

STUDIES IN THE EPISTLE TO THE ROMANS.

SOCRATES relates of Eunomius that he composed a commentary on the Epistle to the Romans in seven books, but, "though he spent many words, failed to seize the gist of the Epistle." Many words have been spent by better men since then upon the same task, and if complete success has not even yet been obtained, the gist of the Epistle is perhaps clearer now than it was. The following papers will attempt to focus some results of the process upon such vital elements of the problem as seem as yet incompletely solved. Their aim will be to grasp a few determining conceptions, the result of years of thought upon the Epistle, round its leading difficulties; and where questions not ripe for an answer arise, at any rate to attempt a statement of the exact problem involved.

I.

To sift preliminary questions such as are dealt with in "Introductions" is outside my present purpose.¹ The questions, who? when? where? to whom? why? what? open up, in reference to our Epistle, exceptionally wide fields of inquiry.

I lay down, therefore, in order to define my position on introductory questions, that this Epistle forms the last of the second or controversial group of St. Paul's Epistles,

¹ Where many good Introductions exist, it may suffice, without invidious exclusiveness, to name those prefixed to the two best commentaries in English—perhaps in any language—namely, that of Dr. Gifford, and the recent admirably complete one by Dr. Sanday and Mr. Headlam.

that it was written before the passover of 58,¹ that the last two chapters, and the final doxology, were from the first part of the Epistle, that the names in chapter xvi. belong to the Roman Church, and not to the Ephesian. I hold that St. Paul wrote with some knowledge of the condition, history, and composition of the Roman Church; that the latter was originally formed by the agency of Christian Jews, but that these were now greatly outnumbered by Christian Gentiles; that the Epistle, intended, as it appears to be, for readers Gentile by blood, but largely Jewish in their ideas and in their religious training, is a good index to the composition of the Roman Church at this time; that, in fact, at Rome as elsewhere, the large body of proselytes—uncircumcised but devout persons who worshipped the one God, attended the synagogue, kept the moral law, and studied the Scriptures—had furnished in great numbers the first recruits to the Christian society.

I assume that Romans is an expansion, in more systematic and less controversial form, of the position taken up by St. Paul in his controversial letter to the Galatians. I do not assume, but read straight out of St. Paul, that he regarded the whole success or failure of his work for Christ as hanging upon the thorough saturation of Gentile Christendom with the principles upon which he had fought the Galatian Judaizers; that by "his gospel" he meant something which other apostles might doubtless admit, but which it was given to him alone to fully understand and aggressively affirm. With Ramsay I assume that the evangelization of the Roman world as such was an object consciously before his mind and deliberately planned; if so, it is not much to assume that he knew that to influence the Christians of Rome was to influence the Christians of

¹ Without prejudice to a reconsideration of the whole chronological question in the light of Mr. C. H. Turner's researches in *New Dictionary of the Bible*, s.v. Chronology.

the Roman world. I assume that he knew that the Roman Church, Jewish in its religious training, was yet untouched by that anti-Pauline spirit which had begun to show itself there (too late for success) by the time St. Paul wrote from Rome to Philippi.

I assume, then, that in this Epistle St. Paul aims at giving the Gentile Christianity of the future its doctrinal foundation and principles of life; and you will, if you have followed me so far, hardly need to ask why this Epistle was addressed to "all that were in Rome, beloved of God." The Epistle, then, is the first deliberate attempt at a systematic statement of doctrine, the first book of Christian theology. It differs from the theology of later times, firstly, by being the work of one who had seen the Lord, had received a direct personal mission from Him, "not by man nor through man," and who spoke as His specially chosen interpreter or "instrument," *σκεῦος ἐκλογῆς*. In speaking of "theology" in the Epistle, we must remember always that it is unique, and stands above theology.

But it also differs from later theology in its treatment. It is not a discussion in abstract or scientific form. It is dialectical rather than systematic in its structure, and has close reference to problems which pressed hard upon St. Paul—and doubtless in part on his readers—but which are no longer pressing questions with ourselves. These problems arise out of St. Paul's Jewish antecedents and surroundings. Had he written with less constant reference to them, his words might have been more easily and directly applicable to the purposes of the modern student or preacher; but they would have lost that nervous vigour and freshness of passion, that intense personal energy, which give them "hands and feet" to arrest and penetrate the reader of every age.

In this Epistle the principles which underlie the life of Christians, principles to be found in germ in the words of

our Lord, but left by Him to be unfolded by His Spirit through His "chosen instrument," first found permanent expression. The Epistle is their record for all time, and to it the faith and the theology of the Church must ever come back to renew their youth.

II.

The essence of the gospel is Life; and it is the Christian Life—what it presupposes, what forces sustain it, in what it issues—that this Epistle enables us to understand.

In chapter xv. 19 St. Paul speaks of himself as preaching "in the power of signs and wonders, in the power of the Spirit." The Epistle thus confronts us with the most direct possible testimony to Christian miracles—that of the person who worked them. The Christianity of St. Paul is miraculous; to reject miracle is to discredit St. Paul as a witness to what our religion originally was. All admit that Christianity "has produced the greatest change that has ever been known in the world, with reference to moral standard and moral practice." If it is worth while to be a Christian—to hold and to teach this religion, unique in its power over life and conduct—it is surely worth while not to miss the secret of its power. If we are not to miss it, we must make sure that ours is the Christianity which originated this power—the Christianity of the apostles—above all of St. Paul—above all of the Epistle to the Romans.

Our age is somewhat shy of miracle; the idea is in the air that miracles are a kind of dead weight which Christian faith has to carry, but which encumbers its intellectual appeal, and must not be allowed to enter into its essence. The idea that miracles can prove doctrine, however incredible, and that Christianity is primarily a body of doctrine, to be accepted not so much on its evident merits, but simply because of its miraculous proofs, is more alien

to the mind of our age than to that of any age before. The idea of a gospel without doctrine, and depending on no miracle, is attractive to many minds; but such a gospel would not have overcome the world.

At any rate, belief in miracle safeguards the central core of Christian faith—faith in a God of love. That God is love is the last word, the highest utterance, of religious conviction. If we believe in miracle, we *must* believe in a *personal* God. Without miracle, the idea of God gravitates towards the impersonal; and an impersonal God is at any rate not a God of love.

This thought underlies the argument of Mozley in his seventh Lecture on Miracles, which I think contains as true and penetrating an estimate of the Epistle to the Romans as is anywhere to be found.

The Epistle to the Romans, he says, is a prophecy, that is, a claim for *Christian doctrine*, the doctrine of the Incarnation and Atonement of the Son of God,—that it is a wholly new motive power in the sphere of the moral life. It predicts, so to speak, of this truth that it will prove to be a force “able to lift man above the power of sin, the love of the world, and the lust of the flesh.” God was by “this transcendent act of mediation, this mystery transacted in highest heaven,” reconciled to man, “pardoned him, and sent him forth anew on his course, with the gift of the Holy Spirit in his heart.” This was not the work merely of a new and higher moral code, “for men do not do right things because they are told to do them”; nor of a new example, for “the force of example has a natural tendency to wear out.”

And this prophecy has been fulfilled. St. Paul’s “high view of human nature” has been verified. St. Paul took a high view of human nature not founded on empty idealism, but upon the profoundest insight into man’s guilt and misery. Mahomet took a sagacious view of human

nature, but a low one. His religion, a religion without Incarnation or Atonement, rests on the perception that men can be counted upon to do two things for the glory of God—"to transact religious forms, and fight." These duties are severely insisted upon, while "within the sphere of common practical life, where men's great trial lies," Mahomet shows "disdainful laxity."

Nothing, I say, could be truer than all this, or more directly relevant to the central meaning of our Epistle. But on one point I would supplement Mozley's statement by way of caution. To "believe in" Christ, to St. Paul, *involves* belief of doctrine and fact; you cannot have one without the other. But it is not in the *doctrinal assent*, as such, that the central act of faith, the central motive to action, consists. Faith is essentially trust *in a person*. "Abraham believed God," "hoped against hope," and the spiritual son of Abraham, the Christian believer, surrenders himself, in the act of faith, to Christ. The character of God, revealed in Christ, mirrors itself in the spirit of man, and transforms him "into the same image." Faith is in a person; belief of fact and of doctrine is implied, but does not in itself constitute faith as understood by St. Paul.

III.

The theological part of the Epistle extends from chapter i. 15 to the end of chapter xi. Its main divisions are three. The Theology of Redemption (i. 16-v.), the Theology of the Christian life (vi.-viii.), the Theology of History (ix.-xi.).

I will briefly sketch out the contents of each division.

The theology of redemption falls into two main parts, which are gathered up and contrasted in chapter v. 12-21—namely, the "wrath of God" (i. 18-iii. 20), and the "righteousness of God" (iii. 21-v. 11).

The *wrath of God* is the correlative of man's *need* of redemption. "First comes the statement that the world up to that moment had been, morally speaking, a failure." A moral creed was there, but it stopped short at enunciation. Among Jews and Gentiles alike the facts are the same "knowledge without action." The utmost that the knowledge of right could do for man was to confound him with a sense of utter self-condemnation. The natural yearning for communion with God—"Tu Domine fecisti nos ad te"—could only increase his misery by making him feel his impotence to make the first step, to undo the shameful past, to cross the inexorable barrier set up by his own sin.

And this self-condemnation was but the perception of an awfully real fact: the wrath of God,—revealed in all its fearful intensity, not only upon the careless Gentile, but upon the privileged Jew, whose privilege (none the less real because of his apostasy, iii. 1-8) only heightened his personal guilt.

But God's earliest dealings with men—His self-revealed character, had not only led men to fear His holiness, but had also from the first led men to look upon Him as a Saviour; His long series of mercies to His people had led them to look forward to something in the future, some deliverance more final, more complete, more marvellous than His mighty works of old. God was pledged to redeem, and God was righteous.¹ The Old Testament revelation had led men to hold to the righteousness of God as containing the promise of salvation; the gospel declares it as an accomplished fact. And the universality of the wrath of God before Christ only brings out that redemption, when it came, was the sole outcome of the righteousness of God, and not in any degree the achievement of man.

¹ This subject will be dealt with in a future paper.

God's *righteousness* has as its correlative the *fact* of redemption.

The redeeming work of Christ then, wherein God appears as 'righteous and making-righteous' (iii. 26.), humbles man even more completely than did the antecedent revelation of wrath. Their boast is shut out, not (only) by a law of works, but (even more completely) by a law of faith. The privilege of the Israelite has no place in the sight of God.

And this strange result, so far from revoking the word of God in the Old Testament, is really its fulfilment. This gospel of faith, this levelling of privilege, was preached before the Law, before any characteristic institute of Judaism was ordained. The whole story of Abraham—the boasted father of Jewish privilege—makes this clear (chap. iv.)

Well then, my readers, the apostle concludes, let us all make this gift of God our own. Peace with God is ours, founded on the certainty of God's love for us, a certainty created in our hearts by the Spirit of God Himself, but no mere subjective certainty, for actual recorded fact speaks plainly to us of that love, a love transcending all probable limits of human devotion. We can trust God to complete what He has begun, and live in joyful hope, however the appearances of life are against us.

True, the experience of history so far has been that of a world-wide heritage of death and sin, but the act of weakness which bequeathed that heritage to man has now been superseded by an act of Divine power fraught with the promise of righteousness and life to all who receive the abundance of its grace (v. 12-19).

In this great two-fold division of human history, how subordinate a part was played by law! It forms the last episode of the heritage of death, aggravating the disease in order to intensify man's want of the remedy (v. 20).

St. Paul has done half his work, and what he has done is more than half of the whole. He has shown that the wall of sin no longer shuts out the soul from God, that access to God is ours, that the Christian life is made possible.

But it remains for him to place the Christian life itself before our eyes, and this he does in the second great section. And, first of all, he takes it in the concrete (vi). The two-fold question, "Shall we sin?" (vv. 1, 15), at first sight answers itself: no one would say that the Christian is to sin. But the weight of the question really turns on the *reason why*. These chapters (vi.-viii.) give us the fundamental principles of Christian ethics. And, first of all, he shows us that "the grace wherein we stand," which he has hitherto viewed negatively as justification, *i.e.* forgiveness of sin, is on its positive side union with Christ. If we were united to Him by baptism, the rite resembling His death, we shall further be united with Him by something corresponding to His resurrection, *viz.*, a new vital energy—*καινότης ζωῆς*. Only we must realize this: allow the new life of Christ to wield our limbs, for we are no longer under an external compulsion, but instinct with an indwelling force—not under law, but under grace.

Our obedience to the will of God will be not *less* complete for this reason, but *far more*. If (he continues) you seem to take what I have said as a paradox, I will make my meaning plain by an unworthy metaphor. You have to choose between slavery and slavery. Nay, you have made your choice; you have renounced slavery to sin. Well, then, you are slaves of righteousness, slaves of God. You cannot, if you look back on the past, repent your choice. You are dead in Christ; and when a person dies, he passes out of the control of law. You, then, in dying with Christ, died to the law, and are alive to Christ alone (vi. 15-vii. 4).

St. Paul passes from the concrete picture of the Christian life to the consideration of the forces which are at work in it (vii. 5-viii.) He employs the method of difference, comparing the pre-Christian life *at its very best, i.e.* as lived under Divine law, with the Christian life—the old life under the Letter with the new life in the Spirit. This contrast is tersely stated in vii. 5, 6; then life under law is characterized in vii. 7-25; and life in the Spirit in chapter viii. In viii. 12 *sqq.* the question asked in vi. 1, so far as it needs an explicit answer, is finally answered.

I postpone any detailed consideration of these wonderful chapters to another paper, nor shall I more than glance at the contents of ix.-xi. Their connection with the general argument of the Epistle may be best seen if we consider how they are anticipated in iii. 1-8. That this is so can be readily proved. The rejection of Israel, then, was a fact which apparently collided with the main thought of the first section—the righteousness of God. As we shall see later on, the righteousness of God was, to St. Paul, above all God's consistency with, or truth to, His revealed character and purpose. And the absolute levelling of Jew and Gentile, especially the *levelling down* of the Jew to the position of the Gentile as the object of God's wrath, had the look of a revocation of express promise—the going back upon God's own covenant. Was, then, God a "covenant-breaker"? *μη γένοιτο*. Yet to St. Paul the difficulty was a very real one, and had to be explained. His fundamental explanation is found in ix. 6-29 and xi. 1-10, viz., that the proper party to the Divine covenant, the true heir to the promises, is not Israel after the flesh, but the believing few, or, rather, all who by their faith prove themselves true sons and heirs of Abraham (cf. chap. iv.), and that this has been made plain by God all along. But there is the equally important thought that the calling in of all nations, without which the Divine promises from

Abraham downward would not be satisfied, nor the truth of God really maintained—that the calling in of the Gentiles would have been impossible but for the rejection of the Jews. “By their fall, salvation had come to the Gentiles” ; their *unrighteousness* had *established* the righteousness of God (iii. 5). This is the great paradox of the third section, upon which I may say something later on. Still, even with St. Paul, τὸ συγγένες τοι δεῖνον ἢ θ’ ὄμιλια, blood is thicker than water, and he will not surrender the hope of the ultimate conversion of the apostate people, consecrated as they are by the root whence they had sprung.

I omit any detailed account of the practical portion, full as it is of points of high interest, and return to some difficulties in the first section.

IV.

St. Paul starts by characterizing the gospel as *δύναμις θεοῦ εἰς σωτηρίαν παντὶ τῷ πιστεύοντι*, and that, because in it is revealed God’s righteousness.

The revelation of God’s righteousness to man, then, is man’s salvation; the gospel which reveals it is God’s power exerted for that purpose.

The fact of such a revelation is explained by its need. Apart from the gospel, and the Divine promise of the gospel, there is only a revelation of God’s wrath.

Here we meet a difficult series of questions. Firstly, what is meant here by God’s wrath? and when and how is it revealed?

The close correlation between *salvation* and *wrath* appears below, chap. v. 9: ἡ ὀργὴ there is spoken of as future. And this is an almost technical use of the term in St. Paul; it has everywhere an express or tacit reference to the “day of wrath” (see Sanday’s note on i. 18), and the words ἀποκαλύπτεται ἀπ’ οὐράνου (axiomatic present as in 1 Corin-

thians iii. 13), coupled with the language of ii. 5, seems to fasten us here to an eschatological reference. But, then, how does something only to be revealed at the last day prove, antecedently to Christ, man's need of redemption? The answer seems to be that while the "unveiling" of God's wrath takes place on the day of wrath, the certainty that it will be unveiled is a *present* certainty. That God hates sin, and will terribly punish sinners, is known even to Gentiles (i. 32; cf. the definite article in Acts xxiv. 25), and certainly to Jews. That this day of wrath was near at hand was still St. Paul's belief when he wrote this Epistle; but meanwhile the judicial blindness of the heathen world (i. 28) was at once a climax of guilt and a premonition of the wrath to come.

The wrath of God is to be revealed, then, against all men who "hold" the truth in unrighteousness. Of these there are two classes: those whose sense of right and wrong has become so degenerate that they even applaud sin in others, and those who uphold a strict moral standard in theory, but deny it in practice. The latter class hold the primacy of guilt; and they are, practically, none other than the Jews.

That intellectual homage to God's will, the exultant cherishing of the law, could not raise the soul from the death of sin, we shall learn from vii. 7-25. But the comparatively high level of moral effort there described must have been exceptional even among Jews. What was true of the best was truer still of the average. The Jews were, tested by their average practical morality, *σκεύη ὀργῆς* (ix. 22), fully ripe for destruction, *τέκνα ὀργῆς* (Eph. ii. 3), even like the rest of the world, like those "sinners of the Gentiles" on whom they looked down from their imagined pedestal of privilege.

There is an apparent,¹ not a real, contradiction here with

¹ Ritschl's disparagement of Ephesians partly turned on this supposed difficulty.

the covenant relation with God which had certainly belonged to Israel as a whole, and which in its fulness applied to the nucleus, which had always existed, of "Israelites indeed." Whatever its meaning (and this question may be discussed in another connexion), the status of the Israelite, as member of a society to which God had, as it were, pledged Himself by covenant, did not in the least exempt him from the *δικαιοκρισία* (ii. 5) of God. If Israelites were in a state of grace *before* Christ, they were so by virtue of faith—a faith which was virtually faith in Christ (*e.g.* Abraham, iv. *sub fin.*). But no claim of descent, or privilege, or circumcision, gave any man a position of privilege before the tribunal of God. In the day when, "according to my gospel," God shall judge the hidden things of men, possession of the law will only aggravate the guilt of its infraction.

By "my gospel," St. Paul does not, I think, mean simply "*the* gospel"—simply what he taught in connexion with the older apostles. The phrase occurs, both in chapter ii. 16 and in the doxology, xvi. 25, in a "universalist" context. In the latter place the reference is to the universality, *εἰς πάντα τὰ ἔθνη*, of the gospel blessings; in the former to the irrelevance of Jewish privilege ("hearing of law") in the day when God shall judge the secret things of man. In 1 Timothy i. 11 the reference to the Pauline view of the law is clear. In 2 Timothy ii. 8 the reference is no longer specific. But the distinctive *content* of St. Paul's gospel is strictly involved in Galatians ii. 7. His gospel is *ἄλλο* though not *ἕτερον* (*ibid.* i. 7): he preached what the older apostles preached (1 Cor. xv. 11; 2 Tim. ii. 8), but with an added, and specially revealed, insight into all its consequences, with reference to Jewish law, Jewish privilege, and the righteousness of faith.

V.

The Jew is *ἀναπολόγητος* because he had knowledge and law. The same is true of the Gentile. He, too, had knowledge (i. 20 *seq.*); he, too, had a law. In ii. 14, 15, St. Paul argues that such practical morality as existed among Gentiles shows, by its coincidence with the precepts of the Jewish moral law (*τὰ τοῦ νόμου*), that the function (*ἔργον*) of that law is discharged, in their case, by the commandment written in their hearts. In this sense, "natural" morality corresponds to perfected Christian ethics (2 Cor. iii. 3), and both, alike, are in contrast with the Jewish system. Such phenomena among Gentiles are, of course, to St. Paul, fragmentary and exceptional (chap. i.); but they exist. The gospel restores the shattered life of natural ethics, not by enforcing the letter, but by superseding it, and giving life to *φυσικὴ ἀρετὴ* by the Holy Spirit. *Κυρία ἀρετὴ*, the dream of Aristotle, is made a reality, *καθάπερ ἀπὸ κυρίου πνεύματος*.

But there are passages which seem to go beyond this, and speak of "the law" as having reigned over *all* men, even Gentiles, before Christ—*e.g.* vii. 1–4. What St. Paul says of the Law as a preparatory stage, as the last and darkest episode of the reign of sin, gathers greatly in force if we understand him not to be merely analysing the religious history of the Jew, but that of mankind as a whole. In what sense, then, were the Gentiles under *the* law? in what sense could Gentiles be said to have died to the law through the Body of Christ?

To former proselytes such language was not wholly surprising. *They* would feel its applicability to themselves. St. Athanasius¹ speaks of the Law and Prophets as "not sent for the Jews alone, but as a holy school of the knowledge of God and the conduct of the soul for all the world."

¹ *De Incarn.* xii. 5.

And the proselytes were only the most conspicuous example of the widespread direct influence of Judaism as a moral creed. Moreover, without such *direct* influence, the moral *creed* of classical antiquity was a high one. Profanity, unfilial treatment of parents, murder, uncleanness, theft, slander, even coveting (*e.g.* in the superb reply of the Oracle to Glaucus son of Epicydes, in Herodotus) all these things were as unsparingly condemned by Greek and Roman morality as by the ten commandments. True, the practical morals of the Gentile world were flagrantly at issue with their moral creed. But, then, so were those of the Jews. The difference was of degree only. In both cases alike the moral law pressed on man from without, and its clear utterance provoked wilful disobedience: "when the commandment came, sin awoke to life, and I died." "Nitimur in vetitum semper, cupimusque negata."

The great difference there was not moral but religious. The Jew was intent upon righteousness in God's sight; his religion had a moral aim, though a false one. The Gentile had no moral aim in his religion; his religion sat more lightly on his conscience than than of the Jew. This very fact made him easier to teach: he had simply to learn—the Jew had first to *unlearn*.

But to St. Paul, so far from being the exclusive privilege of the Jew, the law, regarded in respect of its moral content, viewed as a standard of morality, was precisely that which the Jew and the Gentile had in common. In a sense the Gentile was *ἀνομος*, the Jew *ἔννομος*. But the difference was apparent rather than real. As a factor in religious education, the experience of the impotence of law (*τὸ ἀδύνατον τοῦ νόμου*) to regenerate the moral life was an experience not Jewish only, but common to all men everywhere.