

## ISRAEL'S GOD HER GLORY.

ISAIAH LX. 19.

IN studying the eighty-seventh Psalm<sup>1</sup> we saw that the Psalmist foretold the advent of a time when the God of Israel would become an object of faith and worship to the surrounding nations. Such a prediction obviously implies on the part of him who utters it great confidence in the superior, or even supreme, worth of the Israelitish idea of God. The prophecy is based on the conviction that the God of Israel is worthy to be the God of all lands, that He would be acknowledged to be such when He became known to the nations, that it was an honour to Israel to believe in such a God, and that it would contribute to her fame in the world to have been the means of communicating to the Gentiles so pure and lofty a conception of the Divine Being. What is implied in the Psalm is distinctly asserted in this Verse from the Book of Isaiah. The prophet means to say that the God whom Israel believes in, worships, and serves, is destined one day to be her distinguishing ornament, her boast, and the ground of her fame and influence among the nations. Insignificant in other respects—in numbers, in extent of territory, in all that constitutes political strength—she is to become a power in the world through her idea of God; a source of light to the nations, drawing all men to her light by its superior brightness, so conquering the world, not by force, but by weapons purely spiritual. Such is the import of the pregnant sentence: “Thy God, thy glory.” It is indeed a very bold assertion, and, antecedently, a very improbable one. Every

<sup>1</sup> THE EXPOSITOR, vol. x. pp. 134, *et seq.*

nation has its own idea of God, and its corresponding cultus. Why should this insignificant people have a conception of Deity capable of eclipsing all others? To excel neighbouring peoples of the same Semitic stock, in that respect, was indeed not difficult; for the religions of the pagan Semites were not only earthly, but sensual, and even devilish. But India, Persia, Greece, Egypt—were these great nations to be outdone by Israel in the matter of religion? What was there in her natural genius that should fit her to outstrip the great peoples of antiquity in this highest concern of man; to become the Educator of the world in religion, and to attain to such a pitch of spiritual illumination as might justify a statement which, even in the exalted poetic style of prophecy, seems to wear an aspect of exaggeration and extravagance, viz., that, bathed in the sunlight of her God, she would have no need of the natural sun by day, nor of the moon by night, but would be herself, as it were, a sun unto the whole world? Yet, strange to say, the superiority claimed for Israel is an acknowledged fact: a comparative study of the religions of the world fully bears out the Prophet's bold declaration. That prophet—whether he was Isaiah or another Great Unknown One uttering sublime words of comfort to Jerusalem in her exile in Babylon—with *his idea of God*, was fully justified in saying to his fellow countrymen, "Thy God, O Israel, is thy glory." To prove this let us sketch in hasty outline the conception of the Divine Being unfolded in the second half of the book of Isaiah, from the fortieth Chapter to the end.

1. Israel's God, as described in these prophetic oracles, is a Creator both in nature and in history,

in both realms bringing into being things that were not. The Prophet calls God "the Creator of the ends of the earth," and represents Him as calling Himself "He that created the heavens, and stretched them; He that spread forth the earth, and that which cometh out of it; He that giveth breath unto the people upon it, and spirit to them that walk therein."<sup>1</sup> These and numerous similar passages refer to God's creative activity in the sphere of nature; but not for its own sake, rather as a foundation whereon to build the doctrine of God's creative activity in the sphere of history, bringing new men, new peoples, new events into existence. As the Creator in history, God is called the Maker of Israel;<sup>2</sup> in the same capacity He raises up Cyrus, the destined deliverer of the elect race, and brings him on the scene begirt with strength to play a hero's part as the conqueror of the strong and the champion of the weak.<sup>3</sup> In general terms God, as the Creator in history, is set forth as the *Doer of new things*; as in the words: "Behold, I will do a new thing, now it shall spring forth, shall ye not see it? I will even make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert."<sup>4</sup> The thing to be done is called a new thing, because it is just the opposite of what God did when He delivered Israel out of Egypt, when He made a way, not in the wilderness, but in the sea.

In this conception of God as a Creator in the spheres of physical nature and of history, the Prophet, and all like-minded with him in Israel, stood opposed to all the rest of the world. Speaking generally, the ethnic religions of the past and of the present confound God with

<sup>1</sup> Isa. xl. 28; xlii. 5.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* xlv.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* xliii. 1; xlv. 11.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* xliii. 19.

Nature, and hence are at once Pantheistic and Polytheistic : Pantheistic in theory ; Polytheistic in practice. God is pantheistically regarded as the Soul of Nature, and polytheistically worshipped in particular objects of Nature ; in the sun, the moon, the blue sky, the dawn, the clouds, the winds, or in images of natural objects made by men's hands. Under such an idea of God, there is no room for the notion of creation in the sense of originating the absolutely new. Nature, in the Pantheistic mode of conceiving the universe, always was, and all that happens is simply Nature giving birth to new forms or modes of being. God, in Spinozan phrase, is simply *Natura naturans*. You might as well not speak of God at all, and make the sum of being, the universe, your divinity, as indeed Strauss, in his "Old and New Faith," has frankly done. How different the God of the Hebrew Prophet ! His God is a Being not only *in* the world, but *above* the world, and independent of the world, transcendent not less than immanent. He is the High and Lofty One that inhabiteth eternity.<sup>1</sup> He is the Holy One, not merely in the sense which we are accustomed to associate with the term—separate from sin ; but in the sense of being distinct from the universe of being ; One who would be though the world were not, who was before the mountains were brought forth—the Alone, the Everlasting. Surely this is a nobler idea of God than that of Pantheistic Naturalism, whether as cherished by the primitive inhabitants of India, or by cultivated Greeks of the classic period, or by modern philosophers ! For, let it be noted, this conception of God does not put Him far away from us. It rather brings

<sup>1</sup> Isa. lvii. 15.

Him nigh. It makes Him a Spirit, a Being with a conscious mind, a free will, omniscient, omnipotent, a personal God, capable of having fellowship with men; just because He dwells on high, capable also of dwelling on earth with him that is of a contrite and humble spirit, and of holding true communion with all devout souls.

2. The God of these prophecies is, further, a Ruler who has all human affairs under his control, and, moreover, one who rules in *righteousness*; a Power in the world making for righteousness against unrighteousness. It was by the righteous character of his rule, not by the mere fact of his being a Ruler, that the God of Israel differed from the God of other peoples of the same family, and speaking kindred tongues, such as the Phœnicians, Zidonians, Canaanites, or the Babylonians, among whom those addressed by the Prophet sojourned as exiles. All these peoples worshipped a Divine Ruler, who was King of kings and Lord of lords; for, as Max Müller has remarked, it was characteristic of the Semitic peoples to worship God in history as a Governor, as it was characteristic of the Aryan races to worship God in nature. The very name for the Supreme Deity of Pagan Semites, Baal, or Bel, means Lord. But Baal was not a righteous holy ruler, favouring righteousness and purity, and hating iniquity. He was an immoral divinity; his worship was a foul, vile, brutal thing, a horror to think of, a shame to speak of, outraging decency and the sacred instincts of humanity; a religion in which lust and hate appeared in company, "lust hard by hate," and the cruel murder of Moloch worship was combined with the unmentionable pollution of Mylitta or Asherah worship. The God of

the Pagan Semites was their *shame*. Even apart from the Babylonian *scandalon*, of which Herodotus speaks with becoming disgust, the worship of Baal was not fitted to foster a sense of righteousness ; for, as the God of the Babylonians, he was the patron of mere brute force, the Lord of military hosts, the supreme Tyrant, favouring human tyrants who did due homage at his shrine. Jehovah, on the contrary, was not only a Lord, but a righteous Lord, just in all his ways, holy in all his works ; exercising a moral government in the world in the interest of justice and mercy, and making the whole course of Nature subservient to such a benignant dominion ; not favouring Israel indiscriminately, irrespective of her behaviour, not frowning on other nations merely because they were Gentiles, but long-suffering towards even them, and not permitting destruction to overtake even the Amorites till their iniquity, their scandalous and unnatural vice, had reached a maximum. Israel had good right to glory in possessing such a God, surrounded as she was by peoples worshipping gods and goddesses like Baal, Moloch, Ashtaroth, and Astarte.

3. The God of these later prophecies is not only a righteous Ruler, but the Supreme Ruler, the only God, a Sovereign without a rival. This truth the Prophet proclaims when he represents Jehovah as saying, " I form the light, and create darkness : I make peace, and create evil. I the Lord do all these things." <sup>1</sup> There seems good reason for thinking that the words contain a reference to the religion of the Persians, the good feature of which was an earnest belief in a morally good God who loved right and hated wrong, and made all good things ; and the weak side that it regarded

<sup>1</sup> Isa. xlv. 7.

many things in the world, such as noxious animals and plants, cold, drought, disease, and death, as the work of another evil being who, if not the equal of the Good Spirit, was at least independent of Him, and his perpetual rival. The followers of Zoroaster did not find it possible to maintain the goodness of God otherwise than by setting up beside him an antigod, who should be made responsible for all the evil in the world. They sacrificed the monarchy of Ahuramazda to save his ethical character. It was a crude theory, but very excusable in those ancient Persians, when even a modern philosopher, like John Stuart Mill, finds it necessary to have recourse to a similar dualism, deeming it impossible to believe in Divine goodness except on the hypothesis that God is a being of limited power.<sup>1</sup> The Hebrew Prophet, as if respecting the motive out of which it sprung, does not denounce the dualistic creed of the countrymen of Cyrus, but contents himself with a tacit negation through a positive statement of the truth. The God of Israel is made to say, addressing the future deliverer of the exiles: "I am Jehovah, and there is none else; there is no God beside me; I girded thee, though thou hast not known me: . . . I form the light, and create darkness: I make peace, and create evil: I Jehovah do all these things." It is as if He had said, "I am the Good Spirit, Ahuramazda, in whom thou believest; and there is no evil spirit beside me? my fellow in the possession of Divine nature, and my eternal antagonist: I made the things whose existence thou ascribest to his malign agency." Surely this Hebrew monotheism was a higher thing than the dualism with which it is

<sup>1</sup> Vide his *Three Essays on Religion*.

implicitly contrasted! Lessing, in his tract on the Education of the Human Race, says that the Jews got their idea of God purified by contact with the wise Persians during the period of the exile. If they did, it was not by borrowing; it was rather as being stimulated by a defective idea of God prevalent in the land of their sojourn to reflect on the loftier idea contained within their national faith, and so to attain to a clearer perception of its significance, and a fuller consciousness of its value. The supremacy of Jehovah was, therefore, another ground for legitimate boasting to Israel. She might not only say to her Babylonian masters, "Our God is not only a Ruler, but a righteous Ruler;" she might, moreover, say to her Persian deliverer and his fellow countrymen, "Our God is not only like yours, a good and holy Being, Creator of all things, whereof light is the emblem, Friend of the children of light, but He is the Ruler over all, without a rival, Creator and Governor of what you call the kingdom of darkness as well as of the kingdom of light." And the more one meditates on the mystery of the universe, the more he feels disposed to acquiesce in this Hebrew idea of God as the true one. Amid the perplexities of Providence and the mysteries of Nature, we may for a season adopt the notion of two Gods fighting against each other; but the craving of the human mind for unity, and the craving of the heart for a cheerful hopeful theory of life, are too strong for that crude notion to give permanent contentment. Sooner or later we must come back to the doctrine of these prophecies: "I am God, and there is none else."

4. Yet another characteristic of Israel's God, the most remarkable of all, remains to be mentioned. He



is not only a just God, but a *Saviour*;<sup>1</sup> not only a Power making for righteousness, but a gracious Being who deals not with men after their sins, but overcomes evil with good; who in sovereign love forms and executes gracious purposes. This is the distinguishing attribute of the God of Israel, or, let us say, the God of the Bible, of the Old Testament, not less than of the New. The God of the sacred Scriptures is, before all things, the God of the gracious purpose. Mr. Matthew Arnold, in a recent work which has attracted much attention, maintains that the God of the Bible, and more especially of the Hebrew Scriptures is, before all things, the God of righteousness. God, in short, is a synonym for the tendency at work in the world to bring about, in individual and in social life, a correspondence between conduct and lot. The idea of grace this author almost entirely overlooks. It is a great omission; for this is the dominant idea of the Bible. The Bible without this idea is the play of Hamlet without the part of Hamlet. Revelation properly consists in God's self-manifestation as the God of *grace*. All other attributes are subordinate to that, and are revealed incidentally. The Bible is the record and interpretation of this manifestation which God made of Himself as the God of the gracious purpose. The Author of the later prophecies of Isaiah understood all this well. If there is one passage which, more than all others in his sublime utterances, may be taken as the keynote of his theology, it is this: "In all their affliction he was afflicted, and the angel of his presence saved them: in his love and in his pity he redeemed them; and he bare them, and carried them all the days

<sup>1</sup> Isa. xlv. 21.

of old." <sup>1</sup> The God revealed in all Israel's history is, to his view, not so much the God of law as the God of grace. And God, in his theology, is the God of grace not for Israel only, but for the world; witness the well-known text, "Look unto me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth: for I am God, and there is none else."<sup>2</sup> Jehovah, as he conceives Him, is not the God of the Jews only, but of the Gentiles also; therefore he represents Jehovah as exclaiming, "Behold me, behold me," unto nations that were not called by his name.<sup>3</sup> The crowning glory of the God he believes in is that He is the God of the whole earth. "It is a light thing that thou shouldest be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob, and to restore the preserved of Israel: I will also give thee for a light to the Gentiles, that thou mayest be my salvation unto the end of the earth."<sup>4</sup>

The foregoing particulars taken together constitute a doctrine of God which the thought of the wisest has not yet surpassed, and, it may be confidently affirmed, never will. The question forces itself on every reflecting mind, Whence did Israel get this idea of God, this incomparable system of ethical monotheism? Naturalistic philosophy replies, It was the product of circumstances, and of the peculiar genius of Israel, acting and reacting on each other. On this view Israel may be said to have created her God. Strange, if true! Strange that a Semitic race should have given to the world so lofty an idea of God, when the well-established fact is considered that the religions of the other Semitic races were distinguished from all other ethnic religions only by their baseness. Strange also, when it is re-

<sup>1</sup> Isa. lxiii. 9.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. xlv. 22.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. lxxv. 1.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. xlix. 6.

membered that the history of Israel shews that she was no exception to the general downward tendency of the Semitic races, God's prophets having to maintain a constant warfare with the idolatrous proclivities of their countrymen. More credible is the Bible doctrine that Israel obtained her idea of God by revelation. Israel did not create God. God created Israel, and gave to her a true idea of Himself through the marvellous works which he wrought to make a disciplined organized nation out of a horde of runaway slaves.

A. B. BRUCE.

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*THE SECOND EPISTLE TO TIMOTHY.*

CHAPTER IV.

A CARELESS or hypercritical reader might be tempted to suggest that St. Paul returns, with wearisome iteration, to the task of denouncing the hostile elements and false teachers who had embittered his last visit to Asia; that a tone of exhaustion displays itself; that his voice begins to grate, and his words to pall over the unwelcome theme. Before coming to such a conclusion, it would be well to ponder the heart-breaking disappointment which these immoral busybodies had provided for him. Let it be remembered that certain insolent blunderers into themes which they were incapable of understanding, sundry braggarts and deceivers of silly women, a few self-conceited critics of all Divine revelation, pretenders to systems of thought or methods of life which cut at the very root of Christian sanctification, were making sad havoc among the Churches of Asia. Their plausibility might win the weak, irritate the strong, and enfeeble the work of