

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

PayPal

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Expositor* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expositor-series-1.php

*MODERN RELIGION AND OLD TESTAMENT
IMMORTALITY.*

It has always been felt to be strange that the teaching in the Old Testament regarding immortality should be so obscure, or at least indirect and inexplicit. This seems not only strange in itself, when the case of some other nations, such as the Egyptians, is considered, in whose minds questions of death and immortality occupied so prominent and engrossing a place; it becomes doubly strange when we take into account the very clear and elevated teaching given in the Old Testament regarding other truths of religion and the true conditions of living unto God. The faith in a future life is so important a part of our religion that we are surprised to find it appearing with so little explicitness in the religious thought of the Old Testament saints. This has indeed appeared to some writers, such as Warburton, so surprising, that they have concluded that the revelation of the doctrine was of purpose kept back with the view of serving some other ends. This idea however belonged to the time when views of the nature and methods of revelation prevailed which were rather artificial. In the present day we are more inclined to conclude that the methods pursued by revelation were simple, and, if we can say so, natural, that is, that its great object was to enable men in each age practically to live unto God, and that at all times it gave them light sufficient for this, but that on other subjects it left them very much with the ideas which they had. In other words, it took men as it found them, setting before them at all times and in each successive age what

was needful that they might walk before God in holiness and righteousness, and leaving this to penetrate and transform other modes of thinking on many non-essential matters which they cherished. If therefore we find explicit teaching on this question of immortality postponed, we may infer that it was not unnatural that it should be so, that there was something in the ways of thinking of the people which, for a time at least, supplied the place of it, or at all events made it not a necessity to a true life with God. And we may perhaps also infer that at a later time events occurred in God's providential ruling of the history of the people which modified their former modes of thinking to such an extent that this new idea was a necessity, or that it was created out of the shattered fragments of former conceptions. Undoubtedly our ways of thinking now differ very considerably from those of the ancient Hebrews.

1. Our life now is very strongly individual, and so is our religion. Some make it a charge against Christianity, at least as felt and lived, that it is too individual, that it is so even to selfishness. However this be, it cannot be doubted that a different way of feeling prevailed in Israel. The individual was always apt to lose himself in some collective, such as the family, the tribe, or the people—he was part of a greater whole, and felt himself to have meaning only as belonging to it. It is possible that this way of thinking was a survival from the ancient tribal form of existence, where, on the one hand, the individual's safety and life depended on the tribe, and where on the other all his energies were at the command of the tribal unity and absorbed into it. The idea was favoured by other similar ideas even in the sphere of religion. The correlatives in those days were God and people. What gave a people distinctiveness was that it had a god, and what gave a god existence or at least respect in the eyes of other nations was that he had a people. So

the religious unit in Israel was the people that came out of Egypt. Jehovah was God of the people. The prophets address their words to the nation, to the leaders and rulers in the kingdom of God. It is the destinies of this kingdom that they pursue, out to the perfection of it. The individual shares in the blessings of the kingdom, but he does so only as a member of the people. This conception of solidarity and the repression of individualism is strange, and, as happens with things distinctive, scholars may have exaggerated it. It is a consideration however always to be kept in view in judging the Old Testament. It explains many things, and gives a different colour to some other things. The sweeping away, for example, of the whole family and dependents of a man along with himself, and only because of his sin or offence, was a practice due to this idea of solidarity. The children and household were not regarded as having an independent existence and standing of their own; they were part of the father, of the head of the family, and he was not held fully punished unless all that was his shared his fate. Such a practice would appear to us now an immorality, because of our strong feeling of the independence of each individual, but from the point of view of solidarity then prevailing it had not this aspect. And in the same way the tendency of the individual in early times to sink himself in the collective unity, the tribe or the people, helps to explain what seems to us the defective aspiration of the individual after immortality or life. What Jehovah had founded on the earth was a kingdom of God. This was eternal. In the days of the King Messiah this kingdom would be universal, and the people would be perfect, and the individual had his immortality in that of the people and the theocracy. His great interest was in it. His hopes found realization there. His labours were perpetuated in it, even if he ceased to live. He saw the good of Israel, and he continued to live in the fuller life of his people. But

this immortality of his hopes and purposes was not all. In his children he continued to live. He was there in them, for he regarded them as himself, furthering God's work and enjoying God's favour. So too his remembrance was not cut off—the righteous shall be had in everlasting remembrance. This kind of feeling is illustrated in Isaiah lvi., where the prophet, encouraging strangers and eunuchs to attach themselves to the community of the Restoration, addresses the latter: "Let not the eunuch say, 'Behold, I am a dry tree.'" The feeling of those persons was that, having no children, they would have no permanent place in the community, no endless share in the kingdom of God. To them the Lord replies: "I will give them in mine house and within my walls a place and memorial, an everlasting name that shall not be cut off."

There must have been times however in which this kind of immortality in the perpetual existence of the kingdom of God in which the spirit of the individual lived must have been felt by him to be too shadowy to satisfy his heart. The individual spirit struggles against the idea of being poured out into the general stream or mankind or even of the people of God, and claims a place for itself. And this claim will be the more resolutely pressed the more the individual becomes aware of his own worth and realizes the meaning of the personal life. Now in the providential history of Israel the time came when the state or people in which the individual was apt to lose himself came to an end. At the exile the people ceased to exist, being scattered into every land. But though the people and state had disappeared Jehovah the God of Israel remained, and religion remained, and there remained the individuals of the nation, and that significance and those responsibilities which belonged to the people before were now felt by the individual to belong to him. We might think the downfall of the kingdom of Judah a great

calamity, yet in a religious sense it was perhaps the greatest step towards Christianity taken since the Exodus. It made religion independent of any locality; it showed that a people of God could exist, though no longer in the form of a state or nation; it changed the religious centre, so to speak, making it no more the conscience of the people but the conscience of the individual. Hence in a prophet of the exile we find such words as these: "All souls are mine, saith the Lord, as the soul of the father so also the soul of the son is mine" (Ezek. xviii. 4). To each individual spirit the Lord stands in the same relation. When this stage of thought had been reached the craving for individual immortality would not be long in following. And by-and-by the idea would be extended; even the dead of past generations would be made to share in the blessings of the perfect kingdom of God (Dan. xii.).

2. There is another way of thinking common now, which makes us wonder how the doctrine of a future state could for long be so obscurely indicated in the Old Testament. We wonder how morality and religion could continue to exist without the support of those eternal sanctions supplied to the mind in the faith of a future retribution. Perhaps this way of thinking is less common now than it was in former days. At all events the difference between our way of thinking and that prevalent at least for long in Israel does not lie in any difference as to belief in retribution. It lies rather here: we relegate this retribution to a future world, Israel believed that it prevailed and was seen in this world. The faith of the people is expressed in Proverbs xi. 31, "Behold, the righteous shall be recompensed on the earth, how much more the ungodly and the sinner!" To our minds now the anomalies of providence bulk much more largely than they did to early Israel at least. We may detect general principles in providence, we may see the direction the

movement on the whole takes, but there are many hindrances, and the current is often hemmed, and to appearance even turned aside. In the early literature of Israel such a feeling hardly appears. In the Book of Proverbs, occupied almost exclusively with the doctrine of providence, with God's rule of men's life, there is scarcely one complaint regarding any anomaly of providence, any hardship or infelicity to the righteous or any prosperity to the wicked. The age of the Proverbs is disputed and held by many to be very late, in which case its statements would be ideal, and mere enunciations of the principle, and the fact that Sirach pursues the same line gives some colour to this view. The assumption of a late date for Proverbs would only show how powerfully the principle of retribution had taken possession of men's minds, seeing they could so persistently enunciate it undeterred by the many anomalies with which they must have been familiar. The principle may be said to be just the essence of the prophetic teaching. The prophets apply the principle to the state or people, and some scholars have argued that it was only later that it became applied to individuals. This is no doubt exaggeration, parallel to the exaggeration which maintains that in early times the individual had no consciousness of a personal relation to Jehovah. The early literature of Israel is composed largely of prophetic writings and histories, in both of which the people is the subject, and passages referring to individuals are rarer. Where they do occur however the same principles are applied to the life and destinies of the individual as to those of the people. In describing the fate of Abimelech the very ancient historian remarks: "Thus God requited the wickedness of Abimelech, which he did unto his father, in slaying his seventy brethren" (Judges ix. 56); comp. Acts. v. 28.

It might be made a question how this very stringent doc-

trine of retribution in this life arose. It is probably due, as almost all other doctrines are, to the very powerful theism, or intuition of God, characteristic of the people's mind. God was all in all. Events were all His work, and all immediately His work. All the changes on the earth in history and life were but the effects of an unseen power operating within all things. And this God was righteous, and His rule therefore in each particular event a display of His righteousness. As there was one God there was one world. His rule prevailed alike everywhere. The universe was a moral constitution. The physical had no meaning in itself, it was but the medium and conductor of the moral. And thus that sphere where retribution finds realization and which we have learned to transfer to some transcendental state, early Israel found to exist in the present world. Sin was punished and righteousness rewarded. There was no anomaly here. The anomaly was the existence of evil and that it was permitted to continue. But even this anomaly was overcome in faith and hope. The day of the Lord was at hand. It might break on the generation then living. The glory of the Lord would be revealed and all flesh would see it together. He would come, His arm ruling for Him, His reward with Him and His recompense before Him. He would feed His flock like a shepherd. But the scene of all this was the earth.

Belief in the day of the Lord was a common and unbroken faith, but it was only great movements among the nations that suggested the nearness of the day. There were long dull stretches of history when the earth sat still and was at rest (Zech. i. 11), and men's eyes failed with looking for their God. In those times the anomalies of providence became oppressive, and appeals to God to arise and judge the world importunate. When the state began to stagger under the blows dealt it from abroad, and when after its fall the people continued the "slave of rulers," downtrodden

and despised, the faith in a perfect retributive providence in this world received rude shocks. The fall of the state indeed was its most perfect illustration, when the state was considered as a moral person, as all the prophets from Hosea downwards consider it. But in the disastrous times that followed it was just the righteous individuals that suffered the most grievous hardships, and that often because of their religion: "For thy sake we are killed all the day long." And not only individuals but even the people, which, though scattered among the nations, still had an existence in idea and a consciousness, when it compared itself with the "sinners of the Gentiles," could not but feel itself more righteous than they; and particularly when it reflected that it had in it the true knowledge of the true God and regarded the world-history as a process between itself and the nations, it could not but be perplexed that the decision of the supreme tribunal was so long delayed. It was then that the ideal of a perfect retributive providence in this world began to break up. Men felt it giving way under their feet. And it is profoundly instructive to observe the perplexities, one might say the agitation and alarm, which the discovery occasioned. The unrighteousness prevailing on the earth was transferred to God as the Author of it, for He was the Author of all events. The very sun of righteousness in the heavens seemed to suffer eclipse. The reason of pious minds tottered under the suggestion that God Himself was unrighteous, as Job says: "It is God that makes my heart soft, and the Almighty that troubleth me." Faith and hope might still sustain the community, for the community had a perennial life, but the individual lying at the gates of death, unrecognised or even stricken of God, had no hope here. The question rose, Was not religion a lie? Was not the God-fearing consciousness delusive? If this consciousness refused to deny itself, it must postulate something after death which would be its verification. This

appears to be the meaning of Job xix., "But I know that my Redeemer liveth . . . and after this my body is destroyed I shall see God." We may not attribute to Job belief in what we call a future life, only an assurance of some point or event after death which would verify the reality of religion and of his religion, and show to him and men that the pious consciousness of God is true possession of God.

3. There is another point of view from which to us now the want of clearness in the Old Testament faith of a future life appears somewhat strange. We are surprised that the Old Testament saint seemed satisfied with the conditions, necessarily imperfect, of a religious life with God upon the earth, that he did not feel the need of a closer fellowship with God than is possible amidst the imperfections of earth and demand and believe in a more perfect condition of existence and a nearer vision of God. It is possible that we may have diverged further from Israel here than was necessary. The very axiomatic nature of our belief, that only in a world which is another can full fellowship with God be realized, may lead occasionally to an undue depreciation of this life, and to an unnecessary disparaging of the possibilities it offers in the way of living unto God. If we examine the utterances of Old Testament saints very numerous scattered over the Scriptures, we do find evidence of a very vivid consciousness of the presence of God with them and of the possession of His fellowship, "Whom have I in heaven and on earth I desire nought beside Thee." "When I awake I am still with Thee." "I have set the Lord before me, He is at my right hand." "Nevertheless I am continually with Thee." This consciousness of God's nearness and fellowship seems to exceed that which men ordinarily have now. We might speculate to what it was due. In some respects it might be due to the extremely emotional and the highly intuitive nature of the people's

mind, which realized God more powerfully than our minds do. It might also in part be due to the fact that God did dwell among the people in a house where He had placed His name. When the worshipper came to this house he felt he was near unto God—then he appeared before Him. And we are familiar with the vividness with which God's presence was realized and men's longing to enjoy it: "One thing have I desired . . . that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life to behold the beauty of the Lord" (Ps. xxvii. 4). But to whatever this vivid sense of God's presence was due it certainly existed, and the religious meaning of it is not affected. That which constitutes the essence of heaven to men now the Israelite profoundly enjoyed on earth.

Not without bearing upon the question is another thing—the view of "life" held by the Israelite. To him "life" meant what we ordinarily mean by it, life in the body. Life was the existence of man in all his parts, and death was not merely the separation of soul and body, it was paralysis of the person. The person in *she'ol* still subsisted, but his subsistence had no religious or ethical meaning—he was dead. The Israelite was far removed from the philosophical view that the body was a prison-house, released from which the spirit could spread its wings and soar into purer and loftier regions. Neither yet had he attained to the Christian view that there is a perfection of the spirit even apart from the body. His view of life was the synthetic one; he stood before that analysis, so to speak, which death effects, and his view corresponded to that new synthesis which the New Testament teaches, and his nomenclature was similar: he called the existence of man in the body life, as the New Testament names existence in the resurrection body life.

But life being understood in this sense, a physical sphere was necessary for it. Hence the earth was the abode of

man, and was to be his abode for ever. A transcendental sphere of existence, such as we conceive heaven to be, would not naturally occur to the Israelite. He was far from being insensible, on many occasions at least, to the imperfections that accompanied life. Though he enjoyed God's presence, it was not yet His presence in its fulness. In a sense therefore the Israelite believed in a future life and longed for it; but it was not a life in a transcendental sphere—it was a future life upon the earth. In the perfection of the people of God they would not be translated and be with God in "heaven." God would come down and dwell among them on the earth; the tabernacle of God would be with men, and He would be their God and they His people. Then He would make a new covenant with men, forgiving their sins and writing His law on their hearts. And simultaneously with this manifestation of God among men the earth would be transfigured, and all hindrances to a perfect life with God removed—"Behold, I create a new heaven and a new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness." And this manifestation of God in His fulness was ever felt to be imminent: the salvation was ready to be revealed; He would turn the captivity of His people, and the kingdom would be the Lord's.

If the faith of Israel had differences from modern religion it had also agreements with it. The remark is not without justification: "Not from want of religion, but from excess of religion was this void (specific thoughts of future immortality) left in the Jewish mind. The future life was overlooked—overshadowed by the consciousness of the presence of God Himself.¹ The sense in which Israel longed for a future life has been stated above.

It is evident how largely thoughts of the future are coloured by faith in the destinies of the community. Individualism is only yet half-born. It is real to this extent:

¹ *The Unseen Universe*, p. 9.

the individual realized keenly his own personal life, and longed earnestly to share for himself in the blessings upon which the community would enter—the abode of God among them and eternal felicity. He longed that he, the living man, should see with his people the glory of the Lord revealed, and enter into the joy of God with them. This may be the meaning of some passages in the Psalms, though another interpretation is possible, *e.g.* Psalm xvii. 15: “As for me, I shall behold Thy face in righteousness,” reference being to the revelation of God when He comes in His kingdom. So Psalm lxxiii. 24: “Thou wilt guide me with Thy counsel, and afterward take me in (or to) glory.” There are other passages however where such a sense appears difficult, such as Psalm xlix. 15: “But God shall redeem my soul from the hand of sheòl: for He will take me.” This Psalm seems to repose on the idea that death is universal, in which case redeeming from sheòl would not refer to life here, but to a passage of the person to God in death and escape of sheòl. This interpretation may certainly be supported by reference to the parable of Lazarus in Abraham’s bosom, which shows that the idea of a blessedness of the spirit at death had been reached before the time of our Lord.

It was perhaps the prospect or the fact of death that rounded off individualism and revealed its energies. The life of the community was perennial, but with death before him the individual could not taste of this life. Yet his whole being reacted against death, and in the fellowship of God defied it: “Thou wilt not give over my soul to sheòl.” Possibly some danger threatened the Psalmist, but his words are more than an assurance that he shall be delivered from this danger, they rise to the expression of a principle. Religion is reciprocal. The consciousness of God gives God. And the possession is absolute, unassailable. The prophets and saints of the Old Testament

kingdom of God were not speculative men. They did not reason that the soul was immortal from its nature—this was not the kind of immortality in which they were interested—though for all that appears the idea that any human person should become extinct or be annihilated never occurred to them. They did not lay stress in a reflective, objective way on man's instinctive hopes of immortality, though perhaps they may be observed giving these instinctive desires expression. They could not with the patient eye of inductive observation gather up what we call analogies to the passage of beings from a lower to a higher state, such as we may conceive death to be. They did not reason; they felt, they knew. Their consciousness or intuition of God—it was not faith and it was not reason—was immovable, *inébranlable*, something that amidst the shaking of all things could not be shaken (Rom. viii. 38).

A. B. DAVIDSON.

THE "ELDERS" OF PAPIAS.

PAPIAS says (Eus., *H. E.*, iii. 39. 3, 4) that he learned certain things from "the *Elders*," and that when any one came who had been "a follower of (*παρηκολουθηκώς*) the *Elders*," he used to "enquire into the words of the *Elders*." The question is, does Papias mean, by "*Elders*," (1) the Apostles, or (2) Elders appointed by the Apostles? If the generation of Apostles was born, say, about A.D. 1 (Jesus being born B.C. 4), the generation of Elders appointed by them in the several churches might be supposed to be born A.D. 30, or earlier (see below): and thus, if Papias was born A.D. 60 or A.D. 70 (as Lightf. suggests, *Sup. Rel.*, p. 150), by the time he reached thirty or twenty years of age, *i.e.* A.D. 90, all the Apostles, with the exception of