

He had spoken to them. Why should we doubt that this disciple had found the promise fulfilled in his own case, and that the words of Jesus which he has recorded were indeed spoken by Him? If we have not preserved for us the letter, yet we may believe that we have what is more important, the spirit.

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NATHAN AND DAVID.

THE KNOWLEDGE OF SIN UNDER THE OLD COVENANT.

SIN, according to the Christian definition, is an offence against a personal God. The term has no meaning for us apart from our thoughts about the Almighty, and indeed, without the manifestation of the will of God there can be no knowledge in man of sin and innocence. A sin is an act of self-assertion against God; it is the setting up of a human will against the Divine.

This view that sin is not a fall from an abstract ideal, but an offence against some person, has its roots in the Old Testament. There the verb "to sin" and the verb "to transgress" are both applied to offences even against *human* persons. The butler and the baker of the king of Egypt, in Hebrew phrase, *sinned* against their lord,¹ and Mesha, king of Moab, when he made his claim to independence, *transgressed* against Israel.² "Sin" was unthinkable for the Hebrew apart from the thought of the person offended by the sin, and in the vast majority of cases in which the two verbs are used the reference is to JEHOVAH.

Of David's devotion to the God of Israel there can be no doubt; it is safe to say that he desired to please Him, and to avoid sin. But though this be true, it must be added that David's account in the First Book of Samuel is charged with deeds of rapine and of blood,³ and in the Second Book

¹ Gen. xl. 1.

² 2 Kings i. 1.

³ 1 Sam. xxvii. 8-12.

with adultery and with murder. He was a robber-leader before he became king, and in his later years a double crime brought dishonour upon his reign. How are facts so divergent to be reconciled?

The key to the discrepancy is, no doubt, to be found in St. Paul's testimony that "Through law cometh the knowledge (*ἐπίγνωσις*) of sin."¹ The moral law now enshrined in the Pentateuch was, we have good reason to believe, unknown to David, or at least unknown in its context, i.e., unknown as part of the covenant made on Horeb between JEHOVAH and Israel. It would, indeed, be much too large an assumption to suppose that the great king of Israel knew the Ten Commandments as we know them. We know them as emphasised by a two-fold repetition in the Pentateuch. We know them in a full text, in which (if we dare say so), we hear the very accents of a personal God speaking with the emotions of love and jealousy to the people of His choice. We know them as traditionally ascribed to Moses, the greatest religious leader who ever arose in Israel.

But, unless the results of the critical study of the Old Testament for the last 150 years are to go for nothing, the probability that David knew the Ten Commandments as we know them is quite remote. The Pentateuch, except in germ, did not exist in his day. The full text of the Ten Commandments is comparatively recent, being due, perhaps, both in Exodus and in Deuteronomy, to the Deuteronomist of Manasseh's day and his school. The earlier text was short,² and the personal note was not struck in it with the power of appeal which belongs to the fuller text. Lastly, it is doubtful if the Ten Commandments, when first written down, stood in the authoritative context in which they now appear. Such are the conclusions with

¹ Rom. iii. 20.

² As in Commandments vi.-ix.

regard to the Decalogue which have secured the support of an influential band of Old Testament scholars to-day, conclusions which we dare not neglect in dealing historically with David's spiritual development. We have to admit the probability that the moral law was known to David only in a dry abstract, and apart from the context which gave it its power over the Jews of a later age.

But in order to state the whole truth, it is necessary to go one step further. We have to admit the possibility that the law of the Ten Commandments was not known to David in any form. By what means was he to know it? We cannot point to any organisation of religious and moral teaching for the people in general at so early a date. "Schools" (or rather "societies") of the Prophets existed in Samuel's time, but it remains to be proved that any religious instruction was given to the members. The case of many monastic societies in the West and of the Dervish communities of the East suggests a negative conclusion. Nay, the very insistence on religious teaching which marks the book of Deuteronomy (vi. 4-9; xi. 18-20) serves as an intimation that in earlier times there had been neglect of it. If it be objected that there is conclusive evidence that both David and Solomon were zealous for worship, it must be answered that (unfortunately) zeal for religious knowledge is not necessarily bound up with zeal for worship.

The custodians of the book of the Law were the Priests, and theirs was the duty of teaching its precepts and expounding its contents (Deut. xxxi. 24-26; 2 Kings xxii. 8; Neh. viii. 1, 2; Mal. ii. 7). But did they exercise their office, and, above all, did they teach the moral precepts of the Law? Did they teach the Ten Commandments in the days of David? Or were they at best content with the prescription to recite the whole Law *once in seven years* at the Feast of Tabernacles? (Cf. Deut. xxxi. 10-13).¹

¹ 2 Sam. vi. 14-22.

It is not an idle question, for David's life, both before he became king and afterwards, is an unusually dark enigma, if he knew the moral Law as it is set forth in Exodus xx. or Deuteronomy v., as we know it. On the one hand he was devoted to the service of JEHOVAH. He would sacrifice equally his kingly dignity and his property to his God;¹ he would accept chastisement from the Divine hand with meekness,² and scathing rebukes from the LORD's prophets.³ On the other hand, his breaches of the moral law are monumental. Is it *probable*, then, that he knew the Ten Commandments at all? Is it *possible* that he knew them as the central part of the covenant which JEHOVAH made with His worshippers? It *is* possible (for the heart is perverse in its workings), but few suppositions are more improbable.

David is a great religious figure, but we must not attribute to him a degree of religious knowledge which can in no way be reconciled with what we know of his conduct. In fact, the significance of his life is that starting in ignorance he became a disciple, a learner, through sin and suffering. The story of the numbering of the people (2 Sam. xxiv.) and the story of Bathsheba (xi., xii.) taken together make this conclusion certain.

David learnt about sin. How much there was for him to learn appears from these two narratives. A comparison of the two brings out one great fact at once. According to the first of these David commits a double crime of the first magnitude, and (so it appears) he shows no sign of repentance for a period of nine months. No doubt we should like to think that he was troubled often during this time with qualms of conscience, but if we follow the narrative just as it stands, we have no right to assume that he felt troubled in mind at all. Even when Nathan the

¹ 2 Sam. xxiv. 24.

² 2 Sam. xv. 25 f.; xvi. 11 f. ³ 2 Sam. xii. 13; xxiv. 14.

prophet appears, the sight of the prophet makes no immediate impression on him. He hears Nathan's story to the end, and never suspects that the rich man who robbed his poor neighbour of his one ewe lamb is himself. No! he snaps out his indignant verdict, "The man who hath done this thing is worthy to die." There is, indeed, a treble horror about David's fall. He not only (to use Christian language) broke with deliberation first the seventh Commandment, and then the sixth, but the crowning horror (from the Christian standpoint) is that he did not realise that he had sinned at all against his God, until "the LORD sent Nathan unto David."

On the other hand, we find something quite different when we turn to the second narrative, that of the numbering of the people, given in 2 Samuel xxiv. On this occasion David needed no prophet to tell him that he had done wrong. It is true that Joab remonstrated on receiving the order to make the census, but Joab was no substitute for a man of God. On this occasion David's conscience awoke of itself; when the numbering was accomplished (so we read) "David's heart smote him." It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the king (and probably Joab also) considered that it was a greater sin to number Israel than to take away a man's wife and to proceed to the murder of the man himself.

Here we have one clue as to the view of sin which prevailed in early history. *Why* was numbering the people a greater offence than murder and adultery combined? Because in the eyes of the early Israelite the one was a sin against JEHOVAH, while the other was not.

The census trenched on JEHOVAH's prerogative. The people was His people; it was for Him to make Israel few in number, or again to make Israel as the stars for multitude. And as it was His work to make the people few or many,

so the knowledge of their number was His secret, the secret of Him who

“tellethe the number of the stars,
And giveth them all their names” (Ps. cxlvii. 4).

It made no difference whether a native king (David) or a foreign king (Caesar Augustus) ordered a census. Joab remonstrated with David, while Caesar had to reckon with the formidable rising of Judas the Galilean “in the days of the enrolment” (Acts v. 37).

But the working of the Eastern mind is obscure to us Westerns. When David would number the people, he was confronted with the belief of Joab and the reviving conviction of his own mind that Israel was the LORD's people. When, however, the king treated individuals as his own, when he caused one of his subjects to be slain, and took possession of his wife, Joab acquiesced, and people generally acquiesced, until Nathan stood up and said, *Thou art the man!* The king was allowed certain privileges of oppressing the people over whom he ruled, but he was not allowed to challenge JEHOVAH's possession of the people as a whole.

We gather from a comparison of the two narratives that in early Israel the idea of sin was known, but the idea was by no means co-extensive ethically with our own. Sin was taken to be an infringement of the rights of JEHOVAH, but David had not yet seen that the rights of each member of JEHOVAH's people were the rights of JEHOVAH Himself. It was the work of Nathan the prophet to teach the king a new lesson, and to teach him a little way towards the Christian truth, *Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of these least, ye have done it unto Me.*

Nathan's teaching started from the principle which all accepted, that Israel was the LORD's people, but it did not stop with the mere general application of the principle. The individual Uriah, Hittite foreigner though he was,

was the LORD'S. JEHOVAH was the protector not only of Israel in general, but of Uriah in particular. David had done double wrong to JEHOVAH'S client. In so doing he had despised JEHOVAH. There is, indeed, no getting round the emphatic message which the prophet delivers in the name of his God, "Thou hast despised me." In *v.* 14 the Hebrew transcribers of the Old Testament of later days tried to evade the tremendous sentence. The Massorettes, from a mistaken feeling of reverence, altered "Thou hast despised the LORD" into the euphemistic nonsensical words, "Thou hast despised the enemies of the LORD,"¹ and the Authorised and Revised Versions, trying to make sense of nonsense, have given the impossible rendering, "Thou hast given great occasion to the enemies of the LORD to blaspheme." But Nathan said something far more direct; twice over he told David, the LORD'S Anointed, that he had despised the LORD.

We have thus a progress in David's knowledge of sin, i.e. in his recognition of what constitutes sin. We may take Psalm xviii., 2 Samuel xxiv., and 2 Samuel xii. as three stages illustrating this progressive knowledge. Whether their chronological order corresponds with their spiritual order, we hardly know.

From the Christian standpoint the first step in the recognition of sin is a true knowledge of God. It is not to be counted a knowledge of sin when the polytheist is overtaken by some calamity and infers from it that he has offended some one or other of the several gods who make up his pantheon. Offence may have been given by some action merely external, which does not belong to the sphere of morals at all. But sin in its Hebrew and Christian sense belongs to the realm of ideas which acknowledges a binding morality which draws its force from the One Moral Ruler

¹ For a parallel case of euphemism see 1 Sam. xxv. 22.

of the Universe. Polytheism, under which a man's duty is supposed to be owed to several different deities, whose wills may be in conflict, does not supply a fixed standard by which sin may be judged. To the polytheist the notion of sin must be arbitrary and wavering.

David first learns to know his God JEHOVAH, his one God, to be his deliverer and his teacher. At once a sense of duty springs up, and with it a knowledge of the possibility of a breach of duty. It is true that in Psalm xviii. which illustrates this David declares his innocence. But this very declaration of innocency implies the knowledge of the possibility of sinning. A real standard of right and wrong became possible for David when JEHOVAH became to him a *known* God. So when (as 2 Sam. xxiv. shows) David infringed a Divine privilege, one of the *rights* of JEHOVAH, he knew at once the quality of his action: he had sinned, and he made the confession to the LORD: "I have sinned greatly."

The next step after realising the nature of sin is to realise in general the boundaries of sin. These general lines were marked out in the Ten Commandments. But if the Ten Commandments in David's day were neither written on visible stones, nor stored in the general memory, nevertheless JEHOVAH did not leave Himself without witness. The Prophets asserted moral principles, though the priests' lips were silent. The parable of Nathan was as potent as a voice from Horeb to assert the Divine obligation of clean hands and a pure heart.

David learned that the injury done to Uriah was of the nature of sin, was indeed an offence against JEHOVAH. His well-known words are no bare confession of a fault committed; they are rather the acknowledgment of the reception of an ethical revelation: "I, who thought I had only the rights of a subject to deal with, *I have sinned against Jehovah.*"

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