

CHAPTER XXIX

GOD AND THE EXISTENCE OF EVIL

1. A leading objection to the belief in divine Providence is the existence in this world of physical and moral evil. All living creatures are exposed to the influence of evil, according to their physical or moral constitutions and the peculiar conditions of their existence. Heathenism accounts for the powers of darkness, pain and death by assuming the existence of forces hostile to the heavenly powers of light and life, or of a primitive principle of evil, the counterpart of the divine beings. But to those who believe in an almighty and all-benign Creator and Ruler of the universe, the question remains: Why do life and the love of life encounter so many hindrances? Why does God's world contain so much pain and bitterness, so much passion and sin? Should not Providence have averted such things? The answer of Judaism has already been stated here, but we need further elaboration of the theme that there is no evil before God, since a good purpose is served even by that which appears bad. In the life of the human body pleasure and pain, the impetus to life and its restraint and inhibition form a necessary contrast, making for health; so, in the moral order of the universe, each being who battles with evil receives new strength for the unfolding of the good. The principle of holiness, which culminates in Israel's holy God, transforms and ennobles every evil. As the Midrash explains, referring to Deut. XI, 26: "If thou but seest that both good and evil are placed in thy

hand, no evil will come to thee from above, since thou knowest how to turn it into good."¹

2. The conception of evil passed through a development parallel with that of the related conceptions which we have just reviewed. At first every misfortune was considered to be inflicted by divine wrath as a punishment for human misdeeds. Nations and individuals were thought to suffer for some special moral cause; through suffering they were punished for past wrong, warned against its repetition in the future, and urged to repentance and improvement of their conduct. Even death, the fate of all living creatures, was regarded as a punishment which the first pair of human beings brought upon all their descendants through their transgression of the divine command. The Talmudic sages clung to the view of the Paradise legend in the Bible, when they held that every death is due to some sin committed by the individual.²

This view, which was shared by paganism, was accompanied by a higher conception, gradually growing in the thinking mind. As a father does not punish his child in anger, but in order to improve his conduct, so God chastens man in order to purify his moral nature. Good fortune tends to harden the heart; adversity often softens and sweetens it. In the crucible of suffering the gold of the human soul is purified from the dross. The evil strokes of destiny come upon the righteous, not because he deserves them, but because his divine Friend is raising him to still higher tests of virtue. This standpoint, never reached even by the pious sufferer Job, is attained by rabbinic Judaism when it calls the visitations of the righteous "trials of the divine love."³ Thus evil, both physical and spiritual, receives its true valuation in the divine economy. Evil exists only to be overcome by the

¹ See Gen. R. IX, 5, 10, 11; Dillmann, l. c., 309-318; D. F. Strauss, l. c., II, 343-384.

² Shab. 55 a.

³ Ber. 5 a, after Deut. VIII, 5; Prov. III, 12.

good. In His paternal goodness God uses it to educate His children for a place in His kingdom. According to the direct words of Scripture good and evil, light and darkness, emanate alike from the Creator. This is accentuated by the great seer of the Exile, who protests against the Persian belief in a creative principle of good and a destructive principle of evil. The rabbis, however, ascribe the origin of evil to man; they take as a negation rather than a question the verse in Lamentations III, 38: "Do not evil and good come out of the mouth of the Most High?" Thus they refer this to the words of Deuteronomy, "Behold, I have set before you this day life and good, death and evil; choose thou life!" Such medieval thinkers as Abraham Ibn Da'ud and Maimonides did not ascribe to evil any reality at all. Evil to them is the negation of good, just as darkness is the negation of light, or poverty of riches. As evil exists only for man, man can overcome it by himself. Before God it has no essential existence. Unfortunately, such metaphysics does not equip man with strength and courage to cope with either pain or sin. The same lack is evident in that modern form of pseudo-science which poses as a religion, Christian Science, which has made propaganda so widely among both Jews and non-Jews. Christian Science declares pain, sickness, and all evil to be merely the "error of mortal mind," which can all be dispelled by faith; such a view neither strengthens the soul for its real struggles nor convinces the mind by an appeal to facts. Frail mortals as we are, we need the help of the living God. Thus only can we overcome physical evil, knowing

¹ Isa. XLV, 7.

² Deut. XI, 27; see the Midrash ad loc.

³ See *Enayot Ramah*, ed. Weil, 93 f. *Moreh*, III, 20, 21. ⁴ See M. Lefkowitz, "The Attitude of Judaism to Christian Science," in Y. B. C. C. I. A. R. XXII, 360-372.

that He bears with us, feels with us, and transforms it finally into good. We need it also to overcome moral evil, in the consciousness that He has compassion upon the repentant sinner and gives him courage to follow the right path. The modern philosophers of pessimism had the correct feeling in adopting the Hindu conception, and emphasizing the pain and misery of existence, repeating Job's ancient plaint over the hard destiny of mankind. The shallow optimism of the age would rather conceal the dark side of life and indulge in outbursts of self-sufficiency. Yet if we measure it only by a physical yardstick, life cannot be called a boon. Against shallow optimism we have the testimony of every thorn and sting, every poisonous breath and every destructive element in nature's household, as well as all vice and evil in the world of man. The world does not appear good, unless we measure it by the ideal of divine holiness. If God is the Father watching over the welfare of every mortal, all things are good, because all serve a good purpose in His eternal plan. Every hindrance or pressure engenders new power; every sting acts as a spur to higher things. Short-sighted and short-lived as is man, he forgets too easily that in the sight of God "a thousand years are as a single day," world-epochs like "watches in the night," and that the mills of divine justice grind on, "slowly but exceeding small." But one belief illumines the darkness of destiny, and that is that God stands ever at the helm, steering through every storm and tempest toward His sublime goal. In the moral striving of man we can but realize that our every victory contributes toward the majestic work of God.¹

¹ See Morris Joseph, l. c., p. 108, 127 ff.; C. Seligman, l. c., 50-68.