

THE WAYS OF GOD

By BRUCE VAWTER

My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says Yahweh. As high as the heavens are above the earth, so high are my ways above your ways and my thoughts above your thoughts'.¹

The Old Testament possesses a rich and varied vocabulary in which to express the divine imperative. This is as we would expect it to be in the record of a salvation history that is likewise a history of revelation, a revelation which is in turn the self-manifestation of a God who has shown himself in doing quite as much as in saying, and who demands, as man's response to this self-manifestation, a constant doing. Faith, as St Paul, speaking from the authentic historical experience of Israel, continually reminds us, is a labour, a working, a toiling. Anything short of this, as the prophets taught, is the 'mouth-honour' which the Lord despises.

The Israel which does not 'know' God is the Israel in which there is no fidelity, no covenant faith with God and man, no practice of the social virtues. Thus it was seen by Hosea.² 'Knowledge of God' and 'law of God' add up, as far as man is concerned, to one and the same thing.³ The great deeds of Yahweh are not merely to be contemplated and retold through the generations, they are above all to be imitated. The ways of God must become the ways of man, otherwise there is no faith.

'Ways', as a concrete metaphor for man's moral life, is common to many languages besides biblical hebrew and greek. The 'two ways' of good and evil turns up as a theme in the literature of ancient Egypt and Greece, in hellenism and the bible, in the *Didache* and at Qmran. What is distinctive about the biblical usage is the personal relation that is set up with the 'ways' of God. This follows, of course, from the uniquely personal character of the God of revelation as the bible presents him, as confronting man with a call to action that must in some fashion match the divine action.

The gods of the gentiles had no such character, even when the gentiles had the idea – as, indeed, they sometimes did – that man's

¹ Isai 55, 8f.

² Hos 4, 1f.

³ Cf Hos 4, 6.

moral conduct was somehow the concern of the deity. Hammurabi's law-code, as it has been preserved for us on the diorite stele in the Louvre, is inscribed beneath a representation of Shamash, the sun-god, apparently transmitting legislative power to the babylonian king. But the law-code itself shows how much of an afterthought and how adventitious this concept was: the laws of Hammurabi are his and his predecessors', they are in no sense the laws of Shamash. It is true, of course, that some biblical law is a reflection of Yahweh's will in an analogous way: much of the casuistic part of the law of Moses had its origin as legislation in Israelitic lawcourts and is parallel in form and content with the code of Hammurabi and the laws of Eshnunna and Lipit-Ishtar. But the hard core of the mosaic law is without any real parallel with these alien legislations, just as there is no real parallel between Israel's prophetic word and the 'revelations' of the gentile gods. Here, in Israel's apodictic law, the God of Israel speaks out of the I-thou confrontation that is unique to biblical religion.

The 'ways of God' in the Old Testament are, it is true, quite frequently simply the ways of man which God has commanded. Thus in Jeremiash: 'Listen to my voice; then I will be your God and you shall be my people. Walk in all the ways that I command you, so that you may prosper'. There is a way which man must follow, and this has been pointed out to him by Yahweh.¹ Even these 'ways', however, though God's only by adoption, so to speak, put man in a personal relation to God, in which the entire believing person is involved and not merely external obedience. 'One heart and one way I will give them', said Yahweh to Jeremiah, 'that they may fear me always, to their own good and that of their children after them. I will make them an eternal covenant, never to cease doing good to them; into their hearts I will put the fear of me, that they may never depart from me'.²

In a far more intimate sense, however, there are ways of God which, if they are to be the ways of men also, can be such only to the extent that men follow the lead of God. These are the ways of God's own doing in which he has revealed himself to his people. Thus in the ancient Song of Moses: 'Proclaim the greatness of our God: the Rock – how faultless are his deeds, how right all his ways! A faithful God, without deceit, how just and upright he is'!³

¹ Jer 7, 23. Cf Ex 32, 8; Deut 5, 33, etc.

² Jer 32, 38–40.

³ Deut 32, 3f; see also Ps 25, 10; 145, 17; Tob 3, 2; Dan 3, 27.

It is characteristic of the Wisdom writers, the theologians of ancient Israel in something of a modern sense, that they have translated the ways of God as seen in his dealings with men into the norms of human conduct in what amounts to a rational system. The conclusion to the book of Hosea¹ exhorts: 'Let him who is wise understand these things; let him who is prudent know them. Straight are the ways of Yahweh, in them the just walk, but sinners stumble in them'. The writer bids the reader reflect on the words of the prophet, how in accord with the realities they have proved to be; and how, therefore, the only course for the sensible man (who is the 'wise' man of the Wisdom tradition) is to conform his own conduct to the ways of God as they have been made known to him.

In the same line of thought is the theme of hypostatized wisdom that appears especially in the later Wisdom tradition. 'Yahweh begot me, the firstborn of his ways', says Wisdom, 'the forerunner of his prodigies of long ago'.² The hypostatizing of wisdom rose from the same kind of experience that impressed the author of the conclusion to Hosea. Experience demonstrated to the sensible man that to live according to the revealed will of God was not only a religious duty, it also worked: pragmatically, good morality is also good common sense. This recognition led to the identification of human and divine wisdom, originally separate concepts: the theme of divine wisdom as the creative and sustaining power of God is quite ancient³ and also appears in the literatures of Egypt, Mesopotamia, and Canaan. But just as only in Israel did creation become the initial act of a *Heilsgeschichte*, in the same way it was only within its historical perspective that a divine wisdom which had been shown to man in history could be seen as the first of the Lord's ways in the government of man. As a further development of the same idea, in John's gospel Jesus can be called 'the way, the truth, and the light'.⁴ Jesus is the eternal Wisdom or Word of God made flesh. He is the divine way just as he is the divine truth and the divine life, personalized and revealed. He and he alone is the way to the Father, because he alone has the power to take his disciples with him to the Father.⁵

There was no opposition between this doctrine of the Wisdom writers and that of Paul, who saw the 'wisdom of men' as standing

¹ Hos 14, 10, a Wisdom ending.

² Prov 8, 22.

³ Cf Jer 10, 12.

⁴ Jn 14, 6.

⁵ In what precise sense the primitive Church is called 'the way' or 'this way' in Acts 9, 2; 19, 9, 23; 22, 4; 24, 14, 22 and what relation this usage has to the foregoing, is not clear.

in contradiction to the divine wisdom. What was wrong, in Paul's view, about such a wisdom of men was not that it was a false wisdom, but that it was substituted for the wisdom of God and preferred to it. The wisdom of God and of man can coincide only when the latter has been seen as reflecting the former and as under its firm control. This, too, the Wisdom writers believed. 'The beginning of wisdom is the fear of Yahweh, and knowledge of the Holiest is understanding'.¹ 'All wisdom comes from the Lord, and with him it remains forever'.²

For there are ways of the Lord which the wisdom of man cannot know, but in which it can only be instructed. The ways of God can break in upon those unprepared for them even as something shocking, startling, unacceptable. 'You say, The way of Yahweh is not fair. Hear now, house of Israel: Is it my way that is unfair, or rather, are not your ways unfair?'³ Centuries later Paul would similarly speak of the way of the cross, 'a stumbling-block to Jews and folly to Greeks, yet to those who have heard his call, Jews and Greeks alike, the power of God and the wisdom of God'.⁴ These ways of God can be known only by him who has made himself receptive to the divine revelation: they will be forever unknown to those who trust in their own wisdom. 'They seek me day after day, and desire to know my ways, like a nation that has done what is just and not abandoned the law of their God!'⁵ 'You will look for me, but you will not find me. Where I am, you cannot come'.⁶

The ways of God refer both to what God has done and what, from the human point of view, he is about to do: that is, both to his deeds and his thoughts, his plans. It is in no metaphysical sense that the bible considers the thoughts of God as already existing realities, only for the moment hidden from man. To think (*hashab*) is to devise, to conceive, to bring something into being in the heart. Jeremiah's enemies⁷ do not say, precisely, 'Come, let us think thoughts against Jeremiah', though the text could be translated in such a wooden fashion.⁸ They say, rather, 'Let us devise machinations that will destroy him'. Similarly, in Jer 29, 11 the Lord is not guilty of the banality: 'I know the thoughts which I am thinking about you'. Rather, 'It is I who know (experientially) the devices I am constructing for you' – which here are devices of peace and not of evil.

Evil men invariably will not know the thoughts of God. Micah

¹ Prov 9, 10.

² Sir 1, 1.

³ Ezek 18, 25.

⁴ 1 Cor 1, 23f.

⁵ Isai 58, 2.

⁶ Jn 7, 34.

⁷ Jer 18, 18.

⁸ Cf Jer 11, 19.

scoffs at the nations gloating over the downfall of Zion: 'Yet they know not the thoughts of Yahweh, nor can they discern his plan – though he has gathered them like sheaves to the threshing floor!'¹ Israel, too, is capable of the same fate because of its sins: 'This people draws near me with its mouth only, and honours me with its lips alone, but its heart (i.e. its 'thoughts', what it actually does) is far from me'. Therefore it will see its 'wisdom' confounded when the Lord reveals his plan unexpectedly, without warning. 'Therefore I will again deal with this people in surprising and wondrous fashion. The wisdom of its wise men shall perish, and the understanding of its prudent men shall be hid'.²

It is not only with regard to punishment, however, that the ways and thoughts of God are hidden from men. Because the thoughts of God are the works of his power, to that same extent they are beyond the compass of man. The quotation from the second Isaiah with which we began appears, it is true, in a context in which Yahweh is insisting on repentance and in which the 'way' and the 'thoughts' of the wicked are excoriated. Yet it is not actually to contrast sinners with the sinless One that it is said, 'My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways'. Rather, this follows simply from the fact that 'As high as the heavens are above the earth, so high are my ways above your ways and my thoughts above your thoughts'. 'What eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor ever entered in the heart of man, this God has prepared for those who love him'.³ The prophet of the exile speaks of a way and a thought of Yahweh which has not yet come into the experience of his people, but which surely will.⁴ What he is insisting on is the unexpectedness of the event and the inability of man to attain it by his own devices, since it lies outside the analogy of his experience. 'Who would believe what we have heard? To whom has the arm of Yahweh been revealed?'⁵

The recognition of God's ways, of God's thoughts, is always, therefore, a grace, an act of the divine power by which man is accorded something that is not rightly his, to which he could neither aspire nor of which he could in the first place deprive himself, since it was never within his grasp. It is only by the gracious action of God that man can know the ways of God, to walk therein. It is only by this gracious action that he can be made privy to the thoughts of

¹ Mic 4, 12.

² Isai 29, 13f.

³ 1 Cor 2, 9; Cf Isai 64, 3 which Paul is paraphrasing.

⁴ Cf Isai 55, 11.

⁵ Isai 53, 1.

God. And this occurs when God admits man into his *sod*, that is to say, into his 'council', his comradeship. The false prophets, says Jeremiah, they who lead the people astray speaking their own word and not the word of the Lord, have not stood in the *sod* of Yahweh.¹ But on the contrary, Yahweh does nothing without revealing his *sod* to his true prophets.² Furthermore, this intimacy with Yahweh is not reserved to those alone who have been touched by the spirit of prophecy. It is God's gift to all who are faithful to the covenant in which he has bestowed his grace: 'Good and upright is Yahweh, therefore he instructs sinners in the way. He guides the humble in *mishpat*, and teaches the humble his way. All the paths of Yahweh are steadfast love and fidelity to those who keep his covenant and his decrees . . . When a man fears Yahweh he will instruct him in the way he should choose . . . Yahweh's *sod* is for those who fear him, and his covenant is to make him known to them'.³

Among the many terms which the Old Testament uses to designate the revelation of the divine will, two are important enough to demand our attention: *mishpat* and the concept of the divine word.

Mishpat is the noun of action derived from the verb *shaphat*. Because the latter has consistently been translated 'to judge', the former is frequently given the basic translation 'judgment'. And, as a matter of fact, *mishpat* does have as one of its meanings the decision reached in a court of law. However, it would be an error to conclude that in the many uses it finds in the Old Testament all other senses are simply extensions of the juridical sense or metaphors related to it. *Mishpat* has a much more primary significance than that of 'judgment'.

The verb *shaphat* implies sovereign rule in a way that includes its judicial exercise without being exhausted by it. The Old Testament *shopphetim*, however, whom we call 'judges', were certainly not in biblical tradition even primarily those who handed down decisions of law. Something more is involved than merely 'rule'; or perhaps it would be better said that the ancient meaning of 'rule' is involved rather than the mere 'reign' to which we might be tempted to reduce the idea. 'Vindicate' might be a better approximation of the meaning. A ruler was, pre-eminently, the one who vindicated right and justice, who protected the poor and oppressed, who righted wrongs and made justice triumph. That is the kingly ideal reflected in canaanite literature of 1500 B.C. and in the bible. It lies behind

¹ Jer 23, 18.

² Amos 3, 7.

³ Ps 25, 8-10, 12, 14.

the messianic expectation of the Old Testament.

Mishpat is accordingly sometimes translated 'justice', that is, the doing of justice. This will be correct, of course, depending on whose *mishpat* is in question and in what connection. The *mishpat* of the king of which Samuel speaks¹ is obviously not a regimen of justice, nor is the *mishpat* of the prophets of Baal.² But the *mishpat* of Yahweh is justice, righteousness, for it is the way of God: 'The way of Yahweh, the *mishpat* of their God'.³ The judgment of Yahweh is always justice, while that of earthly rulers is too often its very opposite.⁴ His judgment may be a repudiation of the unworthy.⁵ But for those who are truly his, it is always grace and mercy and all blessings, the divine action in history revealing himself and his ways.⁶

The God who reveals his way and his thoughts by the same token reveals his *mishpat*, his judgment, his regimen, the very norm of his being. It is part of the bridal gift with which he has dowered Israel in its covenant-marriage.⁷ Accordingly, he who would be faithful to the covenant of his God has no choice but to make it the norm of his own being. Yahweh wants, rather than empty sacrifices, that '*mishpat* may surge like waters, and justice like an ever-flowing wadi!'⁸ The way to God is through covenant fidelity and *mishpat*;⁹ it is a path that is to be found only in Yahweh.¹⁰ In a fine play on words Isaiah tells of Yahweh who planted Israel as a vine, looking for a yield of *mishpat* only to be rewarded with bloodshed (*mispah*).¹¹

From this it is easy to see in what sense the commandments of Yahweh to Israel are known as his *mishpatim*. Though, as a matter of fact, many of these laws had been formulated in consuetudinary law and the judgments of israelite tribunals, they were recognized as *mishpatim* of the Yahwistic covenant, because in them Yahweh had communicated his *mishpat*; he had thus ruled Israel and he thus continued to rule Israel.

And, finally, the word. Continuing the poem with which we began, 'My thoughts are not your thoughts . . .', the second Isaiah quotes the Lord: 'For just as the rain and snow come down from the heavens and return not, but water the earth, making it bear and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, thus shall my word be: It shall go forth from my mouth not to return to me empty, but it shall do what I have willed, it shall succeed in what I have

¹ 1 Sam 8, 11.

⁴ Prov 29, 26.

⁷ Hos 2, 21f.

¹⁰ Isai 40, 14.

² 1 Kg 18, 28.

⁵ Ezek 7, 3, 8, 27 etc.

⁸ Amos 5, 24.

¹¹ Isai 5, 7.

³ Jer 5, 4f.

⁶ Isai 30, 18-21.

⁹ Hos 12, 7.

sent it to do'.¹ The word of God is the divine power itself, the 'actualization' in time of God's thoughts.

The Old Testament has two ways of expressing what has been indifferently translated 'word' by the Septuagint and subsequent versions. A distinction between the expressions is not, for that matter, always maintained in the Hebrew Bible itself, or it might be more correct to say that the stronger of the expressions has extended its meaning to the concept as a whole. One of the expressions (*'omer*, *'imrah*) denotes the act of speech, and the word, therefore, as an utterance. It is the other, *dabar*, which has some basic significance of 'backness', 'innerness', that refers to the word as a reality, a force. As Fr. John McKenzie has aptly put it, the sense is 'to get behind and push'. It is this strong meaning of word that has prevailed in the Bible and given it such a fulness of meaning that we sometimes find puzzling when we compare it with our ways of thought.

For the word of God is creative power: 'By the word of Yahweh the heavens were made; by the breath of his mouth all their host!'² 'The word of Yahweh' is pre-eminently the prophetic word, which we should never imagine to have meant for its contemporaries thoughts, hopes, or aspirations. When Ahab greeted Elijah as 'You troubler of Israel'³ it was in tribute to the efficacy of his prophetic word that had shut up the heavens against Israel's sins: 'As Yahweh the God of Israel lives, before whom I stand, there shall be neither dew nor rain these years, except by my word!'⁴ The law of God is his word: the decalogue is the *asereth had-debarim*, the 'ten words', the very covenant with Yahweh himself.⁵ The word of Yahweh continues to give life to the world and man which he has created: 'man lives by what proceeds from the mouth of Yahweh'.⁶

Of all the expressions we could consider, doubtless the 'word' is the most inclusive and the most filled with meaning. Furthermore, it is the word which has proved, in the end, to be the most surprising of all God's ways. 'Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this word which has come to pass, which the Lord made known to us'.⁷ The prophets – whatever later generations may have thought about their intimacy with the ways of God – never suffered any illusions concerning their limited possession of the word of the Lord. They would have been the first to agree with the author of Hebrews that God had spoken through them 'in fragmentary and varied fashion'.⁸ Not even those most enlightened in the ways of God were prepared

¹ Isai 55, 10f.

² Ps 33, 6.

³ 1 Kg 18, 17.

⁴ 1 Kg 17, 1.

⁵ Deut 4, 13.

⁶ Deut 8, 3.

⁷ Lk 2, 15.

⁸ Heb 1, 1.

for the final form which the word took on in its coming from God and appearing among men: 'The Word became flesh!'¹ 'The law (which was also God's word) was given through Moses; grace and truth came to be through Jesus Christ',⁴ who alone has revealed God in all fulness.

We do wrong if we succumb to the temptation of western minds to treat the johannine *Logos* as a metaphysical expression of the divine nature of Christ. It does express his divinity; this is obvious. But it does so as the introduction to a gospel, the good news which is the culmination and climax of *Heilsgeschichte*. The deliberate way in which the prologue to John's gospel evokes the creation narrative of Genesis is no mere literary device. The same creative word which first appeared in human history bringing man into being, which gave him a hope beyond his nature and imposed on him a commensurate way of life, found its insurpassable expression in the Word made man, who has reconstituted mankind and revealed to him the divine glory as the life, the truth, and the way. The Christ-event, -word, -reality is no mere concept or idea to be grasped by the mind alone; it is the definitive breaking-in of God into man's affairs, demanding the commitment of man's mind and will and his whole being.

When we survey the Old Testament's varied ways of considering the will of God, we find that they converge in a consistent affirmation which can be viewed from many angles. The divine will is power, act, doing. It demands on man's part a reciprocal doing which is not contrary to his nature, but which his nature alone could never discover for him. It is in this doing alone that he fulfils his nature and properly evaluates his place in creation. As Walther Eichrodt has written: 'Here the natural harmony between the outer and the inner life, between nature and spirit, was broken, and there followed a general devaluation of the gifts of creation in face of the one infinitely valuable and irreplaceable good, the community of the will of God . . . Man sees himself pressed to the limit of his earthly existence by the divine demand, and directed towards a new order whose only assurance lies in the promise of God'. The ways of God take man on an adventure in which God alone is the guide. That he is known to be a sure guide does not lessen the element of adventure, for in these ways man walks not by sight but in faith. He walks into the unknown, by ways he could never find One thing only he does know, that it is this adventure that is the meaning of life.

¹ Jn 1, 14.

² Jn 1, 18f.