

CHAPTER XVIII

GOD'S LONG-SUFFERING AND MERCY

1. In one of the little known apocryphal writings, the Testament of Abraham, a beautiful story is told of the patriarch. Shortly before his death, the archangel Michael drove him along the sky in the heavenly chariot. Looking down upon the earth, he saw companies of thieves and murderers, adulterers, and other evil-doers pursuing their nefarious practices, and in righteous indignation he cried out: "Oh would to God that fire, destruction, and death should instantly befall these criminals!" No sooner had he spoken these words than the doom he pronounced came upon those wicked men. But then spoke the Lord God to the heavenly charioteer Michael: "Stop at once, lest My righteous servant Abraham in his just indignation bring death upon all My creatures, because they are not as righteous as he. He has not learned to restrain his anger."¹ Thus, indeed, the wrath kindled at the sight of wrongdoing would consume the sinner at once, were it not for another quality in God, called in Scripture *long-suffering*. By this He restrains His anger and gives the sinner time to improve his ways. Though every wicked deed provokes Him to immediate punishment, yet He shows compassion upon the feeble mortal. "Even in wrath He remembereth compassion."² "He hath no delight in the death of the sinner, but that he shall return from his ways and live."³ The divine holiness does not merely overwhelm and consume; its essen-

¹ Testament of Abraham, A, X.

² Hab. III, 2.

³ Ezek. XVIII, 23, 32; XXXIII, 11.

tial aim is the elevation of man, the effort to endow him with a higher life.

2. It is perfectly true that a note of rigor and of profound earnestness runs through the pages of Holy Writ. The prophets, law-givers, and psalmists speak incessantly of how guilt brings doom upon the lands and nations. As the father who is solicitous of the honor of his household punishes unrelentingly every violation of morality within it, so the Holy One of Israel watches zealously over His people's loyalty to His covenant. His glorious name, His holy majesty cannot be violated with immunity from His dreaded wrath. There is nothing of the joyous abandon which was predominant in the Greek nature and in the Olympian gods. The ideal of holiness was presented by the God of Israel, and all the doings of men appeared faulty beside it.

But its power of molding character is shown by Judaism at this very point, in that it does not stop at the condemnation of the sinner. It holds forth the promise of God's forbearance to man in his shortcomings, due to His compassion on the weakness of flesh and blood. He waits for man, erring and stumbling, until by striving and struggling he shall attain a higher state of purity. This is the bright, uplifting side of the Jewish idea of the divine holiness. In this is the innermost nature of God disclosed. In fear and awe of Him who is enthroned on high, "before whom even the angels are not pure," man, conscious of his sinfulness, sinks trembling into the dust before the Judge of the whole earth. But the grace and mercy of the long-suffering Ruler lift him up and imbue him with courage and strength to acquire a new life and new energy. Thus the oppressive burden of guilt is transformed into an uplifting power through the influence of the holy God.

3. The predominance in God of mildness and mercy over punitive anger is expressed most strikingly in the revelation to Moses, when he had entreated God to let him see His ways.

The people had provoked God's anger by their faithlessness in the worship of the golden calf, and He had threatened to consume them, when Moses interceded in their behalf. Then the Lord passed by him, and proclaimed: "The Lord, the Lord, God, merciful and gracious, long-suffering and abundant in goodness and truth, keeping mercy unto the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin; and that will by no means clear the guilty; visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children and upon the children's children, unto the third and unto the fourth generation."¹ Such a passage shows clearly the progress in the knowledge of God's nature. For Abraham and the traditions of the patriarchs God was the righteous Judge, punishing the transgressors. He is represented in the same way in the Decalogue on Sinai.² Was this to be the final word? Was Israel chosen by God as His covenant people, only to encounter the full measure of His just but relentless anger and to be consumed at once for the violation of this covenant? Therefore Moses wrestled with his God. Filled with compassionate love for his people, he is willing to offer his life as their ransom. And should God himself lack this fullness of love and pity, of which even a human being is capable? Then, as from a dark cloud, there flashed suddenly upon him the light of a new revelation; he became aware of the higher truth, that above the austerity of God's avenging anger prevails the tender forgiveness of His mercy; that beyond the consuming zeal of His punitive justice shines the sun-like splendor of His grace and love. The rabbis find the expression of mercy especially in the name JHVH (*i.e.* "the One who shall ever be") which is significantly placed here at the head of the divine attributes. Indeed, only He who is the same from everlasting to everlasting, and to whom to-morrow is like yesterday, can show forbearance to erring

¹ Ex. XXXII-XXXIV, 7. Comp. Num. XIV, 18.

² Gen. XIX, 1-28; Ex. XX, 5-6.

man, because in whatsoever he has failed yesterday he may make good to-morrow.

4. Like Moses, the master of the prophets, so the prophet Hosea also learned in hard spiritual struggle to know the divine attribute of mercy and lovingkindness. His own wife had proved faithless, and had broken the marital covenant; still his love survived, so that he granted her forgiveness when she was forsaken, and took her back to his home. Then, in his distress at the God-forsaken state of Israel through her faithlessness, he asked himself: "Will God reject forever the nation which He espoused, because it broke the covenant? Will not He also grant forgiveness and mercy?" The divine answer came to him out of the depths of his own compassionate soul. Upon the crown of God's majesty which Amos had beheld all effulgent with justice and righteousness, he placed the most precious gem, reflecting the highest quality of God — His gracious and all-forgiving love.¹ Whether the priority in this great truth belongs to Hosea or Moses is a question for historical Bible research to answer, but it is of no consequence to Jewish theology.

5. Certainly Scripture represents God too much after human fashion, when it ascribes to him changes of mood from anger to compassion, or speaks of His repentance.² But we must bear in mind that the prophets obtained their insight into the ways of God by this very process of transferring their own experience to the Deity. And on the other hand, we are told that "God is not a man that He should lie, neither the son of man that He should repent."³ All these anthropo-

¹ Hosea I-III; XI, 1-9; XIV, 5. Comp. Micah XIII, 18; Jer. III, 8-12; Isa. LIV, 6-8; LVII, 16 f.; Joel II, 13; Jonah IV, 2, 10 f.; Lam. III, 31; Ps. LXXVIII, 38 *et al.* See Dillmann, l. c., 263 f.; Davidson *Theology of O. T.*, 132 f.

² Gen. VI, 6; I Sam. XV, 11; Jer. XVIII, 7-10; Joel II, 14; Jonah III, 10; IV, 2.

³ Num. XXIII, 19; I Sam. XV, 29; see Targum and commentaries.

morphic pictures of God were later avoided by the ancient Biblical translators by means of paraphrase, and by the philosophers by means of allegory.¹

6. According to the Midrashic interpretation of the passage from the Pentateuch quoted above, Moses desired to ascertain whether God ruled the world with His justice or with His mercy, and the answer was: "Behold, I shall let My *goodness* pass before thee. For I owe nothing to any of My creatures, but My actions are prompted only by My grace and good will, through which I give them all that they possess."² According to Judaism justice and mercy are intertwined in God's government of the world; the former is the pillar of the cosmic structure, and the latter the measuring line. No mortal could stand before God, were justice the only standard; but we subsist on His mercy, which lends us the boons of life without our meriting them. That which is not good in us now is to become good through our effort toward the best. God's grace underlies this possibility.

Accordingly, the divine holiness has two aspects, the overwhelming wrath of His justice and the uplifting grace of His long-suffering. Without justice there could be no fear of God, no moral earnestness; without mercy only condemnation and perdition would remain. As the rabbis tell us, both justice and mercy had their share in the creation of man, for in man both good and bad appear and struggle for supremacy. All generations need the divine grace that they may have time and opportunity for improvement.³

7. Thus this conception of grace is far deeper and worthier of God than is that of Paulinian Christianity; for grace in Paul's sense is arbitrary in action and dependent upon the acceptance

¹ See J. E., art. Anthropomorphism and Allegorical Interpretation.

² Tanh. Waethhanan, ed. Buber, 3.

³ Gen. R. VIII, 4-5. See Morris Joseph: *Judaism as Creed and Life*, p. 59, 90-95.

of a creed, therefore the very reverse of impartial justice. In Judaism divine grace is not offered as a bait to make men believe, but as an incentive to moral improvement. The God of holiness, who inflicts wounds upon the guilty soul by bitter remorse, offers also healing through His compassion. Justice and mercy are not two separate powers or persons in the Deity, as with the doctrine of the Church; they are the two sides of the same divine power. "I am the Lord before sin was committed, and I am the Lord after sin is committed" — so the rabbis explain the repetition of the name JHVH in the revelation to Moses.¹

¹ R. h. Sh. 17 b; compare, J. Davidson, 134; Koeberle: *Suende und Gnade*, 1905, p. 625, 634 f.; but p. 658, 614, are misleading; Weber, l. c., 154, 260, 303 f., altogether misrepresents the Jewish doctrine of grace.