

THE IMMORTALITY OF THE SOUL.

I.

IMMORTALITY BEFORE CHRIST.

IN these papers I shall discuss the history of the phrase *Immortality of the Soul*, and the history and worth of the teaching therein embodied.

THE GREEKS.

That the *soul* of man is *immortal* or *deathless*, or in other words that every human soul will exist in happiness or misery for endless ages, is a conspicuous feature of the teaching of PLATO. But that this doctrine was by no means universal among the Greeks of his day, we learn from p. 70 of his *Phaedo*, where we read, "In what relates to the soul men are apt to be incredulous; they fear that when she has left the body her place may be nowhere, and that on the very day of death she may be destroyed and perish, (*διαφθείρηται τε καὶ ἀπολλύηται*,) immediately on her release from the body issuing forth like smoke or air and in her flight vanishing away into nothingness."

In the pages following, Socrates is represented as arguing against this popular belief. He endeavours first to prove that the soul existed before birth, and then that it will exist after death. On p. 70, he goes on to say, "Whether the souls of men after death are or are not in Hades, may be argued in this manner:—The ancient doctrine of which I have been speaking affirms that they go from hence into the other world, and return hither, and are born from the dead. Now if this be true, and the living come from the dead, then our souls must exist there: for, if not, how could they be born again?"

Lower down, at the foot of p. 72, an interlocutor says, "Your favourite doctrine, that knowledge is simply re-

collection, if true, also necessarily implies a previous time in which we have learnt that which we now recollect. But this would be impossible unless our soul had been in some place before existing in the human form. Here then is another proof that *the soul is an immortal something*": ἀθάνατόν τι ἔοικεν ἡ ψυχὴ εἶναι.

On p. 77, the argument and dialogue continue. "I think, said Simmias, that Kebes is satisfied. Although he is the most incredulous of mortals, yet I think that he is persuaded of this, that our soul existed before we were born. But that after death the soul will continue to exist is not yet proved even to my own satisfaction. I cannot get rid of the feeling of the many to which Kebes was referring, that when the man dies the soul may be scattered, and that this may be the end of her. For, admitting that she may have been born elsewhere and framed out of other elements and was in existence before entering the human body, why after having entered in and gone out again may she not herself be destroyed and come to an end? Very true, Simmias, said Kebes; that our soul existed before we were born, was the first half of the argument, and this appears to have been proved. That the soul will exist after death as well as before birth, is the other half of which the proof is still wanting and has to be supplied."

On the pages following, Socrates argues that the soul is not compounded, and therefore cannot be dissolved; that it is unseen, and that while the seen changes the unseen remains; and that at death the soul goes to the pure and the always-existing and the immortal and the unchangeable, to which it is akin.

On p. 81, he says that the soul which has learnt the lessons of philosophy goes at death to the divine and immortal and rational, and dwells in peace; but that the sensual are dragged down into gloom until they are im-

prisoned in another body appropriate to their former lives." "Men who have followed after gluttony and wantonness and drunkenness, and have no thought of avoiding them, will probably pass into asses and beasts of that sort. And those who have chosen the portion of injustice and tyranny and violence will pass into wolves or into hawks or kites. Whither else can we suppose them to go?" And Socrates goes on to argue at length that the true philosopher has no need to fear that at death his soul will cease to be.

Having thus endeavoured to prove that the soul will survive death, the dialogue goes on to adduce evidence that by its own nature the soul of man can never cease to be.

On p. 88, a serious question is raised. "Suppose we grant even more than you say, and besides acknowledging that the soul existed before birth admit also that after death the souls of some exist and will continue to exist, and will be born and die again and again, and that there is a natural strength in the soul which will hold out and be born many times, nevertheless we may be still inclined to think that she will weary in the labours of successive births and may at last succumb in one of her deaths and utterly perish; and this death and dissolution of the body which brings destruction to the soul may be unknown to any of us, for no one of us can have had any experience of it: and, if so, I maintain that he who is confident about death has but a foolish confidence, unless he is able to prove that the *soul* is altogether *immortal and imperishable*: ψυχὴ ἀθάνατον τε καὶ ἀνώλεθρον. But, if he cannot prove it, he who is about to die must needs fear about his soul lest when it is unyoked from the body it may altogether perish."

Against this serious objection, Plato, speaking through the lips of Socrates, argues at great length. His arguments move our pity. For they are the painful efforts of a good man straining his eyes, in the twilight and uncertainty of Greek philosophy, to catch a glimpse of a ray of light from beyond

the grave: and for us, walking in the light of the "promise of life in Christ Jesus," they have no practical value. In these arguments we frequently find the phrase *the soul is immortal*: it occurs four times on p. 95, and not less than twenty times in the whole dialogue. Moreover, its meaning is indisputable. Plato uses the phrase to assert that every human soul, by its very nature, will continue in conscious existence for endless ages.

This teaching is put to noble moral use. On p. 107, we read: "If the soul is really immortal, what care should be taken of her, not only for this time only which we call living, but for all time. And the danger would seem to be awful if one shall neglect her. For if death were an end of all, a fortunate thing it would be to the wicked when dead to be quit of the body, and at the same time of their wickedness along with the soul. But now, since the soul is manifestly immortal, there is no other escape or salvation from wickedness except for it to become as good and as wise as possible. For the soul takes nothing else with her into Hades except education and nurture, which are said very much to help or injure the dead man straightway at the beginning of his journey thither."

At the conclusion of the work we read that those guilty of great crimes will be cast into Tartarus, whence they will never go out; that those less guilty will be cast into Tartarus for a time, and then if their victims take pity on them they will be allowed to escape; and that the righteous will go to the mansions of the blessed.

The same teaching, clothed in the same language, is found in Plato's *Republic*. The writer argues, in bk. x. pp. 108-110, that vice cannot destroy the soul, and that therefore nothing else can. "Do the injustice and other evil of the soul waste and consume the soul? do they by inhering in her and clinging to her at last bring her to death and separate her from the body? Certainly not. And it is

unreasonable to suppose that anything can perish from without through external operation of evil, which could not be destroyed from within by internal corruption." Lower down he says, "But the soul, which cannot be destroyed by evil inherent or external, must it not be something always existing, and if always existing immortal? Certainly. And if so, the souls must always be the same: for they will not become fewer, if not one perishes; nor more." Here again we find frequently the same phrase, *the soul is immortal*. The book concludes with a tremendous vision of judgment, in which all men good and bad receive beyond death exact retribution according to their works.

Similarly in Plato's *Meno*, p. 81: "The soul of man is immortal, and at one time has an end which they call dying, and then again is born, but never perishes: ἀπόλλυσθαι δ' οὐδέποτε. We must therefore live our life in the most holy way. . . . The soul then, as being immortal and having been born again many times," etc. We have the same phraseology and teaching in the *Phaedrus*. On pp. 245-6, we read, "Every soul is immortal. For that which is always in motion is immortal. . . . But if that which is moved by itself is declared to be immortal, he who says that this is the essence and description of the soul will not be put to confusion. For the body, as being moved from without, is soulless: but that which is moved from within has a soul, this being the nature of the soul. But if this be so, that which is self-moved being no other than soul, necessarily the soul must be unbegotten and immortal."

The immortality of the soul is discussed at great length in bk. i. of CICERO'S *Tusculan Disputations*. He admits the wide diversity of opinion on the subject. So in art. 9: "Some imagine death to be the departure of the soul from the body: others think that the soul and body perish together, and that the soul is extinguished in the body. Of those who think that the soul departs, some think it to be

immediately dissipated, others that it continues for a time, others that it continues always." We frequently meet the phrase *immortalitas animorum* or "immortality of souls," or other equivalent phrases, e.g. arts. 11, 14, 16, 17. In art. 16, we read that "Pherecydes, a Syrian, first said that the souls of men are eternal"; that his disciple, Pythagoras, held the same opinion; and that Plato was said to have come to Italy and there learnt the Pythagorean teaching about the eternity of souls. In art. 32, Cicero speaks of the Stoics as saying that human souls survive death, but not for ever. He accepts Plato's metaphysical arguments for the endless permanence of the human soul; and indeed quotes at full length the passage from the *Phaedrus* given above in part. But of Plato's conspicuous and noble teaching of moral retribution beyond death, he has but slight hold. He rather looks upon bodily life as an evil, and death as release from it; thus contradicting Plato. Of the moral issues involved, he seems to have thought little.

That Pythagoras taught that the *soul* is *immortal*, is also asserted by Diogenes Laertius (bk. viii. 19) and by other ancient writers. The same phrase, that man's soul is immortal, is used by Herodotus, bk. ii. 123. This proves that the phrase and thought were earlier than Plato.

To what extent the doctrine of the immortality of the soul was accepted by the masses in ancient Greece, we do not know. But in later days the popularity of Plato made it widely known, as matter for discussion, among educated Greeks and Romans.

THE EGYPTIANS.

We turn now to teaching about the soul much earlier than the earliest Greek philosophers whose opinions have come down to us.

Throughout THE BOOK OF THE DEAD, recently published in English by Dr. Wallis Budge, curator of Egyptian anti-

quities in the British Museum, immortal and endless life beyond the grave, with all good things, very much like the good things of earth, is promised to the righteous on condition of observance of certain religious duties. So chap. xxxi. rubric: "If this chapter be known by the deceased, he shall come forth by day, he shall rise up and walk upon the earth among the living, and he shall never fail and come to an end, never, never, never." But this immortality of blessing is never supported, as are the rewards for which Plato looked, by any teaching about the indestructible nature of the soul. Its permanence is always represented as a reward of righteousness and religion. About the fate of the wicked little is said. But apparently their doom was annihilation.

In Dr. Budge's Introduction to *The Book of the Dead*, p. cvii., we read: "The evil heart, or the heart which had failed to balance the feather symbolic of the law, was given to the monster Ammit to devour; thus punishment consisted of instant annihilation, unless we imagine that the destruction of the heart was extended over an indefinite period." The judgment scene here referred to is depicted, from the famous papyrus of Ani, now in the British Museum and also published by Dr. Budge, as frontispiece to his edition of *The Book of the Dead*. The man being judged stands before scales in which his heart is being weighed. The god Thoth records the result. Behind him stands a monster ready to devour him if in the balance his heart is found wanting.

In an admirable little book, of which a translation is published by Grevel, Wiedemann's *Egyptian Doctrine of Immortality*, we read: "Nowhere are we clearly informed as to the fate of the condemned who could not stand before the god Osiris. We are told that the enemies of the gods perish, that they are destroyed or overthrown; but such vague expressions afford no certainty as to how far the

Egyptians in general believed in the existence of a hell as a place of punishment or purification for the wicked; or whether, as seems more probable, they held some general belief that when judgment was pronounced against a man his heart and other immortal parts were not restored to him. For such a man no re-edification and no resurrection were possible. The immortal elements were divine, and by nature pure and imperishable; but they could be preserved from entering the Osiris, from re-entering the hull of the man who had proved himself unworthy of them. The soul, indeed, as such did not die, although personal annihilation was the lot of the evildoer in whom it had dwelt. But it was the hope of continued individuality which their doctrine held out to the Egyptians; this it was which they promised to the good and in all probability denied to the wicked. After judgment the righteous entered into blessedness, unchanged in appearance as in nature; the only difference being that, while the existence which they had led upon earth had been limited in its duration, the life of the world to come was eternal."

The above is confirmed by Canon Rawlinson in his *History of Ancient Egypt*, vol. i. p. 318: "Ultimately, after many trials, if purity was not attained, the wicked soul underwent a final sentence at the hands of Osiris, Judge of the Dead, and, being pronounced incurable, suffered complete and absolute annihilation."

Herodotus reports (bk. ii. 123) that the Egyptians "were the first who taught that man's soul is immortal"; using the phrase soon afterwards so common in the writings of Plato. Indisputably the Egyptians anticipated Plato by teaching that beyond death exact retribution awaits all men good and bad. But, as we have just seen, they did not base this doctrine, as did Plato and probably Pythagoras, on the endless and essential permanence of all human souls. We need not wonder that Herodotus, a Greek stranger visiting

Egypt, did not find out this important difference between teaching familiar to him and the belief of the Egyptians.

Herodotus also says that some Greeks borrowed from the Egyptians the doctrine of the transmigration of human souls into the bodies of various kinds of animals. But Plato taught, as do the Hindus, that this transmigration is strictly retributive. The Egyptians looked at the power to assume various forms as a reward given to the righteous.

In all ancient literature, so far as I know, the phrase *every soul immortal*, or phraseology equivalent, is found only in the school of Greek philosophy of which Plato is the most conspicuous representative. Doctrine equivalent to that conveyed by these words of Plato underlies the religion of the Hindus, but is not, so far as I know, found in any school of thought which influenced the Jews of our Lord's day or the early Christians. Common to Plato and the Hindus, whatever be the link of connection, is also the doctrine of retributive transmigration; which also is, I believe, unknown elsewhere in ancient literature.

THE JEWS.

That all human souls are immortal, or that they will think and feel for ever, is not taught or implied in the Old Testament. That man was made in the image of God, by a definite act, and in fulfilment of a deliberate purpose of God, is conspicuously taught in Genesis i. 26, 27, ii. 7; and reveals the infinite superiority of man to the lower animals. But this by no means implies that he will necessarily continue to exist for endless ages after the moral purpose of his existence has finally failed and when existence has become an unmixed curse. Certainly these passages are a very unsafe basis for dogmatic assertion that all human souls good and bad will exist for ever.

In Ecclesiastes xii. 7 we read that at death "the spirit will return to God who gave it." But this return to God

implies only (see *v.* 14) the judgment of the dead, not necessarily their endless permanence. In Daniel xii. 2 we read that "many who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake some to eternal life and some to shame, to eternal abhorrence." This last word does not necessarily imply eternal consciousness, but only the lasting effect on others of the doom of the lost. So Isaiah lxxv. 24: "they shall be an abhorrence to all flesh." That retribution beyond the grave, so important an element in Christian teaching, occupies so small and indefinite a place in the Old Testament, in contrast to its large place in the religion of ancient Egypt and in the teaching of Plato, is one of the most perplexing facts in Old Testament theology.

After the close of the canon, retribution beyond the grave became more definite in the thought of Israel. So Judith xvi. 17: "The Lord Almighty will take vengeance on them in the day of judgment, to put fire and worms in their flesh; and they shall wail, feeling the pain, for ever. In Wisdom ii. 23 we read that "God created man for incorruptibility." But this does not imply that in all cases this purpose will be accomplished. For it is equally true that God created man in order that he might love and serve his Creator. Are we then to infer that in all men this purpose also will be attained? The writer continues in chap. iii. 1-4: "The souls of righteous men are in God's hands; and torment shall not touch them. They seemed, in the eyes of foolish ones, to be dead: and their departure was reckoned an injury, and their journey from us a calamity. But they are in peace. For, even if in the sight of men they be punished, their hope is full of immortality."

In the book of Enoch we read of a resurrection of the dead, of destruction and torment by fire for the wicked, and of eternal life and endless days for the righteous. So chap. li. 1: "Sheol will give back that which it has received, and hell will give back that which it owes." Also chap. liii. 2:

“Sinners will perish before the face of the Lord of Spirits and will be removed from off the face of His earth, continually for ever and ever.” And chap. liv. 6: “And cast them on that day into a burning furnace, that the Lord of Spirits may take vengeance upon them.” Also chap. lviii. 3: “And the righteous will be in the light of the sun, and the elect in the light of eternal life: there will be no end to the days of their life, and the days of the holy will be without number. And they will seek the light and find righteousness with the Lord of Spirits: and there will be peace to the righteous.” But we have no definite teaching about the endless permanence of the soul.

A few references to the immortality of the soul are found in the voluminous theological writings of Philo, an Egyptian Jew, an older contemporary of Christ. In his work on *The Creation of the World*, § 46, in a comment on Genesis ii. 7, we read: “One may rightly say that man is on the boundary line of a mortal and an immortal nature, partaking so far as is needful of each; and that he has been born both mortal and immortal, mortal as to the body, but as to the mind immortal.” Similarly, *On Dreams*, § 22, where men good and bad are spoken of as “incorruptible and immortal.” But the writings of Philo are permeated by the philosophy of Plato; and cannot therefore be appealed to as embodying independent Jewish thought.

Josephus reports, in his *Wars*, bk. ii. 8, 11, that the Pharisees believed that the “bodies are indeed corruptible and their substance not abiding, but that the souls continue immortal always”; that the souls of the righteous pass the ocean to a place of rest and blessing, but that the wicked go to a subterranean abode “full of ceaseless punishments.” This teaching, Josephus compares with that of the Greeks. He attributes similar teaching to the Essenes. Also in his *Antiquities*, bk. xviii. 1. 3, 5, he says that the Pharisees believed that souls have “immortal strength”; and that

the Essenes "make souls to be immortal." But these statements of Josephus cannot be accepted as decisive evidence that the Jews of his day accepted the natural immortality of the soul. For, like Philo, he wrote in Greek, was familiar with Greek philosophy, and was eager to call attention to elements common to this last and the Jewish Scriptures. On the other hand, this doctrine of Plato would be welcome to the Pharisees, as in later days it was welcomed by Christian teachers, because of the support it rendered to the all-important doctrine of retribution beyond the grave, which was common to the Pharisees and to Plato. Moreover, we must remember that for three centuries before Christ the Jewish nation had been either under Greek rule or at least in close contrast with Greek thought. We may therefore not unfairly attribute to Plato and his school, of whose influence in the age preceding that of Christ Cicero affords abundant proof, the doctrine of the natural immortality of the soul so far as it influenced Jewish thought. In other words, we have so far found no trace of this doctrine outside the school of thought of which Plato is the best-known representative. And we are unable to determine how far this school of thought was prevalent among the Jews of the Apostolic age.

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