

CHAPTER XV

GOD'S OMNIPRESENCE AND ETERNITY

1. As soon as man awakens to a higher consciousness of God, he realizes the vast distance between his own finite being limited by space and time, and the Infinite Being which rules everywhere and unceasingly in lofty grandeur and unlimited power. His very sense of being hedged in by the bounds and imperfections of a finite existence makes him long for the infinite God, unlimited in might, and brings to him the feeling of awe before His greatness. But this conception of God as the omnipresent and everlasting Spirit, as distinct from any created being, is likewise the result of many stages of growing thought.

2. The primitive mind imagines God as dwelling in a lofty place, whence He rules the earth beneath, descending at times to take part in the affairs of men, to tarry among them, or to walk with them.¹ The people adhered largely to this conception during the Biblical period, as they considered as the original seat of the Deity, first Paradise, later on Sinai or Zion, and finally the far-off heavens. It required prophetic vision to discern that "the heavens and the heavens' heavens do not encompass God's majesty," expressed also in poetic imagery that "the heaven is My throne and the earth My footstool."² The classic form of this idea of the divine omnipresence is found in the oft-quoted passage from Psalm CXXXIX.³

¹ Gen. IV, 16; XI, 5; XVIII, 21; XXVIII, 16; Deut. XXVI, 15; Micah I, 3; see Strauss, l. c., I, 548 f.

² I Kings VIII, 27; Isa. LXVI, 1.

³ See above, Chapter XII, 5.

3. The dwelling places of God are to give way the moment His omnipresence is understood as penetrating the universe to such an extent that nothing escapes His glance nor lies without His dominion.¹ They are then transformed into places where He had manifested His Name, His Glory, or His Presence ("Countenance," in the Hebrew). In this way certain emanations or powers of God were formed which could be located in a certain space without impairing the divine omnipresence. These intermediary powers will be the theme of chapter XXXII.

The following dialogue illustrates this stage of thought: A heretic once said sarcastically to Gamaliel II, "Ye say that where ten persons assemble for worship, there the divine majesty (*Shekinah*) descends upon them; how many such majesties are there?" To which Gamaliel replied: "Does not the one orb of day send forth a million rays upon the earth? And should not the majesty of God, which is a million times brighter than the sun, be reflected in every spot on earth?"²

4. Nevertheless a conception of pure spirit is very difficult to attain, even in regard to God. The thought of His omnipresence is usually interpreted by imagining some ethereal substance which expands infinitely, as Ibn Ezra and Saadia before him were inclined to do,³ or by picturing Him as a sort of all-encompassing Space, in accordance with the rabbis.⁴ The New Testament writers and the Church fathers likewise spoke of God as Spirit, but really had in mind, for the most part, an ethereal substance resembling light pervading cosmic space. The often-expressed belief that man may see God after death rests upon this conception of God as a substance perceptible to the mind.⁵

¹ Comp. Amos IX, 2; Jer. XXIII, 24.

² Sanh. 39 a.

³ Comp. Kaufmann, l. c., 70 and 71, notes 130, 131; Strauss, l. c., I, 551.

⁴ *Makom*, see above, Chapter X, 8-9; Schechter, *Aspects*, 26 f.

⁵ Luk. 45 b; comp. I Corinth. XIII, 12, based on Ex. XXXIII, 28; Ps. XVII, 15.

A higher standpoint is taken by a thinker such as Ibn Gabirol, who finds God's omnipresence in His all-pervading will and intellect.¹ But this type of divine omnipresence is rather divine immanence. The religious consciousness has a quite different picture of God, a self-conscious Personality, ever near to man, ever scanning his acts, his thoughts, and his motives. Here philosophy and religion part company. The former must abstain from the assumption of a divine personality; the latter cannot do without it. The God of religion must partake of the knowledge and the feelings of His worshiper, must know his every impulse and idea, and must feel with him in his suffering and need. God's omnipresence is in this sense a postulate of religion.

5. The second earthly and human limitation is that of time. Confined by space and time, man casts his eyes upward toward a Being who shall be infinite and eternal. Whatever time begets, time swallows up again. Transitoriness is the fate of all things. Everything which enters existence must end at last. "Also heaven and earth perish and wax old like a garment. Only God remains forever the same, and His years have no end. He is from everlasting to everlasting, the first and the last." So speak prophet and psalmist, voicing a universal thought²; and our liturgical poet sings:

"The Lord of all did reign supreme
Ere yet this world was made and formed;
When all was finished by His will,
Then was His name as King proclaimed.

"And should these forms no more exist,
He still will rule in majesty;
He was, He is, He shall remain,
His glory never shall decrease."³

¹ See Kaufmann, l. c., 100 f.

² Isa. XLVIII, 12; Ps. XC, 2 f.; CII, 26, 27. On the process of development of the idea of eternity, see Neumark, l. c., II, 77.

³ Adon Olam, Singer's *Prayerbook*, p. 3.

6. But the idea of God's eternity also presents certain difficulties to the thinking mind. As Creator and Author of the universe, God is the First Cause, without beginning or end, the Source of all existence; as Ruler and Master of the world, He maintains all things through all eternity; though heaven and earth "wax old like a garment," He outlasts them all. Now, if He is to manifest these powers from everlasting to everlasting, He must ever remain the same. Consequently, we must add immutability as a corollary of eternity, if the latter is to mean anything. It is not enough to state that God is without beginning and without end; the essential part of the doctrine is His transcendence above the changes and conditions of time. We mortals cannot really entertain a conception of eternity; our nearest approach to it is an endless succession of periods of time, a ceaseless procession of ages and eons following each other. Endless time is not at all the same as timelessness. Therefore eternity signifies transcendence above all existence in time; its real meaning is *supermundaneity*.¹

7. This seems the best way to avoid the difficulty which seemed almost insuperable to the medieval thinkers, how to reconcile a Creation at a certain time and a Creator for whom time does not exist. In the effort to solve the difficulty, they resorted to the Platonic and Aristotelian definition of time as the result of the motions of the heavenly bodies; thus they declared that time was created simultaneously with the world. This is impossible for the modern thinker, who has learned from Kant to regard time and space, not as external realities, but as human modes of apperception of objects. So the contrast between the transient character of the world and the eternity of God becomes all the greater with the increasing realization of the vast gap between the material world and the divine spirit.

¹ See Strauss, l. c., 562, 651; Kaufmann, l. c., 306 f.; Drummond: *Philo*, II, 46.

At this point arises a still greater difficulty. The very idea of creation at a certain time becomes untenable in view of our knowledge of the natural process; the universe itself, it seems to us, extends over an infinity of space and time. Indeed, the modern view of evolution in place of creation has the grave danger of leading to pantheism, to a conception of the cosmos which sees in God only an eternal energy (or substance) devoid of free volition and self-conscious action.¹ We can evade the difficulty only by assuming God's transcendence, and this can be done in such a way as not to exclude His immanence, or — what is the same thing — His omnipresence.

8. Both God's omnipresence and His eternity are intended only to raise Him far above the world, out of the confines of space and time, to represent His sublime loftiness as the "Rock of Ages," as holding worlds without number in "His eternal arms." "Nothing can be hidden from Him who has reared the entire universe and is familiar with every part of it, however remote."²

¹ See Chapter XXV below.

² Tanh. Naso ed. Buber, 8; Gen. R. IX, 9 with reference to Jer. XXIII, 24.

CHAPTER XVI

GOD'S HOLINESS

1. Judaism recognizes two distinct types of divine attributes. Those which we have so far considered belong to the metaphysical group, which chiefly engage the attention of the philosopher. They represent God as a transcendental Being who is ever beyond our comprehension, because our finite intellect can never grasp the infinite Spirit. They are not descriptions, but rather inferences from the works of the Master of the world to the Master himself. But there are other divine attributes which we derive from our own moral nature, and which invest our whole life with a higher moral character. Instead of arising from the external necessity which governs nature in its causes and effects, these rest upon our assumption of inner freedom, setting the aims for all that we achieve. This moral nature is realized to some extent even by the savage, when he trembles before his deity in pangs of conscience, or endeavors to propitiate him by sacrifices. Still, Judaism alone fully realized the moral nature of the Deity; this was done by investing the term "holiness" with the idea of moral perfection, so that God became the ideal and pattern of the loftiest morality. "Be ye holy, for I the Lord your God am holy."¹ — This is the central and culminating idea of the Jewish law.²

2. Holiness is the essence of all moral perfection; it is purity unsullied by any breath of evil. True holiness can be

¹ Lev. XIX, 1.

² Comp. Dillmann, l. c., 252 f.; Strauss, l. c., 593 f.; Rauwenhoff, l. c., 498-505; Lazarus: *Ethics of Judaism*, Chapters IV-V.