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A table of contents for *The Expository Times* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expository-times_01.php

pdfs are named: [Volume]_[Issue]_[1st page of article].pdf

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ADONI-BEZEK AND JUSTICE

(Judges 17).

THIS incident is not to be explained as a piece of primitive morality which has been outgrown by the principles enunciated by Christ.

Its roots strike deeper, for the truth it embodies is the foundation of all life and society. It expresses the human instinct for justice, and the belief that somehow or other God finds expression for it in His providence. It not only applies to kings, but to them conspicuously and specially.

Most probably the cutting away of the thumbs and great toes of conquered kings may have been a contemporary custom sanctioned by the need of crippling the best warriors in order to the preservation of peace. That of itself would explain the action of the Israelites. But the fact that the king himself had practised it on his enemies is the Israelites' defence in this case. The law—not of Israel only but of natural justice—was an eye for an eye. If Israel had law, this man like all the heathen had a conscience. Though seventy kings had been crippled by him so that they could neither march well, nor pull the bowstring, nor grasp sword and spear, he may have acted not from mere cruelty, but from prudence and habit. At any rate, his conscience had not become altogether insensible, and he acknowledged the righteousness of the treatment meted out to him. It was only just that as he had been accustomed to treat others, so he himself should be treated when his turn came.

Now the Israelites might have done nothing to him, or they might have killed him. But neither of these would have been just; the one would have erred by defect and the other by excess, the one in weakness and the other in severity. Neither would have served the highest spiritual purposes as this did. The one would have left him unmoved, whilst the other would have cut him off from improvement. But this treatment roused in the man a sense of the nearness of God, of the reality of His providence in the moral government of men, and of personal responsibility toward Him. In fact here was repentance begun, and with it confession made of sin.

Thus far the result of applying justice was best; it was a gospel, the only one, too, which was possible in the circumstances. But the history not only tells us of the best results immediately; it hints at the possibility of still better afterwards. That the Israelites were not animated by cruelty is clear not only because they did not kill this king, but because though they cut off his thumbs and great toes they treated him kindly. He who in the pride of his heart had made the mutilated monarchs gather their food from crumbs under his table was not caused to suffer such indignity in his turn. Justice was tempered with mercy. He was well fed and cared for in Jerusalem for the remainder of his days. True, he gives no sign at first that he repented of his pride and torture, but he had time, and no means was more likely to rouse in him some sense of the grace of this people's God than such action on the part of the triumphing nation. The result is not mentioned. But mercy has meaning after justice is satisfied, if not before; and if anything could have brought to ripeness the impressions produced at first, it must have been the line of treatment adopted toward him.

Justice followed by mercy is the highest gospel. But mercy is weak where justice is absent. The foundation of sure mercy must be in justice; for only then will its quality and its results be moral.

AGAG—JUDGMENT

(1 Sam. 15⁸³).

When Israel passed through the wilderness of Rephidim, Amalek attacked him. The attack was markedly cruel. It was delivered when Israel was weak; it was specially pointed against the weaklings and laggards of the rear.

The Israelites were repeatedly commanded to remember the occurrence and in due time to wipe out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven. Now that Israel had a king, the time had come, and the command laid on Saul enjoined a thorough extirpation: 'Go and smite Amalek and utterly destroy all that they have, and spare them not; but slay both man and woman, infant and suckling, ox and sheep, camel and ass.'

The sin of Saul consisted in the first instance in his yielding only partial and interested obedience. The sin of Agag consisted in his adoption of the ancestral policy of his people—bloodshed and cruelty—and in his holding to it after long experience of it and the enlightenment of a later age, which must have made its evil clearer, but had only indurated him to an exaggeration of it. As Samuel said, 'Thy sword hath made many mothers childless.' For as a man's character descends, and the tone of his house infallibly affects his children, so in the case of features of national life. And history becomes cumulative. No man lives to himself. Responsibility becomes greater with the years. The blood of all the prophets came on the generation that crucified Christ. A nation has an individuality of its own and is treated according to it.

One cannot look at the history of Prussia without noticing in the line of its rulers the same policy of cruelty and meanness in war, followed too faithfully by its people. They have been quick always to seize opportunity of personal advantage and to push it to success in the most unprincipled manner. Like Amalek, they regarded not God, and served the law of selfishness by cunning and physical force only.

The responsibility for the past does not die out with those who created it; it rests on the head of the representative of the day; and in the king as the origin of its policy may be found the representative person against whom is expressed the detestation of the human conscience as to it.

The past does not excuse even if it explain the present. It emphasizes and exaggerates. The past of a people belongs to it as really as the past of a person, and is embodied by it; and it must bear the responsibility.

For the safety of mankind those who know no rule but selfishness and cunning and physical force have their doom pronounced here. For them there is no mercy, and their name is to be blotted out from beneath heaven. In some ways Saul as well as Agag has features akin to those of the late ruler of Germany and his followers. He had an eye to the spoil. He had no appreciation of God's command and no detestation of his enemy's policy. He had no sympathy with God's whole-hearted hatred of such doings, no fear of the remains of such a people left to be his neighbours, of the danger, of the infection it might prove, of the

necessity of purging it from the earth. But this characteristic desire of loot which was so clear in Saul is joined in the modern instance with the cruelty and bloodthirstiness found in Agag.

Saul also showed deceit; for he denied sparing the spoil and failing to carry out God's command; temporizing, as he offered excuse after excuse; shifting the blame on to others, though he must have been pre-eminently responsible; and thinking more of his throne and of appearances before the people than of his soul and the judgment of God upon his action. Thus, curiously, still further Germany finds its character in Agag and Saul.

It is interesting to mark the difference of their ends. Saul had not spared Agag because of any sentiment of mercy; for he had slain the people and kept the best of the spoil. It may be that he had some sympathy for Agag as a king, being one himself, and fearful of his new-found dignity, though without any appreciation of it as the trust of God to him. Samuel stretched the matter to the utmost in sparing him meantime as the anointed of God, and leaving him to God's judgment in due time.

But the thing was different in the case of Agag. His kingship was only by inheritance; it brought with it no excuse of sanctity, seeing its power had been abused. Agag was but an individual who represented the encrusted evil of generations of his people. If they perished, much more should he.

Also regard must be had to Samuel's character. He had been brought up in immoral surroundings in Eli's day, and his character had become stiffened into loyalty to God. And now when he saw Agag coming walking delicately or mincingly toward him, when he heard him say, like the German 'kamerad,' surely the bitterness of death is past, his whole soul revolted and he rushed at him, hacked him to pieces, and executed the judgment of the Lord.

It is quite clear that Agag's case was worse than that of Adoni-bezek, and deserved a different end. The latter's apparent cruelty was perhaps only a customary policy. He lived in a different and earlier generation. He showed a disposition totally different from that of Agag when God inflicted his calamity.

Nothing but judgment, justice without mercy, was the doom of the Amalekites, and must be of all who stand where they did; and their king,

specially in his succession, represented their spirit and deserved, more than any, their doom.

ODED—JUDGMENT AND MERCY

(2 Chron. 28^o).

Oded was a prophet in Israel. Ahaz had misled Judah and caused her people to sin. For this God brought on them the armies of Damascus and of Israel. It could scarcely be expected that the former would perceive the spiritual implications of their action; the latter certainly did not; they let themselves loose in mere slaughter, or, as the prophet put it, 'in a rage that reacheth up to heaven.'

This instance differs from that of to-day inasmuch as the promoters of the war had succeeded, and the mere spirit of warfare which had impelled them to begin the war rendered them unfit to use their victory. They lacked spiritual motive and consequent self-restraint. They lacked the judicial faculty. They allowed themselves to be carried off on the tide of excitement, and to be ruled by their worst feelings.

They had more than exacted justice and imposed judgment. They had no thought of mercy, and had to be recalled to it, ere too late, by the prophet. He pointed out that God has an aim in punishing nations, and that they must regard themselves as instruments in His hands. He pointed out that our own sins must not be forgotten even when dealing with those of other people. God used imperfect people to punish others, and the sign that they are fit for the task is that they remember that. They may be less sinful than the others, but the occasion should just because of that quicken their conscience to greater sensitiveness. They ought not to deal with the affair as one personal to themselves and involving bitterness, which must involve injustice. Judgment, if it is to be just, must become the foundation of mercy.

And it is well at this stage to remember the worldliness and luxury, the pride, the growing immorality, and the class selfishness of Britain. In these sins her great continental enemy may be

deeper dyed. But 'are there not with you, even with you, sins against the Lord your God'? Britain may be thankful that amid the many provocations to a rage reaching up unto heaven, the knowledge that the contest was neither personal nor even national, but involving higher and wider spiritual issues, has enabled her soldiers to regulate their conduct and restrain their feelings even in victory. And is it not needful that her people should prove themselves worthy of such men by corresponding reform at home? For however much Germany has sinned, no less truly at least do we need many things to be reformed in our midst and to be renewed ourselves in the spirit of our mind. The prophet pointed out several lines along which the victor's rage might express its moderation.

First there was repatriation; for God is He 'who sets the prisoners free'; He loves liberty and gives it to all that they may come to their best. But the repatriation was to be in the right spirit—they arrayed them, gave them to eat and drink, carried all the feeble of them on asses, and brought them to their brethren at Jericho. At least the treatment of captives in Britain and in Germany has been a marked contrast to each other, and the return of the latter's prisoners in direct opposition to this great law.

Along with this was, from the same spirit, the example of charity and unselfishness. They took none of the spoil, but used it to clothe the naked and to give them food.

On the whole, the interests to be considered were not the pride of a people but the propagation of the Kingdom of God. Instead of leaving the peoples sundered, there was to be a new gospel of love with hands outstretched, for judgment had been executed and justice satisfied. And the Allies may rejoice that they now can fulfil the great injunction of their Lord, 'If thine enemy hunger, feed him.' Such conduct after a purely judicial line of action, contrasted with a rage reaching up to heaven, cannot fail of the best results in promoting that temper which should ensure for the future the best results in connexion with the League of Nations.