

CHAPTER XXII

GOD'S KNOWLEDGE AND WISDOM

1. The attempt to enumerate the attributes of God recalls the story related in the Talmud¹ of a disciple who stepped up to the reader's desk to offer prayer, and began to address the Deity with an endless list of attributes. When his vocabulary was almost exhausted, Rabbi Haninah interrupted him with the question, "Hast thou now really finished telling the praise of God?" Mortal man can never know what God really is. As the poet-philosopher says: "Could I ever know Him, I would be He."² But we want to ascertain what God is *to us*, and for this very reason we cannot rest with the negative attitude of Maimonides, who relies on the Psalmist's verse, "Silence is praise to Thee."³ We must obtain as clear a conception of the Deity as we possibly can with our limited powers.

To the divine attributes already mentioned we must add another which in a sense is the focus of them all. This is the knowledge and wisdom of God, the omniscience which renders Him all-knowing and all-wise. Through this all the others come into self-consciousness. We ascribe wisdom to the man who sets right aims for his actions and knows the means by which to attain them, that is, who can control his power and knowledge by his will and bend them to his purpose. In the same manner we think of wisdom in view of the marvelous order, design, and unity which we see in the natural and the moral world. But this wisdom must be all-encompassing, comprising time and eternity, directing all the forces and beings

¹ Ber. 33 b.

² Jedayah ha Penini.

³ Ps. LXV, 2.

of the world toward the goal of ideal perfection.¹ It makes no difference where we find this lesson. The Book of Proverbs singles out the tiny ant as an example of wondrous forethought;² the author of Job dwells on the working together of the powers of earth and heaven to maintain the cosmic life;³ modern science, with its deeper insight into nature, enables us to follow the interaction of the primal chemical and organic forces, and to follow the course of evolution from star-dust and cell to the structure of the human eye or the thought-centers of the brain. But in all these alike our conclusion must be that of the Psalmist: "O Lord, how manifold are Thy works, in wisdom hast Thou made them all."⁴

2. Accordingly, if we are to speak in human terms, we may consider God's wisdom the element which determines His various motive-powers, — omniscience, omnipotence, and goodness, — to tend toward the realization of His cosmic plan. Or we may call it the active intellect with which God works as Creator, Ordainer, and Ruler of the universe. The Biblical account of creation presupposes this wisdom, as it portrays a logical process, working after a definite plan, proceeding from simpler to more complex forms and culminating in man. Biblical history likewise is based upon the principle of a divinely prearranged plan, which is especially striking in such stories as that of Joseph.⁵

3. At first the divine wisdom was supposed to rest in part on specially gifted persons, such as Joseph, Solomon, and Bezalel. As Scripture has it, "The Lord giveth wisdom, out of His mouth cometh knowledge and understanding."⁶ Later the obscure destiny of the nation appears as the design of an all-wise Ruler to the great prophets and especially to Isaiah, the

¹ Jer. X, 12; Amos IV, 13; Job XXXVIII-XXXIX.

² Prov. VI, 6.

³ Job XXXVIII-XXXIX.

⁴ Ps. CIV, 24.

⁵ Gen. I, 20; see Dillmann, l. c., 280; Strauss, l. c., 575 f.; Hamburger, l. c., art. "Weisheit Gottes"; A. B. Davidson, l. c., 180-182.

⁶ Gen. XLI, 38; I Kings III, 12; Ex. XXXV, 31; Prov. II, 6.

high-soaring eagle among the seers of Israel.¹ With the progressive expansion of the world before them, the seers and sages saw a sublime purpose in the history of the nations, and felt more and more the supreme place of the divine wisdom as a manifestation of His greatness. Thus the great seer of the Exile never tires of illumining the world-wide plan of the divine wisdom.²

4. A new development ensued under Babylonian and Persian influence at the time when the monotheism of Israel became definitely universal. The divine wisdom, creative and world-sustaining, became the highest of the divine attributes and was partially hypostatized as an independent cosmic power. In the twenty-eighth chapter of the Book of Job wisdom is depicted as a magic being, far remote from all living beings of earth, beyond the reach of the creatures of the lowest abyss, who aided the Creator with counsel and knowledge in measuring and weighing the foundations of the world. The description seems to be based upon an ancient Babylonian conception — which has parallels elsewhere — of a divine Sybil dwelling beneath the ocean in “the house of wisdom.”³ Here, however, the mythological conception is transformed into a symbolic figure. In the eighth chapter of Proverbs the description of divine wisdom is more in accordance with Jewish monotheism; wisdom is “the first of God’s creatures,” “a master-workman” who assisted Him in founding heaven and earth, a helpmate and playmate of God, and at the same time the instructor of men and counselor of princes, inviting all to share her precious gifts. This conception is found also in the apocryphal literature, — in Ben Sira, the book of Enoch, the Apocalypse of Baruch, and the Hellenistic Book of Wisdom.⁴

¹ Isa. XXV, 1; XXVIII, 29.

² Isa. XL–LV.

³ Prov. IX, 1. Comp. A. Jeremias: *D. A. Test. i. L. d. i. alt. Orientis*, 5, 80, 336, 367.

⁴ Ben Sira XXIV, 3–6, 14, 21; Enoch XLII, 1–2; Slavonic Enoch XXX, 8; Baruch III, 9–IV, 4; comp. Bousset, l. c., 337 f.; J. E., art. Wisdom; Bentwich: *Philo*, pp. 141–147.

From this period two different currents of thought appeared. The one represented wisdom as an independent being distinct from God, and this finally became merged, under Platonic influence, into the views of neo-Platonism, Gnosticism, and the Christian dogma. The other identified the divine wisdom with the Torah, and therefore it is the Torah which served God as counselor and mediator at the Creation and continues as counselor in the management of the world. This view led back to strict monotheism, so that the cosmology of the rabbis spoke alternately of the divine wisdom and the Torah as the instruments of God at Creation.¹

5. The Jewish philosophers of the Middle Ages, such as Saadia, Gabirol, and Jehuda ha Levi, followed the Mohammedan theologians in enumerating God's wisdom among the attributes constituting His essence, together with His omnipotence, His will, and His creative energy. But they would not take wisdom or any other attribute as a separate being, with an existence outside of God, which would either condition Him or admit a division of His nature.² “God himself is wisdom,” says Jehuda ha Levi, referring to the words of Job: “He is wise in heart.”³ And Ibn Gabirol sings in his “Crown of Royalty”:

“Thou art wise, and the wisdom of Thy fount of life floweth from Thee;
And compared with Thy wisdom man is void of understanding;
Thou art wise, before anything began its existence;
And wisdom has from times of yore been Thy fostered child;
Thou art wise, and out of Thy wisdom didst Thou create the world,
Life the artificer that fashioneth whatsoever delighteth him.”⁴

¹ Targ. Yer. to Gen. I, 1. Gen. R. I, 2, 5. See Schechter: *Aspects*, 127–137.

² Kaufmann, l. c., 16, 107, 113, 163, 325, 418.

³ Job IX, 4; *Cuzari*, II, 2.

⁴ Sachs, cl, 6, 227.