

THE ROLE and EFFECT of PUBLIC OPINION in
BIBLICAL SOCIETY

by

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DIGEST OR ABSTRACT

The purpose of my thesis is to examine the areas of biblical society where public opinion operated and to gauge its effectiveness. In order to gain a better understanding of public opinion I first consider the Origin and Role of Public Opinion. The tribe was the first structure of society where opinion was important. Since the people were in a close interaction, public opinion was an influence in the establishment of norms of behavior. The importance of public opinion extended from the tribal period into the nationalistic period; it served not only to prevent amoral behavior but also as an agency for judgment and punishment.

In the area of government, public opinion was a vital factor. The opinions of the people were voiced vociferously and listened to by their leaders and rulers. The entire group or individuals who represented the "group will" were the vehicles of expressing the opinions of the people.

Derision and scorn was another expression of public opinion. It was either directed against nations or individuals. Israel herself was often the target of reproach. The suffering servant songs of Isaiah are a salient example of this. On the other hand individuals such as Job and the prophets faced personal derision and ridicule.

In my dissertation I also devote a chapter to the factors the public utilizes to determine the achieved status

of an individual. In other words, what traits characterize attainment of honor or despisement.

The theological implications of public opinion are found in my discussion of the concept "for the sake of his name."

THEOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS OF PUBLIC OPINION AS DETERMINED BY INDIVIDUALS

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In my present study I intend to investigate the role and effect of public opinion in national society. My primary source will be the entire Old Testament.

INTRODUCTION


The general role of public opinion during the many centuries of history has captured the attention of governments and individuals. During the middle ages the role of the people was considered an important one. The popular saying of that time was "vox populi, vox dei". In the 17th century writers such as Voltaire, Hobbes, Locke and Hume spoke of the world as governed by opinion. Locke declared that opinion is one of the three categories of law. Hume on the other hand stated: "It is on opinion only that government is founded and this maxim extends to the most despotic and the most militaristic governments as to the most free and most popular." Rousseau also stated that the general will is the most just.¹

Today, more than at any other time of history, contemporary events highlight the importance of public opinion.

Two ideologies, which are gripped in mortal combat, are now operating in the world. One ideology bases its rationale upon the theory that public opinion is important and that government policy is made with the public in mind. In the other ideology an elite class rules. This class ignores public opinion and even devotes a considerable amount of time to prevent its expression.

In my present study I intend to investigate the role and effect of public opinion in biblical society. My primary source will be the entire Old Testament.

The Bible, as no other book, has acquired a certain sanctity in the minds of the reading public. It will be my task to investigate and report on the actual role that the people played during that period of our history. In my work I will deal with all aspects of public opinion, overt expressions of the public will, as well the more subtle expressions of public opinion. For instance preconceived modes of thought which effect public opinion. They are of vast importance in effectuating and influencing individual behavior and attitudes. My attempt is to present my material in a systemitized way and to deal with major categories.



NOTES

1. Childs, Harwood L., An Introduction to Public Opinion, John Wiley and Sons., p. 35, 36.

CHAPTER ONE

THE ORIGIN AND ROLE OF PUBLIC OPINION

Of course the earliest form of society as reflected in the Bible is the tribal society. What was the role of public opinion here? Indeed it would seem that since the people were in such constant interaction, it would only be natural that public opinion would be operative. This was the case. For the good of all there were certain accepted modes of behavior which were considered the norm and those who deviated from them would incur the wrath of public opinion.

The importance of this can not be minimized. Since public opinion was operative at an early time it was of course destined to reappear. "Group consciousness was primary in early Arabian life. In the struggle with the elements, with the animals, and with neighboring tribes, the tribe and not the individual, was always the vital interest."¹ Or as David Jacobson states in his book, The Social Background of the Old Testament, "The tribe is responsible for the actions of every individual. Public opinion is the only compulsion."² Whether they be tribe or nation, time and again, the people served as the law enforcement agency. Hence not only were there preventive aspects of public opinion but actually the public was utilized as a vehicle for law enforcement. If the "thou shalt nots" were disobeyed the people would punish the offenders. He tells them to

Public opinion functioned effectively by deterring certain types of behavior. It did this by establishing taboos and norms of behavior. Taboos were the established safeguards in primitive society and in due time came to be considered the dictates of the deity.

In the book of Genesis we first encounter an example where public opinion is operative as illustrated when Jacob seeks the hand of Rachel. Laban tricks him into marrying Leah and in reply to Jacob's question, "Why hast thou beguiled me,?" Laban answers: "It must not be done in our country to give the younger before the firstborn."³

Due to the fornication of Shechem with Dinah, Scripture reports that the wrath of the sons of Jacob was aroused because: "He had wrought folly in Israel in lying with Jacob's daughter, which thing ought not to have been done."⁴ Even when Shechem offered to take Dinah for his wife he was refused on the grounds that to give her to an uncircumcised man would be a reproach.⁵

Later in the book of Genesis, when the touching reunion of Joseph and his brothers is described Joseph and his brothers are forced to eat separately for "the Egyptians might not eat bread with the Hebrews for that is an abomination."⁶ Again near the end of the book we have an example of the widespread public opinion held in Egypt against shepherds. This is revealed from Jacob's instructions to his family when they go before the Pharaoh. He tells them to

lie about their occupation for "every shepherd is an abomination unto the Egyptians."⁷

In the story of Moses's and Aaron's negotiations with the Pharaoh, the Pharaoh offers them the compromise solution that the Jews sacrifice to Jahveh in the land of Egypt. However both Moses and Aaron refuse on the grounds that Egyptian public opinion would be against them and they and their people would be stoned.⁸

Public sentiment indeed operated in the area of sexual relations. Tamar is unsuccessful in her attempts to ward off her half brother though she pleaded with Amnon "that no such thing ought to be done in Israel."⁹

Public opinion as it operated in the legal field was somewhat varied. Often a transgression would be deterred because of the threat of reprisal by the people. In the book of Leviticus it is mentioned that Moses admonishes the people that they should not blaspheme because the penalty would be stoning by the populace.¹⁰ Also Leviticus prescribes the same punishment for anyone giving child sacrifices to Molech.¹¹ In Deuteronomy stoning is threatened for idolatrous practices¹² and as a punishment against the child who is rebellious against his parents.¹³

The fact that the threat of public reprisal would be carried out can clearly be seen from other passages. In Leviticus 24:23 the blasphemer is brought outside of the camp and then stoned to death by the people. Also when

Achan took the devoted thing the whole people of Israel stoned
 14
 and burned him.

1. Matthews, I. J., The Religious Pilgrimage of Israel,
 Harper and Brothers, New York, 1907, p. 11.
2. Jacobson, David, The Social Background of the Old Testa-
ment, Hebrew Union College Press, Cincinnati, 1907, p.
 111.
3. Genesis 24:10
4. Genesis 24:11
5. Genesis 24:12
6. Genesis 24:13
7. Genesis 24:14
8. Genesis 24:15
9. 11 Samuel 1:12
10. Leviticus 24:13
11. Leviticus 24:14
12. Deuteronomy 17:16
13. Deuteronomy 21:132
14. Joshua 7:25

NOTES

1. Matthews, I. J., The Religious Pilgrimage of Israel, Harper and Brothers, New York, 1957, p.14.
 2. Jacobson, David, The Social Background of the Old Testament, Hebrew Union College Press, Cincinnati, 1942, p. 114.
 3. Genesis 29:26
 4. Genesis 34:7
 5. Genesis 34:14
 6. Genesis 43:32
 7. Genesis 46:34
 8. Exodus 8:22
 9. II Samuel 13:12
 10. Leviticus 24:23
 11. Leviticus 20:2
 12. Deuteronomy 17:5
 13. Deuteronomy 21:18² - 21
 14. Joshua 7:25
- Ruth (4:1-2) tells of the summoning of such a legal assembly. Boaz is concerned with his right to purchase Naomi's field and to marry Ruth since there is a closer kinsman who is living in the city. Therefore he goes to the gate of the city and summons at random ten men to witness his case. The closer relative is present and since he withdraws his right to the field, Ruth and the field are his. Yet, though the matter was actually a private one, an assembly had to be called.

The legal assembly seemingly was convoked when the

CHAPTER TWO

described in Jeremiah 25, give us a very good insight into

PUBLIC OPINION AS AN AGENCY FOR JUDGING

how the assembly operated, Jeremiah 26, and 1 Kings 12.

Important aspects in any legal system are the preventive laws which act as a threat to the would be offender and the possible resulting penalties. Yet there is another component in any system; that is the provision of individuals or groups who will sit in judgment.

Regardless of the reason, though Ludwig Kohler in his book, Hebrew Man claims law and judging was a way of developing community solidarity,¹ nevertheless it can quickly be seen that the people's role was a very active one rather than a passive one.

Examples of the populace gathering together for judging purposes are numerous. The legal assembly was one of the main ways the people sat in judgment.

The book of Ruth (4:1-2) tells of the summoning of such a legal assembly. Boaz is concerned with his right to purchase Naomi's field and to marry Ruth since there is a closer kinsman who is living in the city. Therefore he goes to the gate of the city and summons at random ten men to witness his cause. The closer relative is present and since he withdraws his right to the field, Ruth and the field are his. Yet, though the matter was actually a private one, it disturbs the well-being of the group itself. The assembly had to be called.

There often comes a point when there is a quarrel, and even in some circumstances its existence is so great that the legal assembly seemingly was convoked when the

occasion warranted it. The trial of Jeremiah, that is described in Jeremiah 26, gives us a very good insight into how the assembly operated. Jeremiah had hardly finished an address in which he forecast destruction for Jerusalem unless the people reformed when the various elements of society - the nobles, priests and populace - cried forth that he should be put to death for his treasonous words. When news of the commotion had spread other leaders arrived and an impromptu court was formed. The charge against Jeremiah was leveled against him, an opportunity for his rebuttal was offered and ^{verdict was rendered} sentence was decreed by the entire group of people assembled. In this instance a "not guilty" verdict, of course, was rendered by those who were assembled there.

The assembly met when there was a need for it to meet; and, it met to decide cases involving inheritance rights as well as cases which were punishable by death. It seems that if at any time there was a matter of dispute between two individuals they could resort to the assembly for judication on the matter. The people of the towns were happy to respond and considered this an important aspect of their communal obligations. The people's feeling toward the assembly might well be the following:

There often comes a point when there is a conflict of two members of the group which disturbs the well-being of the group itself. The group is disturbed, irritated by the quarrel, and even in some circumstances its existence is endangered. Then it intervenes, and makes the

quarrel its own and settles it in such a way as to accommodate the ~~desires~~ desires of all parties in so far as it is desirable. This intervention is the duty of the legal assembly. It grows out of a practical need. It does not go beyond this in actions nor in its outlooks. It intervenes when it must, but does not intervene any further than it must. It has no desire to produce systematic law.²

Everyone who had the status of citizen, in other words the legal right could sit in judgment. Actually though, judging was often considered an aspect of helping rather than of condemnation. For instance in Isaiah 1:17 the prophet urges the people to "judge the fatherless."

The scene of the meetings of the assembly was usually the gate of the city. This is evident in Ruth 4:1 and in Deuteronomy 17:5f where the suspected idolater is brought to the gate for judgment.

Additional examples where the people were an important role in the judging process can be found when a city is tried after an unknown slain man is found nearby³ and in the case of Jeremiah's second trial.⁴ *The final (26.11) is cleared*

Hence it can be seen that the people and their opinions mattered a great deal in biblical society. It was not by the somewhat passive vote that the people participated in their communal life. Actually, for all intents and purposes, they were participants in the judging process being a vital, necessary, and important part of the governmental machinery. They cherished this right and responded to the

obligations that accompanied it.

NOTES

1. Kohler, Ludwig, Hebrew Man, S C M Press Ltd., London, 1956, p.150f.
2. ibid., p.154-155.
3. Deuteronomy 21:4f. - 8
4. Jeremiah 38:4

When they left Egypt, the Israelites, filled with the disobedience of Pharaoh, had accepted their own desperate abandonment of God. From the outset the people grew restless under the strain and made their feelings known. For them the deliverance was back on the role of tyrant driving them forward seemingly with no purpose or goal in mind.

At the sea known as Marah due to the bitterness of the water, the people cried forth in despair. When they reached the wilderness of Sin they again made their feelings known and murmured against Moses because of the lack of bread.³ Again as they continued their journey through the desert and finally reached Rephidim, they murmured against Moses because of their dire thirst and lack of water.⁴ What is significant is that in each case their overt feelings do not go unanswered. Scripture records Moses as taking heed of

CHAPTER THREE

THE ROLE OF PUBLIC OPINION IN THE GOVERNMENT

The leaders and rulers often felt the weight of public opinion. This dates back even into early times. In the desert wanderings the people's opinion had to be reckoned with. While they were in Egypt before the Exodus, Moses intervened for the people but instead of causing relief from their arduous tasks his intercession with the Pharaoh actually increased their rigor. After they left the Pharaoh's palace¹ they were met by the masses and severely criticized.

When they left Egypt on their hasty flight, though the blessedness of freedom was accorded them their desperate impoverishment overshadowed it. From the outset the people grew restless under the strain and made their feelings known. For them the deliverer Moses took on the role of tyrant driving them forward seemingly with no purpose or goal in mind.

At the site known as Marah due to the bitterness of the water, the people cried forth² in despair. When they reached the wilderness of Sin they again made their feelings known³ and murmured against Moses because of the lack of bread. Again as they continued their journey through the desert and finally reached Rephidim, they murmured against Moses because of their dire thirst and lack of water.⁴ What is significant is that in each case their overt feelings do not go unanswered. Scripture records Moses as taking heed of

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tradition

their opinion. In each instance the intercession of God is sought and relief is obtained first by Moses being able to cast a tree into the waters which made the waters sweet, then by the appearance of Manna on the ground and finally by Moses smiting the rock which resulted in a flow of water. But the people's expression of their will was not merely confined to discontent at their stricken condition. In the story of the building of the golden calf it indeed was a decisive element. Aaron is pictured as a helpless leader who is overcome by mob sentiment. We read that when Moses delayed in coming down the people converged upon Aaron. They forced him to sanction the building of the golden calf. In Aaron's own words he apologizes to Moses but admitted he was only a pawn of the people. "And Aaron said, Let not the anger of my lord wax hot: thou knowest the people, that they are set on mischief."

But the opposition manifested by the people toward their leaders continued and extended beyond the desert period. Though Samuel was displeased at the prospect of choosing a king the overwhelming public opinion forced him to do so.

Concerning the role of the people in the Hebrew Monarchy, Edward McNall Burns's Western Civilizations, Their History and Their Culture said:

Nevertheless it is undeniably true that this

code (referring to the D code) did provide for more political and social democracy than the laws of any other Oriental nation with the exception of the Egyptian. Even the king himself was forbidden to accumulate great wealth or to indulge in ostentatious luxury. No military despotism of the Babylonian type was to be tolerated. The king was not above the law but very definitely subject to it; he was required to have constantly with him a copy of the code and to "Read therein all the days of his life... that his heart be not lifted up above his brethern, and that he turn not aside from the commandment." (Deut. 17:18-20) Moreover, his power and that of his officers was strictly limited. The administration of justice was left almost entirely in the hands of the people. The conscription of labor for foreign service was also prohibited, and exemption from military duty was required to be granted to the man who had built a new house, planted a new vineyard or married a new wife.¹¹

The hope that the king must rule within the limits of public approval is expressed by Isaiah when he says: "Behold a king shall reign in righteousness and as for princes they shall rule in justice."¹²

During the various reigns of monarchs the voice of public opinion was heard. It might be said that the earlier prophets were the communicating medium for this opinion. In the persons of Nathan and Elijah they actually condemned monarchs for acts which the people themselves held in disrepute, i.e. the sending of a husband forth¹³ to be killed¹⁴ and interference with the laws of inheritance. Perhaps as no other leader David portrays the Bible's great emphasis on the role of public opinion. The rights of the sovereign were strictly limited by public opinion, which was fearlessly

voiced. There was the basic idea of a covenant between the king and the people. We find none of the unbridled absolutism usually associated with the oriental leader. Even if the king could covet the wife of one of his subjects, he did not dare to seize her from her husband. He had to get rid of him by a subterfuge, which in itself demonstrates the limitations imposed upon his rights. When Nathan arraigned him for his conduct, he did not give vent to his anger though he could not give a satisfactory answer. Likewise in the story of Ahab and Naboth's vineyard Ahab did not take over the field directly but he also had to employ more subtle means.

That the people were never so much enslaved as to lose all their sense of dignity and right before the king is seen at the ascension of Rehoboam to the throne. The people had chafed under the yoke of Solomon; their patience had reached the breaking point. They would tolerate no further abuse. Therefore they came before Rehoboam for relief from their oppression and they rebelled when none was given. ¹⁵

I have shown a very democratic relationship between the king and his people. There was a basic agreement between the ruler and his subjects. It is no surprise that Solomon ¹⁶ prays for an understanding heart rather than riches. The high ideals expressed in the Bible were a basis for the constitutional idea of government.

Charges of abuses were laid directly before the

have 7
sovereign. We even record of one segment of the population bringing public opinion to bear on another segment of society.

1. Exodus 5:20
After the Jews returned from exile the wealthier classes
2. Exodus 15:23
were impoverishing the poorer classes by charging usurious
3. Exodus 16:2
rates of interest. The feeling of the lower rungs of society
4. Exodus 17:2
was made known to Nehemiah and he corrected the exploitative
5. Exodus 17:15:25
practices.

6. Exodus 17:18

7. Exodus 17:57

8. Exodus 32:11

9. Exodus 33:22

10. I Samuel 8:11

11. Burns, Edward McCall, Western Civilizations and Their History
and Their Culture, Boston, 1907, p.173.

12. Isaiah 32:1

13. II Samuel ch.11

14. I Kings ch.21

15. I Kings 12:13

16. I Kings 3:19

17. Nehemiah 5:17

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1. Exodus 5:20
 2. Exodus 15:23
 3. Exodus 16:2
 4. Exodus 17:2
 5. Exodus 15:25
 6. Exodus 16:4
 7. Exodus 17:5f
 8. Exodus 32:1f
 9. Exodus 32:22
 10. I Samuel 8:4f
 11. Burns, Edward McNall, Western Civilizations Their History and Their Culture, Norton, 1947, p.123.
 12. Isaiah 32:1
 13. II Samuel ch.11
 14. I Kings ch.21
 15. I Kings 12:3f
 16. I Kings 3:9
 17. Nehemiah 5:1f
- which became a target of mockery and scorn of those who pass by: "All that pass by clap their hands at thee; they hiss and wag their head at the daughter of Jerusalem, saying, Is this the city that was called the perfection of beauty, the joy of the whole earth? All thine enemies have opened their mouth against thee: they hiss and gnash the teeth; they say we have swallowed her up; certainly this is the day we looked

CHAPTER FOUR

PUBLIC OPINION AS DERISION DIRECTED AGAINST NATIONS

Israel is often spoken as destined to be or as having been the recipient of public derision. There are many passages in which Israel is pictured as destined for derision and scorn. The prophet Jeremiah prophesies that the city of Jerusalem will be a desolate city and "everybody that passeth thereby shall be astonished and hiss because of all the plagues thereof."¹ In chapter 22 verse 8, Jeremiah pictures the people that pass by the ruins of Jerusalem asking in astonishment why a great city such as Jerusalem had fallen.

For the moral and idolatrous sins of Jerusalem the prophet Ezekiel warns that in the future only reproach will be meted out to the city: "Therefore shall I make thee a reproach unto the heathen, and a mocking to all countries. Those that be near, and those that be far from thee, shall mock thee, thou defiled of name and full of tumult!"²

In Lamentations the author pictures a deserted city which becomes a target of mockery and scorn by those who pass by: "All that pass by clap their hands at thee; they hiss and wag their head at the daughter of Jerusalem, saying, Is this the city that men call the perfection of beauty, The joy of the whole earth? All thine enemies have opened their mouth against thee: they hiss and gnash the teeth; they say we have swallowed her up; certainly this is the day we looked

for; we have found, we have seen it."³

In the suffering servant songs of the prophet Isaiah the people Israel is pictured as having faced the scorn of others: "I gave my back to them that smote me, my cheek to those who plucked it. I hid not my face, from insult and spittle."⁴ He was despised and ignored by men, a man of pains, familiar with sickness, one to look away from, despised we took no account of him."⁵

Yet Israel is not the only nation which receives public scorn and mockery. There are many cases cited where other nations are mentioned. Most of these are enemies of Israel who because of their treatment of Israel are singled out as targets for reproach. Almost all of the instances of this nature are secondary and apocalyptic.

In the 49th chapter of Jeremiah the doom of Ammon and the doom of Edom is prophesied. Public derision will accompany their destruction. For in the case of Ammon she is to become "small among the nations and despised among men"⁶ and concerning Edom everyone that goes by will hiss because of its plagues.⁷ Babylon too is destined for destruction and afterwards it is to become a "dwelling place for jackals, an astonishment, and a hissing without an inhabitant."⁸

In Nahum's condemnation of Nineveh and the prophecy of its destruction again the role of public opinion is mentioned. Chapter 3:5 mentions that the nations will see her nakedness and kingdoms her shame. And in chapter 3:19

everyone who hears the report of her destruction is reported
as clapping their hands.

1. Jeremiah 2:18

2. Ezekiel 22:4,5

3. Lamentations 2:15,16

4. Isaiah 50:5

5. Isaiah 53:1

6. Jeremiah 4:18

7. Jeremiah 49:17

8. Jeremiah 51:17

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1. Jeremiah 19:8
2. Ezekiel 22:4,5
3. Lamentations 2:15,16
4. Isaiah 50:5
5. Isaiah 53:3
6. Jeremiah 49:15
7. Jeremiah 49:17
8. Jeremiah 51:37

Perhaps the greatest reason for the persistence of public criticism in biblical society, was the fact that it is often the people who do not conform to the will of the will, and who do not lower their standards, who fall prey to the error and ridicule of the masses. This was true in the case of the prophets. They expounded a message, which ran counter to the will of the majority, who were primarily concerned with attainment of the most material wealth possible without concern for the means used to achieve this end. It was only inevitable that the prophets would be laid bare to scorn and derision. Though they realized that their task was a difficult one yet time and again the effect of adverse public opinion took its toll upon them. The fact that the prophets were perhaps the most sensitive individuals in society only

CHAPTER FIVE

PUBLIC OPINION AS DERISION AGAINST INDIVIDUALS

The desire for the favorable opinion of others is one of the strongest needs of human beings. This craving has been inherent in man from time immemorial. We find, in biblical society, many instances of society's denial of general approval and the effect it has upon individuals.

In the fourth chapter of Genesis the threat of an adverse public opinion which would prevent him from becoming a permanent settler is given as the most drastic aspect of Cain's punishment after he had slain his brother.¹

Perhaps though, the group which received the brunt of public derision in biblical society, was the prophets. It is often the people who do not conform to the public will and who do not lower their ideals, ^{that} who fall prey to the scorn and ridicule of the masses. This was true (in the case) of the prophets. They expounded a message, which ran counter to the will of the majority, who were primarily concerned with attainment of the most material wealth possible without concern for the means used to achieve this end. It was only inevitable that the prophets would be laid bare to scorn and derision. Though they realized that their task was a difficult one yet time and again the effect of adverse public opinion took its toll upon them. The fact that the prophets were perhaps the most sensitive individuals in society only

increased their responsiveness to public opinion.

The prophet Jeremiah acknowledges the effect that public opinion has upon him and complains bitterly about it.

"Daily I have been an object of ridicule, everyone taunts me."² He considers himself a man of "strife and contention."³

So great is his anguish before the wave of hostile criticism that he curses the very day he was born⁴ and prays for revenge upon his enemies.⁵

Job also is depicted as a man who absorbs the crushing blows of public opinion. That these hostile barbs were matters of concern for Job can be seen from his own, anguished cries:

I am as one that is a laughing stock to his neighbor, A man that called upon God, and he answered him; The just the innocent man is a laughing stock.⁶

They have gaped upon me with their mouth; they have smitten me upon the cheek reproachfully; they have gathered themselves together against me.⁷

Surely there are mockers with me, And mine eye abideth in their provocation.⁸

How long will ye vex my soul and crush me with words.⁹

Public derision indeed had its effect. Individuals did feel the effect of public opinion. When they were not held in the highest esteem of society it grieved them as much as any physical hurt. Even the prophets who felt themselves divine messengers nevertheless cried forth their

feelings of despair and loneliness which were caused by public scorn and ridicule. Likewise public opinion as we have seen operated as derision against nations as well as individuals.

CHAPTER SIX

FACTORS THAT DETERMINE A PERSON'S STATUS

That the opinions of the public are instrumental in establishing a person's status in the community can easily be seen. Public opinion operated as a force in making a person honored and highly esteemed. One way to attain honor in the eyes of the public was to possess wisdom. "The wise shall inherit honor, but as for the fools, they carry away shame."¹ (refer also to Proverbs 3:16, 4:8, 8:18).

Honor is also designated for those who are humble. "He that is of lowly spirit shall attain honor."² (refer also to Proverbs 18:12) Leading a moral and just life was thought to play an important role in establishing a person as an honored and respected member of the community. "He that followeth after righteousness and mercy findeth honor."³ "A good name is better than precious oil."⁴ Righteousness is also set forth as a necessary requirement for a favorable national public opinion. "Righteousness exalteth a nation, but sin is a reproach to any people."⁵

Public opinion likewise accepted certain actions of individuals as proper. "The king that faithfully judgeth the poor: His throne shall be established forever."⁶ (refer also to Proverbs 17:28, 24:24f).

There are however many instances where public opinion condemned certain individuals. A thief would normally be

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to
fortitude

add
to
fortitude

ostracized; yet if he stole to satisfy his hunger he would
 not be condemned. ⁷ Other individuals such as the adulterer, ⁸
 the harlot, ⁹ the person who used his wisdom in a distorted
 sense, ¹⁰ and the unrighteous man of the community ¹¹ all were
 singled out as deserving an unfavorable public opinion.

Hence we have seen that public opinion did operate
 to determine what status the individual would attain in the
 community. A person could run the gamut from honor and esteem
 to despisement. [?] The type of conduct of an individual deter-
 mined exactly how society would view him. *contrast*

The fickleness of public opinion can best be seen by
 looking at the story of Job. Here we indeed see a man who
 is totally rejected by the community. God has removed his
 brethren from him, his acquaintances are estranged from him,
 his relatives and close friends have proven unfaithful and
 his servants consider him as a stranger. The servant who in
 former times would cater to his every wish no longer would
 answer him and he was abhorred by his wife. Job is even
 scorned and ridiculed by the street urchins. ¹²

This picture of complete rejection is indeed a decided
 contrast with the past. For then Job was one of the most
 honored men of the community. When he went forth to the gate
 of the city or when he sat down in the market the old men
 assembled stood up and princes refrained from talking.
 Everyone knew him as a person who helped the widow and the
 orphan and those who were physically handicapped such as

the lame and the blind. But Job was not only respected and honored for his charitable deeds but for his wisdom. The people thought of him as an intelligent man and sought out his advice.

Here in the book of Job we have depicted the unreliability of public opinion. A man who was acclaimed a righteous and intelligent person becomes an object of scorn and derision. Because of his financial losses and his physical afflictions the opinion of the people swings to the other side (of) the pendulum.

10. Proverbs 17:3b

11. Proverbs 18:3

12. Job 19:13f

13. Job 29:7f



CHAPTER NOTES

1. Proverbs 3:35
 2. Proverbs 29:23
 3. Proverbs 21:21.
 4. Ecclesiastes 7:1a
 5. Proverbs 14:34
 6. Proverbs 29:14
 7. Proverbs 6:30
 8. 6:32a, 33a
 9. Proverbs 2:16, 5:3, 5:30, 6:24, 7:5
 10. Proverbs 12:8b
 11. Proverbs 18:3
 12. Job 19:13f
 13. Job 29:7f
- This doctrine, "for the sake of his name", acknowledges that God cares about the fate of his people Israel. Indeed, when they are disgraced his name is profaned. "To profane the name of God is to defame him, to damage his reputation, and to lessen his prestige."
- We have several prophetic examples of God's resolve to help Israel not because of their own merit but "for the sake of his name." For if Israel is humbled their God is considered humbled. Therefore to preserve his reputation

CHAPTER SEVEN

GOD'S CONCERN ABOUT PUBLIC OPINION

Yet not only individuals and nations are concerned about public opinion. God himself is pictured as caring about the opinions of foreign nations. God in Numbers 14:11f refrains from destroying the rebellious people because of an appeal by Moses, an appeal based upon the premise that if God destroyed the people his fame would suffer. "Now if you kill this people as one man, then the nations which have heard the fame of thee will speak, saying: Because the Lord was not able to bring this people into the land which he swore unto them therefore he hath slain them in the wilderness."

The power to annihilate the Egyptians in one smashing blow is attributed to God; however the reason for his not doing so is that the successive plagues will be a sign of his great power and give him respect among the nations.

This doctrine, "for the sake of his name", acknowledges that God cares about the fate of his people Israel. Indeed) *because* when they are disgraced his name is profaned. "To profane the name of God is to defame him, to damage his reputation, and to lessen his prestige."

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among the peoples of the earth God replies that he will not forsake Israel.

This doctrine first appears in the book of Ezekiel.

As in Numbers, Ezekiel recounts the many acts of rebellion in the desert that went unpunished because God did not want his name profaned by the nations.³

In chapter 36, God speaks to the scattered, exiled Israelites. God promises them a return. "For I will take you from among the nations, and gather you out of all the countries, and will bring you into your own land." He does this only to recapture his lost reputation. "Therefore say unto the house of Israel. Thus saith the Lord God: I do not this for your sake, O house of Israel, but for my holy name, which hath been profaned among the nations, which you have profaned in the midst of them; and the nations shall know that I am the Lord."⁴

Chapter 39 of Ezekiel once again shows God as being concerned for his reputation. Here the prophet imagines that an attacking horde will come from the North against the restored nation but God intervenes so that his name will not be profaned among the nations.⁵

Second Isaiah also exhibits God's concern for a favorable public opinion. Total destruction will not befall (upon) Israel so that God may remain highly esteemed among the people's of the earth.

For my name's sake will I defer my anger,
 And for my praise will I refrain for thee,
 For mine own sake, for mine own sake, will I do it;
 For how should it be profaned?
 And my glory will I not give to another.⁶

1. *Ezekiel 36:22-23*
2. Blank, Sheldon, *Prophetic Faith in Isaiah*, Harper and Brothers, New York, 1927, p. 123f.

The later biblical writers wanted God to be a living reality in the hearts of all men. For these writers, God had to have a favorable public opinion in order to enhance his reputation. Therefore the people of Israel became a barometer indicating to the world whether God was active in the affairs of man. How he treated Israel was of cardinal importance. In the doctrine "for the sake of his name", God acts in behalf of himself to preserve a high esteem throughout the world.

NOTES

1. Exodus 9:14-16
2. Blank, Sheldon, Prophetic Faith in Isaiah, Harper and Brothers, New York, 1957, p.124f.
3. Ezekiel 20:21-22
4. Ezekiel 36:22f
5. Ezekiel 39:7
6. Isaiah 48:8,9

CONCLUSION

Throughout the many centuries of biblical life public opinion played a dominant role. In the sphere of government, the influence of public opinion extended from the early desert days until after the exile. The people censored leaders and rulers. A truly democratic spirit grew up between the people and their rulers. Public opinion deterred certain types of behavior and was an agency for judgment and punishment.

By means of the legal assembly, certain individuals who represented public sentiment and the group itself, the opinions of the people were made known.

Public opinion also operated in determining a person's status. Honor or despisement was granted by the people. The effectiveness of public opinion in this area can quickly be seen. Facing a hostile public opinion was one of the most severe tests for Job and the prophets.

In the doctrine of "for the sake of his name", the theological aspects of public opinion are expressed.

Contempt?

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6. The Old Testament, Jewish Publication Society, Philadelphia, 1917.