

C. GOD IN RELATION TO THE WORLD

CHAPTER XXIV

THE WORLD AND ITS MASTER

1. In using the term world or *universe* we include the totality of all beings at once, and this suggests a stage of knowledge where polytheism is practically overcome. Among the Greeks, Pythagoras is said to have been the first to perceive "a beautiful order of things" in the world, and therefore to call it *cosmos*.¹ Primitive man saw in the world innumerable forces continually struggling with each other for supremacy. Without an ordering mind no order, as we conceive it, can exist. The old Babylonian conception prevalent throughout antiquity divided the world into three realms, the celestial, terrestrial, and the nether world, each of which had its own type of inhabitants and its own ruling divinities. Yet these various divine powers were at war with each other, and ultimately they, too, must submit to a blind fate which men and gods alike could read in the stars or other natural phenomena.

With the first words of the Bible, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth," Judaism declared the world to be a unity and God its Creator and Master. Heathenism had always beheld in the world certain blind forces of nature, working without plan or purpose and devoid

¹ Plutarch: "De placitis philosophiae," II, 1; comp. for the entire chapter Dillmann, l. c., 284-295; Smend: l. c., 454 f.; H. Steintal: "Die Idee der Schöpfung" in J. B. z. Jued. Gesch. u. Lit., II, 39-44.

of any moral aims. But Judaism sees in the world the work of a supreme Intellect who fashioned it according to His will, and who rules in freedom, wisdom, and goodness. "He spoke, and it was; He commanded, and it stood."¹ Nature exists only by the will of God; His creative *fiat* called it into existence, and it ceases to be as soon as it has fulfilled His plan.

2. That which the scientist terms nature — the cosmic life in its eternal process of growth and reproduction — is declared by Judaism to be God's creation. Ancient heathen conceptions deified nature, indeed, but they knew only a cosmogony, that is, a process of birth and growth of the world. In this the gods participate with all other beings, to sink back again at the close of the drama into fiery chaos, — the so-called "twilight of the gods." Here the deity constitutes a part of the world, or the world a part of the deity, and philosophic speculation can at best blend the two into a pantheistic system which has no place for a self-conscious, creative mind and will. In fact, the universe appears as an ever growing and unfolding deity, and the deity as an ever growing and unfolding universe. Modern science more properly assumes a self-imposed limitation; it searches for the laws underlying the action and interaction of natural forces and elements, thus to explain in a mechanistic way the origin and development of all things, but it leaves entirely outside of its domain the whole question of a first cause and a supreme creative mind. It certainly can pass no opinion as to whether or not the entire work of creation was accomplished by the free act of a Creator. Revelation alone can speak with unflinching accents: "In the beginning God created heaven and earth." However we may understand, or imagine, the beginning of the natural process, the formation of matter and the inception of motion, we see above the confines of space

¹ Ps. XXXIII, 9.

and time the everlasting God, the absolutely free Creator of all things.

3. No definite theological dogma can define the order and process of the genesis of the world; this is rather a scientific than a religious question. The Biblical documents themselves differ widely on this point, whether one compares the stories in the first two chapters of Genesis, or contrasts both of them with the poetical descriptions in Job and the Psalms.¹ And these divergent accounts are still less to be reconciled with the results of natural science. In the old Babylonian cosmography, on which the Biblical view is based, the earth, shaped like a disk, was suspended over the waters of the ocean, while above it was the solid vault of heaven like a ceiling. In this the stars were fixed like lamps to light the earth, and hidden chambers to store up the rain. The sciences of astronomy, physics, and geology have abolished these child-like conceptions as well as the story of a six-day creation, where vegetation sprang from the earth even before the sun, moon, and stars appeared in the firmament.

The fact is that the Biblical account is not intended to depreciate or supersede the facts established by natural science, but solely to accentuate those religious truths which the latter disregards.² These may be summed up in the following three doctrines:

4. First. Nature, with all its immeasurable power and grandeur, its wondrous beauty and harmony, is not independent, but is the work, the workshop, and the working force of the great Master. His spirit alone is the active power; His will must be carried out. It is true that we cannot conceive the universe otherwise than as infinite in time and space, because both time and space are but human modes of apperception. In fact, we cannot think of a Creator with-

¹ Job XXXVIII; Ps. CIV.

² Comp. Albo I, 12, and Schlesinger's Notes, 625.

out a creation, because any potentiality or capacity without execution would imply imperfection in God. Nevertheless we must conceive of God as the designing and creating intellect of the universe, infinitely transcending its complex mechanism, whose will is expressed involuntarily by each of the created beings. He alone is the living God; He has lent existence and infinite capacity to the beings of the world; and they, in achieving their appointed purpose, according to the poet's metaphor, "weave His living garment." The Psalmist also sings in the same key:

"Of old Thou didst lay the foundations of the earth;
And the heavens are the work of Thy hands;
They shall perish, but Thou shalt endure;
Yea, all of them shall wax old like a garment.
As a vesture shalt Thou change them, and they shall pass away;
But Thou art the selfsame, and Thy years shall have no end."¹

5. Second. The numberless beings and forces of the universe comprise a unity, working according to one plan, subserving a common purpose, and pursuing in their development and interaction the aim which God's wisdom assigned them from the beginning. However hostile the various elements may be toward each other, however fierce the universal conflict, "the struggle for existence," still over all the discord prevails a higher concord, and the struggle of nature's forces ends in harmony and peace. "He maketh peace in His high places."² Even the highest type of heathenism, the Persian, divided the world into mutually hostile principles, light and darkness, good and evil. But Judaism proclaims God as the Creator of both. No force is left out of the universal plan; each contributes its part to the whole. Consequently the very progress of natural science confirms more and more the principle of the divine Unity. The researches of science are ever

¹ Ps. CII, 25-27.

² Job XXV, 2.

tending toward the knowledge of universal laws of growth, culminating in a scheme of universal evolution. Hence this supports and confirms Jewish monotheism, which knows no power of evil antagonistic to God.

6. Third. The world is good, since goodness is its creator and its final aim. True enough, nature, bent with "tooth and claw" upon annihilating one or another form of existence, is quite indifferent to man's sense of compassion and justice. Yet in the wise, though inscrutable plan of God she does but serve the good. We see how the lower forms of life ever serve the higher, how the mineral provides food for the vegetable, while the animal derives its food from the vegetable world and from lower types of animals. Thus each becomes a means of vitality for a higher species. So by the continuous upward striving of man the lower passions, with their evil tendencies, work more and more toward the triumph of the good. Man unfolds his God-likeness; he strives to

"Move upward, working out the beast,
And let the ape and tiger die."

7. The Biblical story of Creation expresses the perfect harmony between God's purpose and His work in the words, "And behold, it was good" spoken at the end of each day's Creation, and "behold, it was very good" at the completion of the whole. A world created by God must serve the highest good, while, on the contrary, a world without God would prove to be "the worst of all possible worlds," as Schopenhauer, the philosopher of pessimism, quite correctly concludes from his premises. The world-view of Judaism, which regards the entire economy of life as the realization of the all-encompassing plan of an all-wise Creator, is accordingly an energizing optimism, or, more precisely, meliorism. This view is voiced by the rabbis in many significant utterances, such as the maxim of R. Akiba, "Whatsoever the Merciful One does,

is for the good,"¹ or that of his teacher, Nahum of Gimzo, "This, too, is for the good."² His disciple, R. Meir, inferred from the Biblical verse, "God saw all that He had made, and behold, it was very good," that "death, too, is good."³ Others considered that suffering and even sin are included in this verse, because every apparent evil is necessary that we may struggle and overcome it for the final victory of the good.⁴ As an ancient Midrash says: "God is called a God of faith and faithfulness, because it was His faith in the world that caused Him to bring it into existence."⁵

¹ Ber. 60 b.

² *Gam zu le tobah*, an allusion to his own name. Taan. 21 b.

³ Gen. R. IX, 5.

⁴ Gen. R. IX, 9-10.

⁵ Sifre Deut. 307.