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The Idea of God in the Psalms.

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II.

THIS conception of God as more than all the world to us is an abiding heritage to our faith. We do not torture ourselves with the false theory that perplexed the Psalmists: from that the Crucified has for ever delivered us. But to our most enlightened Christian faith, the supremely Trustworthy One is also the Inexplicable. The things that our faith demanded as touching the Kingdom do not come to pass. Prayer for what is manifestly and incontrovertibly to our thinking included in the will of God, is not answered. The very opposite of what the highest and least selfish in us expected takes place. Our hopes are broken, our faith is shattered, we are enveloped in 'clouds and darkness'; the Numinous confronts us: what has happened seems to our keenest vision to be utterly wrong, utterly mischievous, utterly alien to the purpose of God. We may not be able to blame ourselves for the overturn; and even if we do find ample cause of blame in our poor selves, we know He would not inflict penal disaster if our main aim was right. For us, too, there is no eudæmonist solution. But there is for us, as for the Psalmists, the personal solution, the embosoming of the human personality in the Divine, come what will:

*Si fractus illabatur orbis,
Impavidum ferient ruinæ:*

not by hard Stoical *αὐτάρκεια*, but by the sufficiency that is of God,

The feeble hands and helpless,
Groping blindly in the darkness,
Touch God's right hand in the darkness
And are lifted up and strengthened.

One marvels how this high faith sprang up and was maintained through the long post-Exilic period. For the Psalms, whensoever or by whomsoever originated, were (as is generally admitted) selected, edited, revised, gathered into the collections now found in the Psalter, after the Exile. They reflect, therefore, the post-Exilic faith. The glowing prophecies of what would happen after the Return, which had emboldened the exiles to face the long march over the desert, remained utterly unfulfilled. The wealth and splendour, the

power and grandeur, which reach their crowning portrayal in the Second Isaiah, were never attained in Zion. The returning exiles found themselves in a most precarious and unenviable condition: small in numbers, poor, unprotected among enemies, granted a very uncertain liberty under Persian satraps, often attacked, not seldom ravaged, their walls when built no sure refuge, their Temple, even, devastated and defiled. The disillusion must at times have amounted to an agony. The contrast between what they had been promised and what they really experienced might have flung the people into pessimism, doubt, and despair. Yet it is just in that long-drawn-out disappointment we hear the people singing, making a joyful noise unto God, exulting in Him; and their songs have become the music of the world.

How came this about? What led to this extraordinary result which seemed at such variance with the actual environment? The people might have been kept alive by the well-organized hierarchy, by the regular performance of the Temple cult and by the thick zereba of the Law. But these things would not have produced the burst of spiritual melody which has charmed the generations. The Psalms are a miracle of literature. Their production is a miracle of history. I can only trace them to a special gift of God bestowed upon that struggling group of returned exiles. The Psalms sprang out of the close fellowship of worship. They express the deep social realization of the presence of God. In the Temple and in the associations of which it was the centre, the people came close together in the adoration of Yahweh. What Jesus later promised to His followers, 'Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst,' was in a measure anticipated in the constant succession of Temple worship. Whatever brawls and disappointments there might be without; there within was the bondkinship intensely real: *חסר* was an abiding fact. The solidarity of Yahweh and His people was a palpable experience. At times so vivid was the realization of His presence that, we are told, the priests in adoring awe ceased to minister.

And those of us who cannot find an explanation of Hebrew prophecy in the merely human environment, but believe that the Central Personality of the universe shaped and called, endowed and empowered, Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and the rest, cannot withhold the conviction that the *social inspiration* of the worshipping community which produced the Psalms was as real and as special as the personal inspiration which was given to the prophets. Social inspiration—that it was which kept the people not only alive, but vibrant with unquenchable faith and vocal with triumphant song. By a supernormal gift of God, a social life was bestowed and fostered so intense and deep as to be more than national, and to be feeling its way to becoming universally human. In the Temple courts Yahweh was socially conceived, socially perceived, socially received. The joy of that self-bestowal is echoed in many and many a Psalm :

A day in thy courts is worth a thousand (84¹⁰).

My soul thirsteth for God, for the living God :
When shall I come and appear before God? (42²).

Then will I go unto the altar of God,
Unto God the gladness of my joy (43⁴).

In the multitude of thy *רח* will I come into thy house (5⁷).

I love the habitation of thy house,
And the place where thy glory dwelleth (26⁸).

One thing have I asked of Yahweh,
That will I seek after :
That I may dwell in Yahweh's house all the days of
my life :

To behold the delight of Yahweh . . . (27⁴).

We have thought on thy *רח*, O God, in the midst of
thy temple (48⁹).

Out of Zion, the perfection of beauty, God hath shined
forth (50⁷).

O Zion . . . all my fountains are in thee (87⁷).

My soul longeth, yea, even fainteth, for the courts of
Yahweh (84²).

Such intense social experience reaches home to the core of humanity and to the heart of God. It is implicitly always, and often in the Psalms explicitly, universal :

Thou art the confidence of the ends of the earth (65⁴).

All the ends of the earth shall turn unto Yahweh
(22²⁷).

The refrain :

Oh that men would praise Yahweh for his goodness,
And for his wonderful works to the children of men!
(107⁸).

shows us *רח* extending beyond the confines of Israel and reaching to all men :

The earth is full, O Yahweh, of thy *רח* (119⁶⁴).

The bud is almost bursting into the flower of God's solidarity with humanity. And a proof of this is the general adoption of the Psalms as the song-book of the race.

Modern criticism has not only conferred upon the world the discovery of the prophets of Israel ; it has made the period between the Return and the rise of the Maccabees luminous with the glory of the social revelation of God in the Psalms. The former gift disclosed the Divine potency of human personality : the latter the Divine potency of human society.

In the light of the suggestions I have made, it remains for me to glance at one or two illustrative Psalms :

Ps 90 is perhaps the most wonderful exhibition of the paradox of psalmic religion. It opens in majestic strain. God is one : Creator of the world, eternal. On His human side, He is our abode, our home, our refuge in all generations. So far all is stately, helpful, and worthy of its theme. Then follows the contrast between God's eternity and power, and the brief and frail life of mortal men. It is couched in terms that sharply collide with the opening verse. Our abode or refuge in all generations now becomes our fierce and angry Tormentor. He crushes us to dust. He sweeps us away as in a flood. We fade like the ephemeral grass under the heat of His anger. In His anger we are consumed : in His rage we flee away. All our days pass in the ebullition of His wrath. Our poor seventy years are but a moan, and any years beyond that limit are but labour and vanity. Our dread is proportioned to the outburst of His wrath.

These verses remind us of Browning's ' Caliban on Setebos ' :

He doth His worst in this our life,
Giving just respite lest we die thro' pain,
Saving last pain for worst,—with which, an end.

Who made them weak, meant weakness He might vex.
So through all the strata deposited by prophetic thought and popular ethics, shoots up the ancient Thunder-God :

Fast invading fires begin ! White blaze—
. . . and there, there, there, there, there,
His thunder follows ! Fool to gibe at Him !

Then the later and nobler faith begins with much tremor to return. The thunder-storm of Divine wrath may pass—though a few lines before, all our days were spent under the shadow and terror of it—how long will it last? Come back! Have mercy! Satisfy us with Thy *חסד*. Let Thy sunshine last as long as Thy raging storm. Show Thy splendour to our children. Let Thy horrors give way to beauty, Thy beauty. Wither not up our poor efforts in the heat of Thine anger, but establish them.

What a bundle of contradictions the Psalm contains! After the calm dignity of the first lines, the writer yields to spasm after spasm of terror, of abject contrition, then of suppliant hope, and finally of a faith slowly recovering.

Ps 36 offers a contrast of another kind, not between Yahweh enraged and Yahweh appeased, but between the oracular utterance of the depraved conscience that our evil conduct is no concern to the Deity, that evil may be designed, and spoken, and done, without fear of detection or punishment; and the ecstatic ascription from the devout heart to Yahweh of moral perfectness. The most joyous confidence is expressed:

O Yahweh, thy *חסד* is in the heavens;
Thy faithfulness reacheth unto the skies.
Thy righteousness is like the mountains of God;
Thy judgements are a great abyss.

In this last line the Numinous emerges, not of the fulminant kind. The Psalmist is absolutely sure of the perfect character of Yahweh, His *חסד*, His fidelity to the bondkinship, His steadfast adherence to the purpose of *חסד*; but His judgements are beyond our explaining or understanding; they are as unfathomable as the Abyss. The glad heart sings on:

Man and beast thou preservest.
How precious is thy *חסד*, O God!
Men shelter in the shadow of thy wings.

Then there is presented the Source of this exuberant faith:

They gorge on the fatness of thy house;
And of the torrent of thy delights thou givest them
to drink.

For with thee is the fountain of life:
In thy light we see light.

In the worshipping fellowship they come on God: they share His joy; they know Him the ever-springing jet of life; in His light they see all life irradiated; He bestows true vision.

Ps 115 is a triumph-song, occasioned by some signal victory over idolatrous foes. To Yahweh is all the glory ascribed. The contrast here is between the hand-made images, motionless, powerless, helpless, and Yahweh, the Creator of the universe, omnific Occupant of the heavens, Bestower of the earth upon men, Help and Shield to nation and priest and convert. The conception of God is seen expanding from national limits towards the universal, from Israel through non-Israelitish adherents (them that fear Yahweh) towards humanity.

Ps 139 is late. It is unique: it is like no other psalm. It shows the universalizing process in its intensive phase. There is no taint of particularism about it. It contains no mention of Israel, Zion, priesthood, or sacrificial cult. It is inwardly, universally human. Just as little has it, with all its suggestions of philosophy, any taint whatever of Greek speculation. There is no abstract thought in it; all is concrete, vivid, personal. The Chief Figure in it is as far removed as possible from anything like Aristotle's *νόησις νοήσεως*. Yahweh is throughout personal; if one may say so, personality to the *n*th power. And it is as personality accompanying, scrutinizing, forestalling personality, that He is presented. Omniscience is implied: He knows and foreknows thought, word, deed, the hidden processes of prenatal life. Omnipresence, in Heaven, earth, and Sheol, is definitely asserted. If the poet takes the wings of the morning, as it flutters over the eastern hills and does not end his flight until he pitches his tent beyond the western wave, even there Yahweh's hand is upon him to grasp and to lead. And then the thoughts of this all-encompassing, all-winnowing Yahweh—no abstractions of the speculative reason, but the living thoughts of the living God—how precious are they; how great are their heads; chapter after chapter of the Divine thought he turns over in his mind, and delights in their priceless value. Ethical content appears in the closing verses, in a truculent assertion of hatred to the enemies of God; and in a request for the scrutiny of his motives:

Search me, and know my heart:
Try me, and know my thoughts.

The introspective note struck at the beginning sounds again at the close.