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*MAN'S FORGIVENESS OF HIS NEIGHBOUR—A  
STUDY IN RELIGIOUS DEVELOPMENT.<sup>1</sup>*

WHEN we study the teachings of the Old and New Testaments on this subject, we are at once struck with the vast ethical gulf that severs the latter from the former, not, indeed, on the question of God's forgiveness of man, but of man's forgiveness of his neighbour. In the New Testament, from the first page to the last, with the exception of certain passages in the New Testament Apocalypse, it is either explicitly stated or implicitly understood that a man can only receive the Divine forgiveness on condition that he forgives his neighbour. Indeed, in their essential aspects these two forgivenesses are one and the same. But in the Old Testament it is very different. There, indeed, God's forgiveness is granted without money and without price to the sinner who truly seeks it. But the penitent in the Old Testament could accept and enjoy the Divine pardon and yet cherish the most bitter feelings towards his own personal enemy. There are, indeed, some noble passages in the Old Testament which forbid the indulgence of personal resentment. Though few in number, and indeed but as voices crying in the wilderness, they are yet of transcendent import; for they form the beginnings of that lofty doctrine of forgiveness which reaches its highest expression in the New Testament, as we shall now proceed to show. The presence of such passages in the Old Testament is evidence that already the more spiritual minds in Judaism were working towards loftier conceptions of forgiveness than those that had prevailed in the past or were current among their contemporaries. We shall now try to show the chief steps in the advance to this more ethical attitude towards an enemy.

<sup>1</sup> Delivered before the General Meeting of the Congress of the History of Religions at Oxford on Friday, September 18, 1908.

i. One of the oldest statements in the Bible which shows a consciousness that as a man dealt with his fellow-men so God would with him, is found in Judges i. 6, 7, and the reflection on this point is, strangely enough, put in the mouth of a Canaanitish king Adoni-bezek: "And Adoni-bezek fled, and they pursued after him and caught him, and cut off his thumbs and his great toes. And Adoni-bezek said: Threescore and ten kings having their thumbs and their great toes cut off gathered their meat under my table: as I have done, so God hath requited me." The primitive human law of exact retaliation, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, life for life, is here described as the law of Divine procedure. In Exodus xxi. 23 sqq. this law is to be observed by the judges in Israel. In the hands of the late scribes and legalists this law was often crassly conceived, and in Jubilees and 2 Maccabees the history of the deaths of notable evildoers is often rewritten so as to furnish examples of this law of retribution. Spiritually conceived, it represents a profound religious truth enunciated repeatedly in the New Testament. But to return, this doctrine, that with what measure we mete it is measured to us again, is found in Psalm xviii. 25 seq.—

"With the merciful Thou wilt show Thyself merciful . . .  
 With the pure Thou wilt show Thyself pure,  
 And with the perverse Thou wilt show Thyself froward."

ii. The belief in such a connexion between a man's treatment of his neighbour and his treatment by God is sufficient to explain the use of such *negative* commands as Proverbs xx. 22—

"Say not thou, I will recompense evil:  
 Wait on the Lord and He shall save thee."

Or on Proverbs xxiv. 29—

"Say not, I will do to him as he hath done to me;  
 I will render to the man according to his work."

These precepts are noteworthy since they are opposed to the principle of retaliation in itself, and that at a time when such a principle was universally current.

iii. But there are one or two notable passages that go beyond these and contain *positive* commands that when we find our enemy in *difficulty or distress* we are to help him. Thus it is enjoined in Exodus xxiii. 4, 5: "If thou meet thine enemy's ox or his ass going astray, thou shalt surely bring it back to him again. If thou see the ass of him that hateth thee lying under its burthen, and wouldest forbear to help him, thou shalt surely help with him."<sup>1</sup> And again in Proverbs xxv. 21, 22—

"If thine enemy be hungry, give him bread to eat,  
And if he be thirsty, give him water to drink;  
For thou shalt heap coals of fire upon his head,  
And the Lord shall reward thee."

This last noble passage, however, occurs in close proximity to a vile direction, that a man was not to rejoice over the affliction of an enemy lest God should see it and remove the affliction. And yet this base precept implies the existence of a higher one, that a man should not rejoice over a fallen enemy's misfortunes.

iv. But the Old Testament ethics reaches its highest point of development in Leviticus xix. 17-18, a passage the importance of which it would be hard to exaggerate.

This passage runs: "Thou shalt not hate thy brother in thine heart: thou shalt surely rebuke thy neighbour, and not bear sin because of him. Thou shalt not take vengeance nor bear grudge against the children of thy people, but thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself."

Here all hatred of a brother is forbidden. In case a man's neighbour does a wrong he is to admonish him. If he has himself suffered a wrong, he is not to avenge himself

<sup>1</sup> These words are used simply in relation to a neighbour, not an enemy, in Deut. xxii. 1-3.

on his neighbour, but to love him as himself. We have here a true foundation for subsequent ethical development on the subject of forgiveness. It is true that the sphere of the precept is limited here absolutely to Israelites or to such strangers or gêrîm as had taken upon themselves the yoke of the Law. Neighbour here means an Israelite or Jew. Notwithstanding the passage is epoch-making and served in some degree to fashion the highest pronouncement on forgiveness in later Judaism that we find in the Testaments of the XII. Patriarchs.

v. Finally, we have the notable instance of Joseph's forgiveness of his brethren; but this act of grace on Joseph's part does not seem to have impressed later Old Testament writers, or led them to urge Joseph's conduct as worthy herein of imitation.

We have now given practically all the higher teaching on forgiveness in the Old Testament; but side by side with this higher teaching there are statements of a very different character, which exhibit the unforgiving temper in various degrees of intensity. Our classification of them is logical rather than chronological.

i. In the first stage this temper manifests itself in a most unblushing and positive manner in one of the Psalms, where the righteous man prays to Yahweh to make him strong enough to pay out his enemies: "Do thou, O Lord, have mercy upon me, and raise me up that I may requite them" (Ps. xli. 10). Side by side with this prayer we might place the unforgiving spirit of David—the man after God's own heart—when on his deathbed he charged Solomon not to let Joab's hoar head go down to the grave in peace; and commanded him to deal similarly with Shimei, though David had promised to preserve Shimei's life.

ii. But this thirst for immediate personal vengeance

could not, unless exceptionally, indulge itself when once order and law were established in the land. The person wronged could take to heart the words of the Deuteronomist, that God would avenge the blood of His servants" (xxxii. 43), for that "Vengeance is Mine and recompence" (xxxii. 35), and so might relinquish the desire of *personally* executing the vengeance; but if so, then in many instances he prayed all the more vehemently for God to undertake the vengeance for him. Under this heading comes the most appalling exhibition of vindictiveness to be found in religious literature, i.e. the imprecatory Psalms. No amount of explaining away or allegorizing can excise the malignant element in these productions; nor in such utterances as the cxxxviii<sup>th</sup> Psalm, where the writer in his fury against Babylon declareth: "Happy shall he be that taketh and dasheth thy little ones against the rock." The use of such Psalms in Christian worship cannot be justified on any reasonable principle.<sup>1</sup> And yet the faithful Jew felt no hesitation in believing that God would fulfil such prayers. "God," he writes, "is mine helper; the Lord is of them that uphold my soul: He shall requite the evil unto mine enemies," and then closes the Psalm with the expression of sated vengeance: "Mine eye hath seen my desire upon mine enemies" (Ps. liv. 47).

iii. But as time went on the teaching of the nobler spirits began to make itself felt, and so the faithful came to feel that there was something wrong in the vindictive spirit in itself and in its joy over an enemy's misfortune. We have already given some passages attesting such a higher temper, but I shall quote still another, and that one of the most remarkable in the Old Testament for its distorted ethics—

<sup>1</sup> Even in Judaism the Imprecatory Psalms are not used in *public* worship.

“ Rejoice not when thine enemy falleth,  
 And let not thine heart be glad when he is overthrown,  
 Lest the Lord see it and it displease Him,  
 And He turn away His wrath from him ” (Prov. xxiv. 17, 18).<sup>1</sup>

Here we are bidden not to rejoice over an enemy's overthrow lest God see our malicious joy and so restore our enemy to prosperity. Though this precept shows an ethical advance on the part of some circle in the community—a consciousness that vindictive rejoicing over an enemy's fall is wrong—yet the temper of the man who gave this precept and of him who observed it is immeasurably lower than that of the plain man who prayed bluntly to God to raise him up that he might pay off old scores against his enemy.

From the two conflicting series of passages on forgiveness we have now dealt with, we see that there was no such thing as a prescribed and unquestioned doctrine of forgiveness in the Old Testament, and that a Jew, however he chose to act towards his personal enemy, could justify his conduct from his sacred writings. It is easy to deduce the natural consequences of such a state of ethical confusion.

When a man, and that, too, a good man, has suffered wrong, his usual course is not to ask what is the very highest and noblest line of conduct he could take towards his enemy, but generally what is the least exacting and yet ethically acceptable amongst his orthodox contemporaries. And in a book where every jot and tittle was equally authoritative, if he chose the precepts that accorded best with his

<sup>1</sup> It has been suggested to me by a distinguished Jewish scholar that the last line here means: “turn away His wrath from him (to thee).” But there is no ground for this interpretation in the text. If this was the meaning, the very important words “to thee” could not have been omitted in the text. Moreover they are not supplied in the Septuagint, Syriac or Vulgate Versions, nor yet in the Jewish Targum.

personal feelings, who could blame him? If he chose to indulge his personal animosities, he could do so without forfeiting his own self-respect or that of the religious leaders of the community; for he could support his action by sanctions drawn from sacred Psalmist and sainted hero. It is true, indeed, that if he were an exceptionally spiritually minded man he could not fail to recognize the fact that there were a few Old Testament passages that conflicted with his natural feelings; and if he were an exceptionally good man, he might forego his desire of vengeance; as no doubt many an Israelite did, and render actual positive help to a Jewish enemy in distress. But to good Israelites generally such isolated precepts were only counsels of perfection, and their fulfilment could not be held necessary to salvation, nor could they be said to possess any higher objective authority than those precepts and examples that conflicted with them in the same sacred books. With these isolated teachings, which represent only the highest the Old Testament was striving towards, let us compare a few of those which are characteristic of and central in the New Testament.

“Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. . . . For if ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive you” (Matt. vi. 12, 14, 15).

“Whosoever ye stand praying, forgive, if ye have aught against any one, that your Father also which is in heaven may forgive your trespasses” (Mark xi. 25, 26).

“How often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Until seven times? Jesus saith unto him: I say not unto thee Until seven times; but Until seventy times seven” (Matt. xviii. 21, 22).

“If thy brother sin against thee, go and show him his fault

between thee and him alone : if he hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother ” (Matt. xviii. 15).

“ If thy brother sin, rebuke him ; and if he repent, forgive him. And if he sin against thee seven times in a day, and seven times turn again to thee saying, I repent, thou shalt forgive him ” (Luke xvii. 3, 4).

“ Let all bitterness, and wrath, and anger, and clamour, and railing be put away from you with all malice : and be ye kind one to another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, even as God also in Christ forgave you ” (Eph. iv. 31).

“ Thou hast heard that it was said : Thou shalt love thy neighbour and hate thine enemy ; but I say unto you, Love your enemies, and pray for them that persecute you ; that ye may be the sons of your Father which is in heaven ; for He maketh His sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust ” (Matt. v. 43-45).

Let us now contrast in a few words the teaching of the Old and New Testaments, and herein accept only that which is highest in the former. First, whereas the Old Testament in a few passages denounces the cherishing or manifestation of *personal* resentment against a fellow-countryman, the New Testament requires universally the annihilation of the passion itself as regards fellow-countrymen *and strangers*. Again, while in two or more passages the Old Testament inculcates that a man should do positive kindness to a hostile fellow-countryman *when in distress*, the New Testament everywhere explicitly and implicitly requires him to render such services whether the wrongdoer be Christian or non-Christian, prosperous or the reverse.

We have now before us the startling contrast which the teachings on forgiveness in the Old and New Testaments present. How are we to explain it ? In the past some

scholars have ignored the question, while others have regarded the New Testament doctrine of forgiveness as a wholly original contribution of Christianity. But such a view is no longer possible, now that recent research has brought to light the evidence of the Apocryphal books on this and other New Testament subjects.

A study of the literature that comes between the Old and New Testaments shows that there was a steady development in every department of religious thought in the centuries immediately preceding the Christian era. This fact has already been fully recognized in the department of eschatology. And on the doctrine of forgiveness new light has come through a critical study of the Testaments of the XII. Patriarchs. However, before we discuss the bearing of this work on the development of this doctrine, we must deal with a noteworthy section in Sirach xxvii. 30-xxviii. 7, which attests some advance on the Old Testament doctrine and yet one not so advanced as that in the Testaments. In xxviii. 3-5 Sirach teaches the duty of forgiveness, but in the main as a measure of prudence. Forgiveness is befitting the frailty of sinful man, he urges—

“ Man cherisheth anger against a man,  
 And doth he seek healing from the Lord ?  
 Upon a man like himself he hath no mercy,  
 And doth he make supplication for his own sins ?  
 He being flesh nourisheth wrath :  
 Who shall make atonement for his sins ? ” (xxviii. 3-5).

This advice is good, but strikes no very lofty note. Verses 1 and 2 are, however, some advance on Old Testament doctrine.

“ He that taketh vengeance shall find vengeance from the Lord,  
 And He will assuredly take account of his sins.  
 Forgive thy neighbour the hurt that he hath done unto thee,  
 And then when thou prayest thy sins shall be loosed. . . .<sup>1</sup> ”

<sup>1</sup> This furnishes an interesting anticipation of Mark xi. 25: “ When

Remember thy last end and cease from enmity,  
 . . . And be not wroth with thy neighbour."

Here the doctrine of divine retribution makes more explicit the teaching of the Psalmist—

"With the merciful thou shalt show thyself merciful."

Moreover, it is now clearly implied that forgiveness is better in itself than vengeance ; and that a man should forego wrath against his neighbour, for that the Jew who forgives his neighbour is forgiven of God. The recurrence of this teaching in later purely Jewish sources confirms the genuineness of the passage in Sirach, and proves that Jewish thought on the subject of forgiveness was developing on the highest lines laid down in the Old Testament. We might here quote some very fine sayings on this subject from the Talmud. "If a friend be in need of aid to unload a burden, and an enemy to help him to load, one is commanded to help his enemy in order to overcome his evil inclination" (B.M. 32).

Again, "Be of the persecuted, not of the persecutors" (B.Q. 93b). And again, "Who is strong ? He who turns an enemy into a friend" (Ab. R.N. xxiii.).

These sayings belong to a much later period than that we are dealing with. They are, however, valuable, as we have already observed, as evidence that Jewish sages were developing the best elements of the Old Testament and advancing to conceptions of forgiveness that would have been unintelligible to most Old Testament saints.

Before we leave Sirach we might remark that on the whole we must regard this section on forgiveness as enforcing the wisdom or prudence of forgiveness, if we are to interpret it in character with the practically universal tone of that

ye stand praying, forgive, if ye have aught against any one ; that your Father also which is in heaven may forgive your trespasses."

author. Notwithstanding it is some advance on Old Testament teaching, and forms in a slight degree a preparatory stage for that of the New Testament. That Judaism after the rise of Christianity did not stop at this immature stage I have already shown. It must be admitted, however, that forgiveness is only incidentally dealt with in Talmudic writings, and is not made the central doctrine of the religious life as it is in the New Testament. On the other hand, there is a genuine Jewish work of the second century B.C. in which a doctrine of forgiveness is taught that infinitely transcends the teaching of Sirach, and is no less noble than that of the New Testament. Moreover, this doctrine of forgiveness does not stand as an isolated glory in the Testaments of the XII. Patriarchs as in other Jewish writings, but is in keeping with the entire ethical character of that remarkable book, which proclaims in an ethical setting that God created man in His own image, that the law was given to lighten every man, that salvation was for all mankind, and that a man should love both God and his neighbour.

Let us now turn to this book and to the section in it which formulates the most remarkable statement in pre-Christian Judaism on the subject of forgiveness.

Test. Gad vi. 3. "Love ye one another from the heart ; and if a man sin against thee, cast forth the poison of hate and speak peaceably to him, and in thy soul hold not guile ; and if he confess and repent, forgive him. 4. But if he deny it, do not get into a passion with him, lest catching the poison from thee he take to swearing, and so thou sin doubly. 6. And though he deny it and yet have a sense of shame when reprov'd, give over reprov'ing him. For he who denieth may repent so as not again to wrong thee : yea, he may also honour and be at peace with thee. 7. But if he be shameless and persist in his wrongdoing,

even so forgive him from the heart, and leave to God the avenging."

These verses show a wonderful insight into the true psychology of the question. So perfect are the parallels in thought and diction between these verses and Luke xvii. 3, Matt. xviii. 15, 35, that we must assume our Lord's acquaintance with them. The meaning of forgiveness in both cases is the highest—and noblest known to us, namely, the restoring the offender to communion with us, which he had forfeited through his offence. And this is likewise the essence of the Divine forgiveness—God's restoration of the sinner to communion with Him, a communion from which his sin had banished him. But our author shows that it is not always possible for the offended man to compass such a perfect relation with the offender, and yet that the offended, however the offender may act, can always practise forgiveness in a very real though limited sense. He can get rid of the feeling of personal wrong, and take up a right and sympathetic attitude to the offender. Thus forgiveness in this sense is synonymous with banishing the feeling of personal resentment, which arises naturally within us when we suffer wrong, and which, if indulged, leads to hate. When we have achieved this right attitude towards the offender, the way is open for his return to a right relation with us. Moreover, so far as we attain this right attitude, we reflect the attitude of God Himself to His erring children.

This is the first and essential duty in all true forgiveness, and it is often all that a man can compass; and apparently the Divine forgiveness has analogous limitations—at all events, within the sphere of the present life.

Returning now to our text, we can better appreciate the thought of our author. If a man does you a wrong, you are first of all to get rid of the feeling of resentment and

then to speak gently to him about his offence. If he admit his offence and repent, you are to forgive him. But if he refuse to admit his offence, there is one thing you must not do : you must not lose your temper lest he get infected by your angry feelings and in addition to his wronging he take to cursing you as well, and thus you become guilty of a double sin—his unbridled passion and his aggravated guilt. In such a case, therefore, you must refrain from further reproof ; for one of two things will take place. The offender, though outwardly denying his guilt, will, when he is reproved, feel a sense of shame or he will not. If he feels a sense of shame, he may repent and honour you and be at peace with you. But if he have no sense of shame and persist in his wrong attitude to you, he in that case must be left to God.

It would be hard to exaggerate the importance of this passage. It proves that in Galilee, the home of the Testaments of the XII. Patriarchs and of other apocalyptic writings, there was a deep spiritual religious life, which having assimilated the highest teaching of the Old Testament on forgiveness, developed and consolidated it into a clear consistent doctrine that could neither be ignored nor misunderstood by spiritually-minded men. This religious development appears to have flourished mainly in Galilee. The section on forgiveness in Sirach is little better than a backwater from the main current of this development, and is of importance as showing that even the Sadducean priest and cultured man of the world could not wholly escape the influence of this bounding spiritual life that had its home in Galilee.

It is further significant that it was not from Judea, the stronghold of Pharisaic legalism, but from Galilee, the land of the religious mystic and ethical eschatologist, that Christ and eleven of His apostles derived their origin and their

religious culture. Christ's twelfth apostle was from Judea.

We shall not be surprised, therefore, that when we come to the Sermon on the Mount we find the teaching of the Testaments is accepted—accepted and yet lifted into a higher plane, and the doctrine of forgiveness carried to its final stage of development. We are to cherish the spirit of forgiveness towards those that have wronged us for two reasons. First, because such is and *always* has been God's spirit towards man; and secondly, because such must be our spirit if we are truly to be His sons. By having God's spirit we show our kinship with God. "Love your enemies, and pray for them that persecute you, that so you may be sons of your Father in heaven; for He maketh His sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth His rain on the just and on the unjust." And this forgiveness He has proclaimed through His Son, as St. Paul teaches: "Forgiving one another, even as God in Christ hath forgiven you."

Thus divine and human forgiveness, being the same in kind though differing in degree, are linked indissolubly together, and in the heart of the prayer given for the use of all men are set the words which own this transcendent duty, "Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive them that trespass against us." The man who forgives his enemy is so far forgiven of God, and has therein, whatever his Church may be, shown his essential kinship with God.

R. H. CHARLES.