan, but it is also unlike them. Israel can release God from his promises by failing to fulfil its own. If it loses its fidelity, its only claim to the 'judgments' of God, it must expect the judgment which he renders to the nations. By the time of Ezekiel, the early sixth century B.C., it was established in prophetic speech that the judgments of God upon Israel were not his saving acts but his punishments. In these as in his saving acts God exhibited the righteousness which is the essential quality of the judge. It is not righteous for him to treat virtue and sin equally. When this was perceived, Israel was educated in the concept of justice. Like all men, Israel also stands under judgment at all times.

It is not characteristic of Old Testament thought to conceive the judgment of God upon mankind in terms of a vast assizes to which all humanity is summoned, although the image is used in

¹ 1 Kg 8, 49.

² Deut 10, 18; Ps 75, 10; 81, 3; 103, 6; 139, 13; Job 36, 6.

³ Ps 7, 7.

⁴ Ps 9, 8; 95, 13.

⁵ Ps 109, 6.

Joel¹ and Daniel.² The Old Testament regularly sees the judgments of God in the events of history or the catastrophes of nature. Judgment is not deferred to a far off eschatological event, but is executed here and now. The Israelite prophets reject any suggestion that the events of history and the catastrophes of nature are merely casual, needing no explanation other than the concurrence of various opposing forces. These vindicate the judgment of God on men and nations.

The idea of judgment passes from the Old Testament into the New Testament, and, like so many theological ideas, experiences a transformation. If one consults the concordance of the New Testament, it is at once evident that the words 'judge' and 'judgment' and compounds of these words occur much less frequently in the Synoptic Gospels than they do in the Pauline and Johannine writings. The content of the Gospels bears out the statistics of the concordance; judgment is not a really dominant theme in the Synoptic Gospels. This does not imply that it is absent. Judgment is that which inevitably follows sin.³ The judgment is usually mentioned without further details, and the interpreter wonders whether it refers to a judgment of this world or the next – in modern theological terms, whether the judgment is historical or eschatological. This question is of more importance than one might think; and we shall return to it later in this article.

Paul is much more conscious of the judgment than the authors of the Synoptic Gospels, so conscious indeed that it is troublesome for the interpreter who attempts to synthesize his thought. There is a past judgment, a sentence of condemnation which has fallen upon all men. This is the judgment passed upon all men in their ancestor,⁴ who by his act brought all of humanity into a state of guilt. From his origin upon the earth man is under judgment. It is this thought of Paul which was the occasion of Augustine's famous and harsh phrase for unredeemed man, *massa damnata*. The saving act of Jesus Christ is an annulment of the judgment.⁵ The judgment is a judgment of death; Jesus by his death restores life to the condemned.

But there is also a future judgment in Paul, and the future judgment is more prominent in his writings than the past judgment. This is the judgment which the sinner cannot escape.⁶ It is a judg-

¹ Joel 4, 9–16.

² Dan 7, 9–12.

³ Mt 5, 21–25; 12, 40–42; 23, 13,33; Mk 12, 40; Lk 10, 14; 11, 31–32; 12, 58.

⁴ Rom 5, 16, 18.

⁵ Rom 8, 1, 3.

⁶ Rom 2, 1–3.

ment accomplished on the day of wrath,¹ a day when God will judge the world,² the living and the dead.³ One of his readers might have asked Paul whether a race condemned in its origin is capable of further judgment. But since neither his readers nor Paul himself placed the question, we must answer it ourselves, or find a reason why the question should not be asked. The answer here as so often in the theology of Paul lies in the versatility – one might say the mercurial quality – of Paul's thought. And the key here is perhaps that the judgment of all men in Adam is original with Paul, while the future judgment was an existing commonplace which Paul accepted. Here it is necessary to supply some information from extrabiblical sources.

The idea of judgment in the Old Testament sketched above experienced remarkable development in Jewish apocalyptic literature of the first century or two before the Christian era. In many of these writings the judgment of God on the nations was dramatized into a vast assizes to which all men are summoned. Not infrequently this dramatic scene is painted in vivid and gruesome colours. The interest in apocalyptic literature (as the name of the literature indicates) lay in alleged revelations concerning the world catastrophe, the great act by which God overturns the world and vindicates His supremacy and His justice. This is the final victory of God over evil.

It is important to notice that the biblical belief in the final victory of God over evil is not of necessity linked with any particular dramatic or metaphorical expression. The last judgment scene which is depicted over so many cathedral doors and so many high altars has become in popular belief an article of faith scarcely less sacred than the Trinity of persons, and one accepts certain risks if one points out that an article of faith does not include purely artistic features. In the Synoptic Gospels the last judgment scene is reflected only in Matthew,⁴ not paralleled in the other Gospels. Nor is it certainly reflected even there. The scene is not called a judgment, it does not resemble a judgment scene, nor are any legal terms employed. One may appear to be playing with words to dwell upon this, but legal terminology was available to the New Testament writers when they wished to use it, and they frequently did. If we call the scene in Matthew the last judgment, we are using a term which Matthew did not use.

¹ Rom 3, 5.

² Rom 3, 6.

³ 2 Tim 4, 1.

⁴ Mt 25, 31–46.

With these reservations, one must still say that the apocalyptic judgment of Jewish belief is most probably what is implied in the judgment mentioned in the synoptic Gospels and in the future judgment of Paul. Sound method demands that when we take this as an acceptance of the belief in a final 'judgment' in the biblical sense, we are not compelled to a literal acceptance of the apocalyptic imagery in which this belief is sometimes expressed. Man is under a judgment from which he can escape, if he accepts the saving act of Jesus Christ; there awaits a judgment from which no deliverance can be expected. The terms of this judgment are man's response to his encounter with God in Jesus Christ; it is altogether fitting that the judgment of man's decision in this crisis should be committed to him who is the focus of the decision, the Lord Jesus Christ who comes to judge the living and the dead.

The judgment is a dominant theme in the Gospel of John; and it is presented in what appears at first sight to be a complex of paradoxes. Jesus came into the world not to judge the world but to save the world;¹ yet Jesus has come into the world for judgment.² The Father judges no one;³ yet it must be the Father who seeks the glory of Jesus and who judges.⁴ The Father judges no one because he has given all judgment to the Son,⁵ and Jesus says that he judges justly⁶ and truthfully.⁷ Yet Jesus says he does not judge.⁸

The unity of thought which underlies these paradoxes is the entirely distinctive concept of the judgment presented by John. There is a judgment of the last day in John⁹ and a resurrection of judgment which is contrasted with the resurrection of life.¹⁰ But when one assembles the passages in which the judgment occurs in John, it is clear that the judgment is not past or future; it is present, it occurs now. The unbeliever is already judged.¹¹ The judge of the unbeliever on the last day is the word which Jesus has spoken.¹² The spirit proves that there is judgment by showing that the prince of the world is already judged.¹³ The judgment of the world occurs *now*, when the decisive hour of the rejection of Jesus by his own people is near.¹⁴

What is this judgment which is eternally present, which is not the work of the Father but is committed to the Son? John has transformed the judgment from an act of God to an act of man; it is

¹ Jn 3, 17; 12, 46.

² Jn 9, 39.

³ Jn 5, 22.

⁴ Jn 8, 50.

⁵ Jn 5, 22, 27.

⁶ Jn 5, 30.

⁷ Jn 8, 16.

⁸ Jn 8, 12; 12, 47.

⁹ Jn 12, 48.

¹⁰ Jn 5, 29.

¹¹ Jn 3, 18; 5, 24

¹² Jn 12, 48.

¹³ Jn 16, 11.

¹⁴ Jn 12, 31.

man who pronounces judgment upon himself. Jesus is judge in the sense that he is the object of decision; in this sense the Father judges no one but commits all judgment to the Son. In the same sense Jesus comes not to judge the world but to save the world; the decision is judgment or salvation to the man who makes it. In John the judgment is unbelief, refusal to accept Jesus as the Son. This judgment is pronounced when one encounters Jesus.

Effectively, then, John tells Christians that it is nonsense to await the judgment; the judgment is an accomplished fact, accomplished by the personal decision of each one. The 'world', which in John's language means those who do not believe in Jesus, is judged by his very coming. Apocalyptic expectations can degenerate into an unreal dreamworld which has little reference to present reality; more than once in the history of Christianity they have been a refuge for those who felt defeated by the world. By recalling that the judgment is accomplished now by the personal decision of each man, John recalls Christians to a sense of their own responsibility and to the immediate effects of their decisions.

If these be the implications of the judgment as it is presented by John, they must have certain repercussions in the personal life of the individual Christian which are not always felt clearly. Christian humility is explained in such a way that the Christian learns to have a low esteem of his personal importance and value; and as a corrective of the pride and vanity which is natural to man the lessons are not to be dismissed. But humility, like all the virtues except love, becomes a distortion of the Christian ideal unless it is taken as part of a larger whole. The Christian who has become so humble that he believes his own personal decisions are important to no one, even to himself, is fleeing from Christian virtue, not pursuing it. What St. Paul meant when he said that the saints will judge the world¹ was clearer to him than it is to us. But it is not impossible that an element of the Johannine judgment crept into his language here, and that he meant that the lives of the saints will prove that the world which rejects Jesus Christ is wrong. Effectively the judgment of God in the present world is expressed in the lives of those who believe in him. And it is terribly important that those who believe in him should vindicate his judgment in what they say and do.

There is a judgment of God in history; and history is the actions of man in society. Just as history is a complex and protracted

¹ 1 Cor 6, 2.

process and not a single action, so the judgment of God in history is not a single event. The Bible is calmly assured that the history which is dominated by the saving acts and judgments of God is none the less written by the men whose decisions determine the events. The celebrated problem of the reconciliation of the sovereignty of God and the freedom of man is not a genuine problem in the books of the Bible. One may say that this is due either to a more profound insight in the biblical writers or to their incapacity for the type of philosophical reflection which presents the problem. For one reason or the other, the Bible affirms each of these truths without losing its grasp on the other. And therefore John can present the judgment as both the action of God and the action of man. Surely one who knows that he shares in the formation of the judgment of God can scarcely think of his own personal decisions as unimportant. History is woven of these personal decisions, so closely interlocked between man and man and in the course of the personal life of each man that no one can set a limit to the consequences of his decisions. Each of us writes history each day, and when we write history we write God's judgment.

The personal decision which is judgment is never made by each man in the permanent and final form which makes further judgment impossible and unnecessary until each man is himself removed from history. The 'now' of the judgment is not an instant; it is the 'now' of the present life, of all the days and years in which we encounter Jesus Christ the incarnate Word. And indeed the word 'encounter', so popular in modern theological writing, is not the perfect word to denote the unique experience of the personal meeting between God and man which occurs when the Word is made flesh and dwells among us. The reality of Jesus Christ is too immense to be apprehended in a single instant and in a single decision. Neither total acceptance of him nor total rejection of him is a decision easily and quickly made. In either case one learns anew each day of one's life what the reality is which one has accepted or rejected. And the magnitude of the decision, as well as its incalculable consequences, are not seen by us in their fullness. One decision leads infallibly to another, and the more one advances in the chain of decisions the more difficult it becomes to reverse the series. At what point does one really make a final and irreversible decision? The Church tells us that our judgment is not determined until we have passed from the land of the living. The Church as well as experience also tells us that men rarely abandon the decisions which have made them

to be one thing rather than another. Each of these personal decisions is a factor forming the judgment which is not reversed.

In the thought of St. John, Jesus judges the world by his very coming and presence. I have paraphrased his thought by saying that Jesus is the judge by being the object of decision rather than its agent. It is a recurrent theme in St. John that the Jews who encountered Jesus did not recognize their judgment in him, and that their failure to recognize him is no excuse. The transparent reality of God in Christ can be concealed only by those who wish to conceal it. That transparent reality is the risen Jesus Christ living in his Church. St. John tells us that men judge themselves; and the entire New Testament, with one accord, tells Christians with more severity than usual that the judgment of other men does not belong to the Christian. The Christian can ask himself and not others whether the transparent reality of the risen Jesus living in His Church is dimmed and obscured to the world by himself; for each of us is the Church in his own time and place. He can ask himself whether in him the world sees the Church as essentially and primarily a community of love and not as something else. He can ask himself whether men will encounter Christ in the Church if they think, for reasons which are not entirely spurious, that the Church is a power society whose officers seem more interested in total control than in total dedication. He can ask himself whether men encounter Christ in a community where words like due submission to properly constituted authority are heard far more frequently than such words as 'A new commandment I give you, that you love one another', and 'Let him who would be first among you be the slave of others'. He can ask himself whether the fullness of Christ has ever been revealed in the existent reality of the Church, and he will conclude that it has not because the members of the Church have not received the fullness of Christ – because they did not choose to receive it. And he must admit that the reality of Christ can be most effectively concealed by those whose responsibility in the Church is the greatest.

It is not ours to judge any except ourselves; but we know that what dulls the encounter between the world and Christ in his Church is one thing here and now, another thing there and then. Can the Christian honestly take refuge from responsibility, which is his own judgment, because he thinks that leadership has failed him? Is he genuinely responsible if he shows a great readiness to do what is right only as long as everyone else has done it before him?

Can he take real comfort in the thought that if what he is doing is, as he fears, wrong, at least he is doing wrong under clerical leadership? At one time in English history a layman, Thomas More, took a position in which he was supported by only one of the English bishops. We sometimes seek in the Church and her leadership a security which the Church does not promise: the security which is felt in blindly following directions which we know are not good, the assurance that we can safely let someone else do our personal thinking and make our personal decisions. This is a flight from judgment. That more men have not faced their own crisis as Thomas More faced his is due simply to the fact that few of us are aware of our responsibility as Thomas More was. In him and those who like him made their own decision, and only in them, could one see Christ in His Church in the England of his time. It would be a mistake to think that this situation is unique.

One final aspect of the judgment as John conceives it may further enlarge our understanding of judgment. John returns to the primitive biblical conception of judgment in this respect, that it is the coming of Jesus as saviour that places man under judgment. Jesus judges by his saving act and saves by his judgment. Judgment becomes again deliverance in a more profound sense. When we combine this with another aspect of the Johannine thought in which judgment is transformed from an act of God to an act of man, it appears that we have the saving act also transformed from an act of God to an act of man; and this is a heresy which the Church has repudiated vigorously and often. Like all heresies, this one is a distortion of a truth. John, like Paul, has no doubt that God alone saves and that man is incapable of saving himself. The act by which man judges and saves is the creation of God's saving and judging will within him. Man himself must make the decision; but he could not make it if God had not empowered him to make it. He is saved when he is judged, when he encounters Jesus Christ, the object of decision.

For the Christian the judgment is an object of hope rather than an object of fear. When we attribute judgment to God, we use a human term which can be misinterpreted if the analogy is pushed too hard. The judgment of God is not an act of law, for law is above the judge. God alone can pronounce a judgment which is a deliverance. The human judgment which we know cannot be exercised unless the judge lays aside love and mercy. The judgment of God is a judgment of love and mercy; were it anything else, it would not be the judgment of God.