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ON THE KNOWLEDGE OF A FUTURE STATE
POSSESSED BY THE ANCIENT HEBREWS.

IN the handsome edition of Bishop Butler's *Analogy* recently put forth by Mr. Gladstone, there are many notes which are most pertinent and useful, and which bear striking evidence to the clearness of intellect still possessed by the venerable statesman. One of these notes I desire to prefix to this paper, with the view of directing attention to it at once, while I shall afterwards return to it when the discussion in which we are to be engaged has been concluded.

The passage in Butler's work, to which the observation referred to is appended, stands as follows (Part II., Chap. vii., Sec. 49), "They (the Jews), in such a sense, nationally acknowledged and worshipped the Maker of heaven and earth, when the rest of the world were sunk in idolatry, as rendered them, in fact, the peculiar people of God. And this so remarkable an establishment and preservation of natural religion amongst them seems to add some peculiar credibility to the historical evidence for the miracles of Moses and the prophets: because these miracles are a full satisfactory account of this event, which plainly wants to be accounted for, and cannot otherwise."

It is on the words "natural religion" which occur in the above passage that Mr. Gladstone bases his annotation to the following effect (p. 342): "The expression seems not absolutely correct, because *the religion of the Jews in no way rested upon future rewards and punishments*, which Butler includes in natural religion. But with this deduction, not only was the Jewish religion a manifestation of natural religion; but it is the only one known to history; which is rarely borne in mind."

There is no singularity about the statement of Mr. Glad-

stone which I have placed in italics. On the contrary, it simply repeats what is to be found in almost all theological writers at the present day. I have selected it merely as typical of a current habit of thought, and with the object of by-and-by setting it face to face with that knowledge of a future state which, as I believe, we shall find reason to conclude was possessed by the ancient Hebrews.

I wish, then, to call attention to some remarkable passages in the New Testament, which seem to me to have been strangely overlooked, or but slightly touched upon, in dealing with this question. Two of these passages are contained in the Epistle to the Hebrews, and a third is found in our Lord's own words as recorded in St. Matthew's Gospel.

With respect to the Epistle to the Hebrews, every one knows the many difficulties which have been felt regarding it. Is it really an epistle, and not rather a dissertation? Was it originally written in Greek, or is it a translation from the Hebrew? For what readers was it primarily intended—for residents in Palestine, Alexandria, or Rome? And, above all, who was its author? Are we to ascribe it to Paul, or Barnabas, or Clement, or Apollos; or is it to be viewed as a joint composition, St. Paul perhaps supplying the thoughts, while some more accomplished Greek scholar, such as St. Luke, gave form to these in the rich and rhythmical diction by which the epistle is so strikingly distinguished?

Such are the questions which have been debated by scholars from age to age respecting this portion of Scripture, and to which the most varied answers have been given. But amid all the contradictory opinions which have been held on these topics, there is one point on which most competent critics are agreed, and that is that the writer, whoever he was, had a thorough knowledge of his subject, that subject being the religion which began with Abraham, and

was perpetuated among his descendants. Some, indeed, have gone to an extreme in the value they attached to the work of this gifted author. Dr. John Owen, for instance, said that "the world might as well want the sun as the Church this epistle"; but without the use of such extravagant language, it is generally felt by Biblical critics that we may safely trust the author's expositions, and rest with confidence in his conclusions.

To be quite just however, there is one passage in the epistle which might modify our view of the knowledge possessed by the anonymous writer, if we were to regard the difficulties which some commentators have found in it, and the almost desperate efforts they have made to remove these difficulties. I refer to chapter ix. 1-10, in which we are instructed to find several gross errors. The author, we are told, is wrong, or seems to be wrong, in placing the "golden censer" (*θυμιατήριον*, perhaps "incense-altar") in the holy of holies—wrong in placing the pot of manna and the rod of Aaron, as well as the tables of stone, in the ark of the covenant—wrong even to such an extent, according to some, as to represent the tabernacle as still standing at the time when he wrote. It would be enough to say that a writer whom Bleek justly describes as "having throughout his work treated of the Mosaic institutions with such special care,"¹ could not have fallen into such mistakes had he thought it worth his while to guard against the possibility of being charged with them. But some unworthy attempts have been made to maintain his credit by distorting the language which he employs. There can be no doubt, for instance, that, with the view of somewhat helping what seemed a bad case, our A.V. here deals unfaithfully with the tenses of the verbs which occur in the Greek. Thus the presents *εἰσίσσιν* (enter), *προσφέρουσιν* (offer), *προσφέρονται* (are offered),

¹ "Welcher überhaupt vorzugsweise die mosaische Einrichtung berücksichtigte" (*Erklär.*, p. 342).

etc., are all translated as if they were pasts—*went, offered, were offered*; and the impression is thus left on the mind of the reader, that at the time when the epistle was written, the Temple worship had entirely ceased. Now all such unwarranted tampering with the sacred text comes of that worship of the letter by which so many have been enslaved, and which has led so frequently to disastrous results in the interpretation of Scripture. One of the most valuable of exegetical principles is always to keep in view the *main purpose* of a writer in any course of reasoning in which he is engaged, and to attach comparatively small importance to details which are manifestly designed to be subordinate. Bearing this in mind, we can easily see that the object of the sacred writer here is certainly not to give a full and accurate account of the various pieces of furniture existing in the tabernacle; but, passing lightly over these, to fix attention on the great truth which he brings out in the eighth verse, that the earthly tabernacle was a symbol of the true sanctuary in heaven. To ask for minute accuracy in a merely casual and rhetorical description like the present, is really little better than folly. We may quite safely grant, and I think we ought in honesty to grant, that our author does here fall into some trivial mistakes with respect to points which are not at the time prominently before his mind. He is bent on far higher things than giving an absolutely correct catalogue of the various articles which were to be found in the tabernacle. And his want of perfect correctness with regard to such things no more detracts from the supreme ability with which he sets forth the scope and spirit of the Mosaic dispensation, than the tradition that Sir Isaac Newton, as Master of the Mint, sometimes failed to add correctly a long line of figures, interferes with the pre-eminent position which he occupies as a mathematical genius; or the fact that Addison, when Secretary of State, found a difficulty in penning a brief business note,

serves to deprive him of that high position which he holds in the history of English literature.¹

With a firm conviction, then, of the authority pertaining to the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews as an exegete of the Old Testament, let us listen to what he says respecting the ancient patriarchs (chap. xi. 13-16, R.V.): "These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. For they that say such things make it manifest that they are seeking after a country of their own. And if indeed they had been mindful of that country from which they went out, they would have had opportunity to return. But now they desire a better country, that is a heavenly; wherefore God is not ashamed of them to be called their God; for He hath prepared for them a city." Even a child might apprehend the import of these words. They need no subtle exegesis to bring out their meaning, but proclaim it at once to the simplest reader. The following truths are clearly implied in them—first, that the ancient Hebrew patriarchs were influenced by faith as the great motive power of their lives; secondly, that by means of it they subordinated the present to the future, looking forward to heaven as their proper home; and thirdly, that for these reasons, their lives possessed a nobility in the sight of God, who would see that their highest aspirations should at last be fulfilled in His own blessed presence. As Delitzsch has remarked (*in loc.*), "The writer here explains and illustrates the promises and wishes of the patriarchs by New Testament light, and gives to both an evangelical expression.

¹ The well-meant but fruitless efforts of Dean Alford to get rid of the difficulties above referred to are instructive. And it must be added that Tholuck does not write in the spirit of modern criticism when he remarks on the difficulty found in *vv.* 3, 4, "So erscheint es also doch als Pflicht des Interpreten, den Vorwurf eines so grossen Verstosses von dem Verf. abzuwenden." Expositors have at last learned to accept the facts of Scripture just as they are.

But in doing so, he discloses their true inward meaning. The promise given to the patriarchs was a divine assurance of a future rest: that rest was connected, in the first instance, with the future possession of an earthly home; but their desire for that home was at the same time a longing and a seeking after Him who had given the promise of it, whose presence and blessing alone made it for them an object of desire, and whose presence and blessing, wherever vouchsafed, makes the place of its manifestation to be indeed a heaven. The shell of their longing might thus be of earth, its kernel was heavenly and divine; and as such God Himself vouchsafed to honour and reward it."

And now let us look a little further down this wonderful chapter, and we read (*vv.* 24–26, R.V.), "By faith Moses, when he was grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter; choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season; accounting the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures of Egypt, for he looked unto the recompense of reward." These are truly remarkable words. They imply the very quintessence of faith with respect to the reality and rewards of a future world. Think of the "choosing rather" (*μᾶλλον ἐλόμενος*), and we recognise that decisive act of volition by which every believer separates himself from those who have their portion in this world, and by which act he says for himself, as did St. Paul (*Rom.* viii. 18), "I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us." Think of "the reproach of Christ" (*τὸν ὀνειδισμόν τοῦ Χριστοῦ*) which Moses willingly endured—the obloquy which has always, in one form or another, had to be borne by those who faithfully served the Lord in the midst of an ungodly world, and we perceive a striking anticipation of these apostolic words addressed to all God's people (1 *Pet.* iv. 14), "If ye are reproached for the name

of Christ, blessed are ye." Think of that "looking away" (*ἀπέβλεπεν*) from the passing enjoyments of our present state of existence to "the hope laid up in heaven," which is ascribed to Moses, and we find an illustration of that habitual exercise of soul which St. Paul attributes to himself and all believers when he says (2 *Cor.* iv. 18), "We look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal."

We now turn to the words of Christ as recorded by St. Matthew, and we read as follows (chap. xxii. 31, 32), "But as touching the resurrection of the dead, have ye not read that which was spoken unto you by God, saying, I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob? God is not the God of the dead but of the living." The argument here made use of by Christ, in proof of a resurrection, is likely at first to excite in the reader a feeling of surprise. We may hardly see that it proves more than that the patriarchs referred to had not sunk into non-existence, but still possessed a spiritual life in the invisible world. As we reflect however on our Lord's words, we come to see the marvellous depth which exists in them, and the completeness of the proof they furnish of the doctrine in question. "I am the God of Abraham," said God; and who was Abraham? Not a mere spirit, but a *man*—a being who possessed a body as well as a soul. The relation in which Abraham stood to God had respect to his corporeal as well as incorporeal part; and this implied the vivification of his body, for "God is not the God of the dead but of the living." As Bengel puts it in his own striking way, "Ipsē est Deus vivens; ergo ii, qui Deum habent, vivere debent, et, qua parte vivere intermiserant, reviviscere in perpetuum." And let it be noted that Christ blames the Sadducees for not having perceived this. We read (*v.* 29) that He said unto them, "Ye do

err, not knowing the Scriptures nor the power of God." They had not studied the word of God with sufficient consideration to perceive in it that great doctrine which as a sect they denied; and in this they were at fault. But we cannot doubt that it was far otherwise with Moses, to whom the words quoted by Christ were spoken, and with many of the more spiritually-minded of his countrymen, who devoutly meditated upon the Divine oracle. We know, as a matter of fact, that in the days of Christ the great majority of the Jews were firm believers (*Acts* xxiii. 8, etc.) alike in the resurrection of the body and the immortality of the soul.

After having had all this before us, let us now revert to the words of Mr. Gladstone quoted at the beginning of this paper: "The religion of the Jews in no way rested upon future rewards and punishments." If this statement is accepted without any modification, as I suppose it must be, it brings us face to face with a very strange, if not unaccountable, phenomenon. We have seen, on the very highest authority, that the ancient patriarchs, and pre-eminently Moses, lived under the power of the world to come. But now we are confronted with the fact that the great Jewish lawgiver, in the religious system which he established, took no account whatever of a future state. Such is the position occupied by those who believe (as the present writer does) that Moses was the author of the legislative code contained in the Pentateuch. I may remark however in passing, that many in our day do not assent to this. We are told by Wellhausen and his followers that Moses had little or nothing to do with the system of laws which bears his name. That code, it is said, must be relegated to post-exilic times. With this theory I am just now in no wise concerned, beyond expressing my disbelief in it, and pointing out that, if adopted,

it simply intensifies the difficulty which has been suggested. For, by general consent, the Jews, as a nation, had come firmly to believe in a state of rewards and punishments hereafter before their return from the exile, and yet it is imagined that their law was then for the first time promulgated, without the slightest reference to a world beyond the grave. That however, as has been already said, is a point with which I have at present nothing to do, and which must be left to be dealt with by Wellhausen and those who accept his views. I have here only to consider the position of those who hold that Moses was the human author of the Jewish religious system, and yet that, while himself a steadfast believer in immortality, he made no reference in any of his enactments to the doctrine of a future state. Some explanation of this singular fact must be attempted.

The first theory at which we may glance is that of Bishop Warburton. I know that it is usual at the present day among writers of all sorts—believers no less than unbelievers—to speak of Warburton and his *Divine Legation of Moses* with derision. But it was not so that such a competent critic as Samuel Johnson judged either of the man or his work. Referring to the man himself, Johnson said, “Warburton is perhaps the last man who has written with a mind full of reading and reflection.” And referring to the work, he declared, “The table is always full, Sir. He brings things from the north, and the south, and from every quarter. In his *Divine Legation* you are always entertained.”¹ Warburton’s bold and original idea was to change what had been thought a formidable objection to the Jewish religion into a conclusive proof of its supernatural character. Let me endeavour to state the argument as briefly as possible. Warburton rests his theory on the two following principles, first, that no religion could, in

¹ Life, by Boswell, chap. lxxi.

ordinary circumstances, be established in the world without a reference to future rewards and punishments; and, secondly, that no doctrine as to recompense or retribution hereafter is to be found in the system instituted by Moses. From these premises his inference is, that the Jewish dispensation must have been set up and sustained by "an extraordinary Providence," *i. e.*, it must have had a superhuman origin, and been attended by constant miraculous interpositions on the part of God. The divine mission of Moses is thus thought to have been proved, and the author regards his demonstration as "very little short of mathematical certainty." I cannot quite accept this estimate of his argument; but the *Legation* is undoubtedly a very able as well as erudite book.

Another solution which, although accepted by some, appears to me far more paradoxical than that of Warburton, has been proposed by the late Dean Stanley. In his *Lectures on the Jewish Church* (i. 135), the Dean writes: "The fact becomes of real religious importance if we trace the ground on which this silence respecting the future was based. Not from want of religion, but (if one might use the expression) from excess of religion, was this void left in the Jewish mind. The future life was not denied or contradicted, but it was overlooked, set aside, overshadowed by the consciousness of the living, actual presence of God Himself. That truth, at least in the limited conceptions of the youthful nation, was too vast to admit of any rival truth, however precious." This is surely an extraordinary description of the Israelites of the desert. Their minds were too full of God to admit the rival idea of eternity! And yet these were the very persons respecting whom God is again and again represented as saying in Scripture (*Ps.* xc. 11; *Heb.* iv. 3, 7), "I swear in my wrath that they should not enter into my rest." The language used about them by Jehovah in the Psalm referred to (*v.* 10), denotes

utter loathing.¹ They were sensualists and idolaters : “ they rebelled and vexed His Holy Spirit ” ; they proved themselves utterly insensible to all those manifestations of the Divine majesty and goodness it was their privilege to witness ; and therefore that generation which is so strangely spoken of as having suffered from “ excess of religion,” was left, with hardly an exception, to fall in the wilderness.

This leads me now to state, in conclusion, what I humbly regard as the true reason why Moses did not include in his legislative code any reference to a future state of rewards and punishments. *The people of the Jews were not then prepared for such a revelation, nor would they have profited by it.* Their long and abject slavery in Egypt had wrought its own proper work upon them. Everything leads us to regard the Israelites of the Exodus as having been in the most debased condition. They were, in fact, little better than a barbarous horde, having no noble aspirations, and capable only of being influenced by the most sordid motives. From beginning to end they utterly disappointed Moses. He began his mission to them by rescuing one of their number from the oppression of an Egyptian, and supposed, as St. Stephen tells us (*Acts vii.* 25), “ that his brethren would have understood how that God by his hand would deliver them : but they understood not.” On the contrary, on the very next day he was grossly insulted by one of them, and had to flee from Egypt to save his life. The same spirit continued to be displayed throughout. As soon as they had the least experience of suffering, we are told (*Exod.* xvii. 3, 4) that “ the people murmured against Moses, and said, Wherefore is this that thou hast brought us up out of Egypt, to kill us and our

¹ See *The Translation of the Psalms*, with notes, by Dr. John De Witt, New Brunswick Seminary. The writer remarks that the word here used by God with respect to the Israelites in the desert “ indicates great disturbance of mind, displeasure, and antipathy.”

children, and our cattle with thirst? And Moses cried unto the Lord, saying, What shall I do unto this people? They be almost ready to stone me." Again, when Moses lingered in the mount, we read (*Exod.* xxxii. 1) that the people came to Aaron, and addressed him in these words of insensate folly, "Up, make us gods which shall go before us; for as for this Moses, the man that brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we wot not what is become of him." Let me quote only one other passage as bringing before us in darkest outlines the grovelling and sensual spirit which the people legislated for by Moses displayed. We read (*Num.* xi. 4-6), "The children of Israel also wept again, and said, Who shall give us flesh to eat? We remember the fish which we did eat in Egypt freely; the cucumbers, and the melons, and the leeks, and the onions, and the garlick: but now our soul is dried away: there is nothing at all, besides this manna, before our eyes." How vain would have been the endeavour to bring high and spiritual motives to bear upon a people sunk so low as this! What cared they about the invisible world! Rewards and punishments in *this* life they could understand, but, in the language of Scripture, they were too "brutish" to feel the influence of what was future and unseen. And hence it is no reproach to the Mosaic law that it limited its sanctions to the present world. That was the only discipline which could have any good effect upon such a people. We are told by Christ (*Matt.* xix. 8) that Moses allowed a certain permission to stand in that law which he issued to the Jews "because of the hardness of their hearts." The permission itself was not good, but the evil nature of the people required it. And, following the same analogy, we may say that Moses did not set future retribution before the men of his day because he knew that the thought of such a thing would have no effect upon them; but restricted his promises and threats to this world, because, owing to

their low and ignoble natures, it was only what appealed immediately to the senses that could have any influence over their conduct.

While, however, as a Lawgiver, Moses thus did not take the invisible and spiritual world into account, he doubtless often spoke of the great hope of his own heart to those like-minded with himself. There were still some who clung to the old Patriarchal religion. We find, indeed, that, even in the darkest hour of Israel's history, noble souls continued to cherish the sublime doctrine of immortality, and from time to time gave it more or less definite expression. In the forty-ninth Psalm, the different futures which await the righteous and the wicked are contrasted, and it is said of the one class with respect to the other, "The upright shall have dominion over them in the morning." In the seventy-third Psalm, there is a magnificent outburst of individual faith in the hereafter, when the writer exclaims with reference to God, "Thou shalt guide me with thy counsel, and afterward receive me to glory." The light goes on deepening and spreading as we advance through the prophetic books, while still dimness lingers, and doubt seems occasionally to prevail: it is not, indeed, till Christ appears that all darkness is dispelled as to the existence of a future world, in which every one shall "receive the things done in his body, according to that he hath done, whether it be good or bad"; and thus, as the Apostle declares (2 *Tim.* i. 10), it is He alone who has clearly and fully "brought life and immortality to light through the Gospel."

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