

*THE RISE AND DEVELOPMENT IN ISRAEL OF
THE BELIEF IN A FUTURE LIFE.¹*

MY object in the following study is to recount the rise and development in Israel of the doctrine of a blessed future life.

Whilst setting before you the main intellectual stages in this development, I wish it to be borne in mind that it cannot be explained on any purely natural hypothesis.

All true growth in religion, whether in the past or the present, springs from the communion of man with the immediate living God, wherein man learns the will of God, and becomes thereby an organ of God, a revealer of divine truth for men less inspired than himself. The truth thus revealed through man possesses a Divine authority for men. In the Old Testament we have a catena of such revelations. At the Exodus God took Israel, Semitic heathens as they were for the most part, and taught them in the measure of their capacity; revealed Himself at the outset to them as their God, the God of their nation, and claimed Israel as His people. He did not then make Himself known as the Creator and Moral Ruler of the world, for in the childhood of Israel's religious history these ideas would have been impossible of comprehension. Yahweh was Israel's God, and Israel was the people of Yahweh. Yahweh was a righteous God, and required righteousness in His people. From this stage the divine education of Israel is carried forward, till in Jeremiah and the Second Isaiah God becomes known to Israel as the supreme all loving Creator and God of all mankind.

¹ Preached before the University of Dublin on October 26, 1902, the text being Heb. x. 34, "Knowing that ye have your own selves for a better and an enduring possession."

Thus before the eighth century B.C. the conception of God in Israel was henotheistic, that is, Israel recognized Yahweh as their God and Yahweh only. At the same time Israel was ready to acknowledge the actual existence of neighbouring deities, though they denied the claims of such deities to their obedience. At this period Yahweh's sovereignty was conceived as conterminous with His own land and people, and His interests and those of Israel were popularly identified. The claims of Yahwism on Israel before the eighth century are rightly expressed in the words: "Thou shalt have none other Gods but Me."

We are here in the childhood of Israel's religious faith.

But these and other limitations and defects in the conception of God—being really heathen survivals in the domain of religious faith—gave way before the attacks of the great eighth century prophets, and one by one the false views attaching to Israel's conception of Yahweh were in the course of its divine education expelled, and the monotheistic stage of Yahwism was achieved, the fundamental doctrine of which is "There are no other Gods but Me." Thus Israel came at last to recognize Yahweh, not merely as their God, but as the Creator and God of all mankind.

With this short outline of the development of religious thought regarding Yahweh, we are in a position to understand the development of eschatological thought in Israel.

Jewish eschatology deals with two originally distinct subjects—the hope of the individual, and the hope of the nation—the hope of the individual which ultimately develops into the conception of individual immortality, and the hope of the nation which gives birth to the doctrine of the Messianic Kingdom. We shall now address ourselves to the hope of the individual.

The primitive hope of the individual and his view of the future life were gloomy in the extreme. Sheol was the

ultimate goal of all men. Here a shadowy life prevailed, which faintly reflected the realities of the upper world. In Sheol, further, not moral but social distinctions were observed: a man enjoyed a position among the shades corresponding to the social position he had held in his earthly life. That such a realm was not under the sovereignty of Yahweh, was to be expected, since Yahweh was only henotheistically conceived, and His jurisdiction limited to the upper world, and there to His own nation and land. Thus the heathen view of the future life is not inconsistent with the Hebrew belief in Yahweh in its earliest stage. In other words, before the eighth century B.C., no conflict between theology and eschatology was possible, for their provinces were mutually exclusive.

But with the rise of Monotheism the relations of theology and eschatology were essentially transformed; for since Yahweh was conceived as the Creator and God of all the earth, the entire existence of men, here and hereafter, came under His jurisdiction. To the western mind this is an obvious conclusion. When once it is conceded that God is the Creator and God of all the world, then man's future life, no less than his present, must be subject to divine Providence. And yet, though Israel possessed a Monotheistic faith as early as the eighth century it did not arrive for some centuries at this conclusion, which appears to us to have been inevitable from the first. How are we to explain this startling fact? The only possible explanation appears to be that as God chose Greece to teach the world wisdom, and Rome to teach the world law and order, so He chose Israel to be the religious teacher of mankind, and therein to discover the doctrine of a blessed future life—not through logical processes of the intellect, but through religious experiences, and thus to achieve a truth for all men because verifiable by all men, should they be willing to surrender themselves to a like religious

experience. And thus we are hereby taught at the outset, and for all time, that the only belief in a future life, that can really endure, is that which we arrive at through the life of faith. But to return. Though Monotheism was implicitly at strife with the traditional eschatology of the individual, this antagonism, as we have already stated, was not explicitly felt till some centuries later. Israel was still allowed to cherish its heathen views of the future; for it was not as yet a fit recipient for the revelation of a blessed life beyond the grave. Religious life in Israel had not yet outgrown the stage of childhood, save in the case of a few spiritual leaders: its individual members had no direct access to God, but could only approach Him through the medium of priest or prophet. But when through the discipline of long ages of prophetic teaching, the individual had learnt to stand face to face with God, and to know the reality of present communion with Him, then, and not till then, was the nation fitted to wrestle with the hard problem of a future life, and in this spiritual conflict to win the assurance of a blessed immortality.

It was not till the religious man in Israel had learnt through living personal communion with God to deal with the problems of the present, that he won the vantage ground from whence, with the assurance of a tried faith, he could approach the darker problems of the future.

We shall now deal with the chief problem of the present life, the final solution of which did not loom upon Israel till it recognized the truth of a blessed hereafter.

This problem arose from the claims of the new Monotheism and dealt with the undeserved sufferings of the righteous and the prosperity of the wicked. So long as Yahweh was regarded by Israel as merely their national God, and so as one God amongst many, no such problem could arise. Though Yahweh was righteous yet He was

not almighty; there were other deities whose jurisdiction circumscribed His powers. Thus there was always an explanation ready to hand for all the unmerited humiliations of His people. When, however, Monotheism drove out these false views of Deity, this explanation was no longer tenable. Yahweh was now worshipped both as perfectly righteous and as infinitely powerful. From this true Monotheistic faith the Jewish leaders of the seventh century inevitably formulated the doctrine, that the righteous must prosper, and the wicked suffer adversity.

Against this postulate of faith no valid objection can be raised. If the world is created and ruled by a righteous God, it must sooner or later be well with the righteous. But owing to the heathen views of the after-world that were current in ancient Israel, this doctrine could not be maintained in its large and true sense. It must be well with the righteous now and in this life, these ancient teachers maintained, or not at all; for, according to the views of their time, the faithful had communion with Yahweh only here; in the after-world they and all others were to be wholly removed from the sway of His Providence.

Thus from the welding together of a true theology and a heathen eschatology there resulted inevitably the conclusion, that *the righteousness of the righteous and the wickedness of the wicked must be recompensed in this life*. The sphere of retribution was thus necessarily limited to this world. The inclusion of this false conception of the future in Israel's theology leads, as we shall find, to still more extravagant views in the sixth century.

This doctrine appears on a great scale in Deuteronomy and other pre-exilic and later writings.¹ The large element of truth it embodied won for it a general acceptance, and

¹ Deut. xxviii.; Jer. vii. 5-7; xvii. 5-8, 19-27; Exod. xxiii. 20 sqq.; Lev. xxvi.

so long as the doctrine was regarded as a general statement and not applied individually, its inherent viciousness escaped criticism.

But the time for such an application was fast approaching through the development of individualism.

Down indeed to the eighth century, no individual retribution had been looked for. The early Israelite was not alarmed by the prosperity of the wicked man, or the calamities of the righteous; for Yahweh was concerned with the well-being of the nation as a whole, and not with that of its individual members. The individual was not the religious unit, but the family, or the tribe. The individual was identified with his family; a solidarity existed between him and the line of his ancestors and descendants. From this identification it was concluded, though not always justly, that God visited the virtues and vices of the fathers on the children (Exod. xx. 5; Lev. xx. 5, etc.), of an individual on his community or tribe (Gen. xii. 17, xx. 18), while His mercy was shown in transferring the punishment of a sinner to his son (1 Kings xi. 12, xxi. 29).

No right view of the present or future destinies of the righteous could be reached till Monotheism had taught the worth of the individual soul and its immediate relation with Yahweh. This was first done in the prophecies of Jeremiah and Ezekiel.

The ancient exposition of the modern doctrine of heredity was expressed popularly in the proverb: "The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge" (Jer. xxxi. 29). In this the people explicitly denied their own responsibility in the overthrow of the nation, and at the same time arranged the justice of Divine Providence (Ezek. xix. 25). It was their fathers that had sinned, and they were involved in the consequences of their guilt. And from the iron nexus which bound them there was

no escape. Such a view naturally paralysed all personal effort after righteousness, and made men the victims of despair. The righteousness of the individual could not deliver him from the doom befalling the nation.

Now in opposition to this popular view, which destroyed all moral initiative in the nation, Jeremiah proclaimed the new doctrine of the individual. This doctrine was based on the new relation which God was to establish between Himself and the individual. This new relation was to supersede the old relation, which had existed between God and the nation as a whole. Heretofore the individual had been related to Yahweh only as a member of the nation, and as such, whatever his nature and character, shared in the national judgments, and was without individual worth. The nation was a religious unit. Henceforth, Jeremiah taught, the individual was to step into the place of the nation and to constitute the religious unit. Thus in the face of the coming exile, when the nation would cease to exist, and only its dismembered elements, the individuals, remain, Jeremiah was the first to conceive religion as the communion of the individual soul with God. Heretofore the individual had approached God either through priest or prophet. Henceforth the individual was to enter into the privileges of the prophet.

The teaching of Jeremiah was taken up and developed by Ezekiel. In pre-exilic times the individual soul had been conceived as the property of the family and the nation, but Ezekiel teaches that every soul is God's and therefore exists in a direct relation with Him (Ezek. xviii. 4). Ezekiel's individualism here receives its most noble and profound expression. Never hitherto had the absolute worth of the individual human soul been asserted in such brief and pregnant words as those of the prophet speaking in God's behalf: "All souls are mine." From this principle Ezekiel concluded that if the individual was faithful in

his immediate relation to Yahweh he ceased to be the thrall of his own sin or that of his forefathers (xviii. 21-28, xiv. 12-20), and became a free man, even God's man, wholly unaffected alike by his own past, or that of the nation.¹ And since no law of heredity could thus intervene between a man's conduct and its recompence, every man should receive a recompence, and that a recompence exactly adequate to his deserts. But the law of retribution, as enunciated by Ezekiel, was still more strictly defined and applied. For, as Ezekiel, like his predecessors, believed in the traditional view of Sheol as the unblessed abode of the shades removed from the sway of Yahweh, he could not but conclude that the perfect recompence which he taught was awarded in this life. Thus the exact measure of that which was his due was meted out to the individual in this life; judgment was daily executed on every man, and that judgment found concrete expression in the man's outward lot. The outward lot of the individual became on this view an infallible index to his character and his actual condition before God. His prosperity was a divine testimony to God's good pleasure in him, his adversity was no less surely a sign of the Divine displeasure. So strongly persuaded was Ezekiel of the certitude of this law of retribution, that he declared that in the coming destruction of Jerusalem not a single righteous man would be destroyed (ix. 3-6); only on two occasions subsequently (xvi. 21, 22; xxi. 3, 4), had the truth of actual fact and prophetic insight power to deliver him from the yoke of his doctrinaire views.

In his teaching on the individual soul Ezekiel had enunciated a great spiritual truth, but hampered its acceptance and development by associating with it positions demonstrably false. It is true, on the one hand, that the

¹ We should observe that no Old Testament prophet emphasizes so strongly the antinomies of man's freewill (iii. 16-21, xiv. 12-23, xviii., xxxiii. 1-20), and God's sovereignty (xxxiv.).

individual can in communion with God break with the iron nexus of his own past and that of his people, and make a new beginning, which is different in essence from that past, and inexplicable from it as a starting point; but on the other hand, it is no less true that this new beginning is always conditioned in some degree by the past of the individual and that of his fathers, and herein lies the truth of heredity, which Ezekiel denied.

It is easy to cavil at Ezekiel's doctrine of retribution, and yet we must admit that no other theory is possible, if we start from the same premises as the theology of that period. If with Ezekiel we hold that God is righteous, and that all souls are His, we shall be ready to conclude, with him, that a righteous retribution must be meted out to every man. If we further held, as we do not, that it is in this life only that man is under the dominion of God, then we should be forced to conclude that every man must receive the full measure of retribution in this life, and that, accordingly, a man's outward fortunes must be the index of his spiritual condition. Logically no other conclusion was possible, and Ezekiel, with a sublime defiance of the actual, maintained this view with a loyalty that hardly ever wavered.¹

Ezekiel's doctrine rooted itself firmly in the national consciousness, and was variously applied in two great popular handbooks, the Psalter and the Book of Proverbs. In these writings modifications were introduced in the exposition of the now dominant dogma, in order to make it clash less rudely with the facts of religious experience. Trouble and affliction, it was taught, were not always retributive, but were sometimes sent as a discipline to the righteous, but such adversity was always in their

¹ Amongst Ezekiel's oldest contemporaries there were not wanting voices that drew attention to the conflict between this postulate of faith and experience, Jer. xii. 1, 2; xxxi. 29, 30; Hab. i. 13, 14.

case followed by a renewal of outward blessings (Ps. xxxiv. 19-22), and the end of the righteous was always peace (Ps. xxxvii. 25, 37; Job viii. 6, 7, xlii. 12; Prov. xxiii. 18; Wisdom iii. 3, iv. 7). On the other hand, though the wicked might be prosperous, yet their prosperity was short-lived, and was permitted only with a view to make their fall the more sudden and humiliating (Ps. xxxvii. 20, 35, 36; lxxiii. 18-20).

Naturally the popular doctrine was a continual stumbling-block to the righteous when in trouble. So long as all went well with him he was assured of God's favour, but misfortune or pain destroyed this certainty; for as such they were evidence of sin. Hence the righteous man looked to God to be justified by an outward judgment. If this was granted, his righteousness was attested; but if it was withheld, his personal friends, it is true, might in their charity possibly construe his affliction as a discipline of God, but the popular conscience was only too ready to arraign it as the penalty of sin.

But it was not to the sufferer alone that Ezekiel's doctrine of retribution proved an insuperable difficulty. So long as the nation was convinced that there was a perfectly adequate retribution in this life, no higher solution of the problem of a future life was possible, nor was there any occasion to question the truth of the current views on the condition of the departed in Sheol. Thus every avenue of progress was blocked, and no advance was possible, till the orthodox doctrine of retribution was impeached at the bar of rational and religious experience, and rejected as unworthy of credit. Of the long sustained attack on the doctrine of Ezekiel two very notable memorials have come down to us, the Books of Job and Ecclesiastes.

Although Ecclesiastes was not written much earlier than 200 B.C., we shall touch on its protest first, as its services were purely destructive, and not, as in the case of Job,

destructive and constructive. Against the statement that the individual is at present judged in perfect keeping with his deserts, the writer of Ecclesiastes enters at once a decided negative. He declares, in fact, that there is retribution neither here nor hereafter: for the few sporadic passages, where judgment is threatened, are, according to an increasing number of critics, intrusions in the text, being at variance with the entire thought of the writer. Thus the author of this book maintains that evil may prolong a man's days and righteousness curtail them (vii. 15), that the destiny of the wise man and the fool is identical (ii. 14), and likewise of the righteous and the wicked (ix. 2).

From the confessedly extravagant attack of this writer on the doctrine of retribution we turn back to one of the foremost books in all the world, whether regarded from the standpoint of literary genius or of actual influence on the destinies of mankind. The Book of Job was written, at all events, before 400 B.C., and its concern from first to last is the current doctrine of retribution, and its aim is to show that the doctrine of man's individual worth, and a strictly individual retribution, are really irreconcilable. Like his contemporaries (for we may regard the main body of the book as a unity for our present purpose), Job accepted the traditional teaching, that every event that befalls a man reflects God's disposition towards him, that misfortune betokens God's anger, prosperity His favour; in short, that a strictly retributive judgment is enforced in this life. But this belief, Job found, was not confirmed by the fortunes of other men (xxi. 1-15); for the wicked prosper and go down to the grave in peace; and his own bitter experience emphasized to the full the conflict between faith and experience.

Human faith, in order to assure itself of its own reality, claims an outward attestation at the hands of God (xvii. 3-4); but as all such outward attestation was withheld,

Job concluded that the righteousness of God could not be discovered in the outer world as ruled by God; this world was a moral chaos: hence from the God of such a world, the God of outer Providence, the God of circumstance, he appealed to the God of faith, though to this appeal he looked for an answer not in this world, but in the next (xix. 25-27). In this momentous passage (xix.) we have the first approach in Jewish literature to the idea of a blessed life after death. And yet the writer has not grasped the idea of a blessed immortality; for had he risen to this height, he would have solved all the difficulties of the problem, by making his argument lead up to the doctrine of a future life. Clearly in the fifth century this doctrine had not yet won acceptance even amongst the religious thinkers of Israel.

And yet the main views and conclusions of Job point in this direction. The emphasis laid on man's individual worth, with his consequent claims upon a righteous God, and the denial that these claims meet with any satisfaction at the hands of the God of the wrongful present, point to the conclusion that at some future time all these wrongs will be righted. A momentary anticipation of this view appears in xiv. 1-15. May not man revive as the tree that has been cut down? May not Sheol be only a temporary place of sojourn, where man is sheltered from the wrongs of the present life, till God, who had once communion with him, summons him back to its renewal? In chapter xix. 25-27 this impassioned desire returns and rises into a real, though momentary, conviction.

I know that my Avenger liveth,
And that at the last He will appear above (my) grave:
And after my skin has been destroyed,
Without my body shall I see God:
Whom I shall see for myself,
And my eyes shall behold, and not another.

Here Job declares that God will appear for His vindication against the false charges of his friends, and the false representations of the orthodox law of retribution. He declares further that he shall himself witness this vindication, and enjoy the vision of God. But we cannot infer that this divine experience would endure beyond the moment of Job's justification by God. It is not the blessed immortality of the departed soul that is referred to here, but its entrance into and enjoyment of the higher life, however momentary its duration. The possibility of the continuance, much less of the unendingness, of this higher life does not seem to have dawned on Job, though it lay in the line of his reasonings. If it had, it could not have been ignored throughout the rest of the book. Nevertheless, the importance of the spiritual advance here made cannot be exaggerated. In order to appreciate this advance, we have only to compare the new outlook into the future which it provides with the absolutely hopeless view that was then accepted on all hands; for the Book of Job reflects all the darkness of the popular doctrine (chaps. iii., viii., xxv.), and at the same time exhibits the actual steps whereby the human spirit rose to the apprehension that man's soul was capable of a divine life beyond the grave.

Two points here call for emphasis. The first is that this new view of the next world springs from a spiritual root, and owes nothing to the animistic conceptions of the soul that were then current.

The second is no less weighty. We have here a new doctrine of the soul, which teaches that the soul is not shorn of all its powers by death, even of existence (as is implied in Ps. lxxxviii. and other writings voicing the beliefs of past teachers), but that it is still capable of communion with God and of its highest spiritual activities, though without the body.

Though the Book of Job does not teach categorically the idea of a future life, it undoubtedly suggests it. That the idea was in the air is clear from xiv. 13-15, xix. 25-27; but even if these passages were absent, it would still be true, for throughout the rest of the book the antinomies of the present are presented in so strong a light that the thinkers of Israel who assimilated its contents were forced henceforth to take up a definite attitude to the new and higher theology. Some made the venture of faith, and so reached forward to the doctrine of a future life; others, like the writer of Ecclesiastes, declining the challenge of the Spirit, made the "great refusal," and fell back on materialism and unbelief. We have here arrived at the parting of the ways. From Job we should naturally pass to the consideration of Psalms xvi., xvii., xlix., lxxiii., in the latter two of which, at all events, clear conviction of a blessed immortality is expressed. Time will not suffer me to do more than call attention to the expression of the writer's hope in Psalm lxxiii., where he declares that the highest blessedness of the righteous is unbroken communion with God; what heaven or earth has in store for him matters not. In comparison with God, all the universe is nothing: this life ended, God is the portion of the souls of the righteous for evermore (lxxiii. 23-26).¹

We have now done with the question of individual immortality in the Old Testament, but it will be observed that, so far, we have taken no account of the doctrine of the resurrection. Without some notice of this doctrine our treatment of this subject would be wholly inadequate. You will remember that at the outset we called attention to the two hopes cherished by Israel—the hope of the individual, with which we have dealt at length, and the hope of the nation, which developed ultimately into

¹ See Duhm's Commentary *in loc.* Some recent critics refuse to acknowledge the references to a future life in these Psalms.

the expectation of the Messianic Kingdom. In this Kingdom, as originally conceived, only the righteous who lived at the time of its advent, and none others, should share. For several centuries these two hopes pursued, side by side, their own lines of development, and it was not till the close of the fourth century B.C., or the beginning of the third, that they were seen to be complementary sides of one and the same religious truth, a truth that subsumes and does justice to the essential claims of both. Thus when the doctrine of the blessed immortality of the faithful is combined with that of the coming Messianic Kingdom, the separate eschatologies of the individual and of the nation issued in their synthesis. Not only should the surviving righteous participate in the Messianic Kingdom, but the righteous dead of Israel should rise to share therein. Thus the righteous individual and the righteous nation should be blessed together, or rather, the righteous individual should ultimately be recompensed—not with a solitary immortality in heaven or elsewhere, but with a blessed resurrection life, together with his brethren, in the coming Messianic Kingdom. “Thy dead men (Israel) shall arise and the inhabitants of the dust shall awake and shout for joy; for a dew of lights is thy dew, and the earth shall produce the shades” (Isa. xxvi. 19).

Thus the resurrection, stripped of its accidents and considered in its essence, marks the entrance of the individual after death into the divine life of the community; in other words, the synthesis of the individual and the common good. The faithful in Palestine looked forward to a blessed future only as members of the holy people, as citizens of the righteous kingdom that should embrace their brethren. And herein, as throughout this evolution of religion, we can trace the finger of God, for it was no accident that His servants were unable to anticipate any future blessedness, save such as they shared in common with their brethren.

The self-centredness, nay the selfishness, that marked the Greek doctrine of immortality is conspicuous by its absence in the religious forecasts of the faithful in Israel. In true religion unlimited individualism is an impossibility. The individual can only attain to his highest in the life of the community, alike here and hereafter.

To conclude. It was only through a strenuous life of faith that Israel won its belief in a blessed immortality. And what was won through religious experience cannot be preserved otherwise than by religious experience. Into this full inheritance of the faithful the individual cannot enter by tradition or metaphysical reasonings. Only through personal communion with the Fount of Life is man enabled to rise into the eternal life. In such communions his doubtings vanish, and his assurance of a share in a blessed hereafter grows steadily deeper with the growth of his life in God.

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