

VIII

THE HEBREW SOLUTION

(I) THE CENTRAL FAITH

IN the last lecture we were concerned mainly with the possibility of Revelation and its nature. We have to deal now with the answer to the riddle of the world given us in the special revelation of the Old and New Testaments. The earlier part of this is given in the Old Testament literature. It is as if the Power which created Nature and history had given one people the master key to the great problem in the revelation of Himself in grace, and had said to them, "Work this out for mankind," and then when they had done their part of the human task for the race, had given the crowning revelation to all mankind.

The plan of these lectures does not give us time to consider the various stages in this process. That the revelation was gradual seems to me clear. Spiritual truth in the Old Testament as in the New is always given in relation to the needs at the moment of those to whom it is revealed. So is it in human education. No wise parent or teacher will try to give his pupil all he knows at once, but just as much as they are able to take in, and he will give it also in varying forms. Unless he is a very prosaic person he may even teach them in fairy tales or legends. Some of us may have memories

of how we learned things worth while from *Cinderella* and *Jack the Giant Killer*, and later on from martial ballads like "Kinmont Willie" or Macaulay's "Armada," things which the primers and manuals, more accurate though they might be in details, could not teach us nearly so well, and yet which it was vitally important that we should know. The graver books came in their due course. Even so was it with the Hebrews. The revelation was gradual and was relative to their practical needs, or as their prophets would have said, it was given to them by the Spirit of God to explain the providence of God.

We shall not here, however, trace the stages by which the Hebrews reached their conceptions of God and the world and the soul. It will be sufficient for our purpose to take these in their fullest development as they appear in their culminating form in the great Prophets, the Psalter and the Book of Job.

The centre of everything else is, of course, the conception of God. The peculiarity of the Bible among all the other ancient sacred books of mankind, is the way in which nearly the whole literature is suffused with the idea of God. No attempt is made to prove His existence, for nobody seems to doubt it. Nobody struggles, as we have to do to-day, "through nature up to nature's God." All the prophets, as has been truly said by a notable Old Testament scholar, "came down upon the world from God," and read its mysteries in that light from heaven. Had we asked them how they came by that certainty, they would all undoubtedly have said that God Himself had

revealed it to them. Thus they never seem to have had any struggle to win that fundamental faith, their whole labour and struggle is to hold and deepen it. Their problem is: Since God is as He has told us, why are the world and man such as we discern them to be? Why are Assyria and Babylon there, to threaten our life? and, later, Why if God rules, are we in captivity to these mightier but lower peoples? Why should the just man suffer and the wicked prosper in a just God's world? and so on. Hebrew thought, impelled by the challenge of the God-denying evil of the world, laboured to find a solution. Thus the theology of the Old Testament is to a very large extent Theodicy, the justification of the ways of God with men.

The vital centre of it all is its faith in God. How then did it conceive of God? In a general way we may say that there are three strands in this conception: the sovereignty of God, the righteousness and moral purity of God, and the grace of God.

(1) The conception of the power of God is common to all religions. It is the primitive and universal element. In spite of all the difficulties which belief in the omnipotence of God may entail on the believer, the great religions have never been willing to compromise on this point.¹ Man in his very marrow seems always to feel himself utterly dependent on supreme and transcendent powers, and they awaken in his mind that unique sense of awe without which there can be no religion. Hebrew prophecy is penetrated by this assurance of one Sovereign God who created, who sustains, and who

¹ *Elements of the Science of Religion* by Cornelius Tiele, vol. ii, p. 93.

governs all things. He transcends the universe, and He controls it. Everything is the instrument of His purpose. Rain, hail, storm and wind fulfil His word, and at His summons the great constellations fulfil their circuits. The huge Babylonian power is His unconscious instrument, His "battle-axe." He beckons to the waiting nations, and they come in their galleys over the midland sea, and in their armies from the great Euphrates valley. "Have not I brought up . . . the Philistines from Caphtor and the Syrians from Kir?" He is the sole and transcendent Sovereign, and all other gods are phantoms. The root idea of transcendent sovereignty develops inevitably into the whole of what modern theology has called "the natural attributes of God," omnipotence, omniscience, omnipresence and eternity. A blind or absent or inconstant, or merely immanent God, would be no true sovereign of the world.

The second great characteristic of the Hebrew faith is the assurance that this Absolute Sovereign is just and pure and good. Every human being by virtue of his personality possesses some conception of ultimate Power and Reality. He also possesses some conception of ideal goodness, by which he measures and grades himself and all other men. By the former he measures all existence, by the latter he judges all character. Now the supreme achievement of the Hebrew people, led by their spiritual leaders, the prophets, was to fuse these two conceptions in one. They reached the faith that the one tremendous Sovereign Reality who was over all things was identical with the

¹ Amos ix. 7.

Power which revealed itself in the tremulous but persistent moral ideal of justice, purity and goodness within them. No more momentous event has ever happened in the history of mankind. The only event comparable with it was the faith that the Word became flesh, and this could never have taken place without the other. Lotze has said somewhere that to their contemporary nations the Hebrews seemed like a race of madmen, but that to us, looking back to-day, they seem the one sober people in a world of drunkards. We know much about the gods and goddesses worshipped by the Phœnicians and Canaanite peoples, and about the gods of the Nile and Euphrates valleys, the Astartes and Molochs and Baals, Nergals and Thoths, monstrous creatures with the bodies of bulls and the heads of dogs or eagles, in whose honour children were thrown into the furnace, and women prostituted their virtue, and nations were ravaged, gods of the brothel and the shambles. Out of these drunkards' dreams the Hebrews awoke and went forth into the pure light and air of the morning, and, rejoicing in the world, sang their psalms of the one and only God. There is a group of these songs in the Psalter from the 91st to the 98th in which one can still catch the thrill of a great spiritual deliverance. In them the writers call all Nature to exult along with them. "Let the sea roar, and the fulness thereof; let the field exult, and all that is therein; then shall all the trees of the wood sing for joy . . . before the Lord, for he cometh to judge the earth with justice."¹ With that assurance that "righteousness

¹ Ps. xcvi. 11-13.

and justice" were the foundations of the visible universe went also delight in all the loveliness and greatness of Nature, and the sense that the whole created universe was a wonderful and glorious place: "Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth? Declare if thou hast understanding. . . . Whereupon were the foundations thereof fashioned, and who laid the corner stone thereof; when the morning stars sang together and all the sons of God shouted for joy?"¹

No upright man or woman who believes that Nature is a cruel tyrant or "harlot" can rejoice in her beauty in that way. It is hard to discern beauty in that which evokes distrust and hate: admiration is inhibited by the disharmony. But convince such a man or woman of a glorious purpose of God moving through Nature and the inhibition disappears.

The uncompromising assertion of the purity and justice of the Sovereign God is a supreme achievement of Hebrew prophecy. In other religions, it is true, the gods are always, or almost always, regarded as the guardians of the tribal customs and their avengers when they are broken. But something much more than that is found in the ethical monotheism of the prophets. Their conceptions of justice, mercy and truth are something much more than tribal customs. They are pure and absolute, as valid for all the nations as for the Chosen People. Customary morality is only the protecting husk under which this pure morality can grow up, when justice, sincerity and kindness are loved for their own sakes, and not simply because the tribe

¹ Job xxxviii. 4-6.

approves them and its prosperity depends upon their practice.

The fusion between religious awe of the mightiest and ethical love of the best, had another far-reaching result. There can only be one highest, and He alone deserves man's worship and obedience. This faith made an end of polytheism. The world entered on a new phase of intellectual sanity and moral dignity and hope when ethical monotheism came into being. The pioneers in that advance were the Hebrew prophets, those rugged and sometimes desperate figures who arose in unending succession amid the collapse of their nation, and led its survivors back from Babylon to their ruined capital and the refounding of a nation that should gamble with its whole existence on the purity, justice and goodness of God Almighty. If challenged how they knew this conception of the moral character of God to be true, the invariable answer of the prophets would have been that God Himself had revealed it to them, and that it was the supreme glory of His people that God had spoken to them alone of all the nations of the earth. "Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom; let not the rich man glory in his riches; but let him that glorieth glory in this, that I am the Lord which exercise loving-kindness, judgment and righteousness in the earth, for in these things do I delight, saith the Lord."¹ The record of Israel's conflict is a great history, surpassing, I believe, even that of Salamis and Marathon in its meaning for the human race, and I cannot but think it should have a new appeal for men and women of our own time. For is it

¹ Jer. ix. 23-24.

not the basal fact of our spiritual existence to-day that men and women are awakening to what is the permanent human situation in the world if there is no God, and if we, and all that we hold most dear or sacred, are in the irresistible control of a power that is morally on a lower level than ourselves? It is true that we no longer worship Baal and Astarte and Moloch, but we are in the control of an ultimate power which not only has no mind or soul, such as we possess, but contains within itself those energies which the ancient peoples symbolised in these repellent forms. In truth these ancient Semitic religions were all plainly forms of Nature-worship, and if Nature be the absolute it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the whole Hebrew adventure was a mistake. That modern thought is realising the situation and is vehemently protesting against it, is a sign of hope.

The third great element in the Hebrew conception of God was that He was gracious.

The mere stark sovereignty of God, a power beyond either good or evil would, of course, have been no real gospel to mankind, though without it there could, equally, of course, have been no gospel. Nor, vitally important as was the moralising of the idea of God, could it alone have sustained the life of Israel, or created the magnificent literature of the Old Testament. Many people of the Protestant races to-day think that they have estimated all that is of permanent importance in the history of Israel when they say that it gave ethical monotheism a footing in the world, and that monotheism, purified by passing through the mind of Christ, is the conclusion of the whole matter,

the rest being ancient folk-lore and modern over-belief, like the worship of the Virgin and the saints. But this is to miss one of the vital elements, not only in the Hebrew but in the Christian faith, what is known throughout the Old Testament and the New as "the Grace of God."

I shall return to this subject later, in the closing lecture, and shall only refer briefly to it here. But it is as essential to the Hebrew conception of God as it is to the Christian that we should realise that every true Israelite believed that the God whom he worshipped was One who had taken, and was always taking, the initiative with him. He did not need to propitiate his God and win His favour. He believed that he had it already as his priceless birthright, as one of a people in covenant with Him. The sacrifices of the Old Testament Covenant were not meant to initiate such relations of love and faith. They were meant to restore them when they had been broken by his unfaithfulness. Now there is something here that no Theism can give us, which is derived by men's labour and thought from the facts of Nature and history, or the study of the moral consciousness, such as we have attempted in the earlier part of these lectures. It is the new element in the Bible which we who are Christians believe to have been given by Revelation. We have, even in the Old Testament religion, something much richer than "philosophical Theism," different not only in its conception of God, but of the communion with Him that is possible to sinful man. For real communion with God there is all the difference

in the world between the God who waits for me to find Him out and the God who comes seeking me, and when He has found me is ever drawing me on to new and deeper trust and love. Without this element the Old Testament is unintelligible. The lives revealed in the psalms and prophets all presuppose it, and out of it springs that Messianic Hope which was to mean so much not only for Israel, but for mankind. All alike have their deep roots in the sovereignty, the moral purity and the grace of God.

Such, then, was the treasure of Israel. We have now to see how the nation possessing that faith was called upon to face and pass through the most drastic experience of evil, evil which challenged its whole conception of God. How could such evils be if God were really sovereign? Why, if God were just, did such judgments fall, as they so often did, on the righteous rather than the guilty? If God were really in singular relations of grace with Israel why did Israel endure such things at the hands of the worshippers of false gods? These and many other questions gnawed at the very roots of the people's faith. Faith responded triumphantly to the challenge, and the Revelation grew. The thought of God became broader and deeper, and out of it sprang the whole of what is known as Old Testament Theology, its total view of God and the world and the soul of man, that broad general interpretation of the mystery of human destiny, which is the ground-work of Theism to-day, and also of Christian theology. It was, I believe, to begin with, Theodicy, the justification of the ways of God with men, an

interpretation of the mystery in full coherence with the fundamental faith in God.

In the development of that Theodicy in the desperate battle with calamity, certain great seminal convictions arose in the consciousness of the prophets and the devout in Israel, which I shall now proceed to describe. They are, I believe, the truths which, along with the fundamental faith in God, can alone give us to-day the elements of a solution of the riddle of the world.