

## THE HEBREW CREED

“HEAR, O Israel; ‘The Lord is our God, the Lord is one; and thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might’.” The chapter in which these words are found (Deut. vi) opens with the impressive statement: “Now these are the commandment (in the original the word is singular) the statutes and the judgements which the Lord your God commanded.” In our modern speech the *commandment* is the constitution of the Jewish state, the *statutes* are the laws of the realm, and the *judgements* are the precedents according to which statute law is interpreted. The commandment, or constitution, is contained in the words quoted above, the “Shema”, often styled “the Hebrew Creed”; the statutes are the larger commandments, such as are gathered together in the decalogue; the judgements are the decisions of the lawgiver and his assessors by which the usages of the Tribes were brought into harmony with the divine revelation.

This “Creed”, then, is the constitution on which the Hebrew state was founded. It epitomises the first table of the decalogue and implies the second; and it was accepted by our Lord as the sum of God-service. In the last days of our Saviour’s ministry a ruler in Israel asked Him, “Which is the first commandment of all?” Jesus answered, “The first of all the commandments is: ‘Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our Lord, the Lord is one; and thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength’. And the second is like, namely this, ‘Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself’. There is none other commandment greater than these”. As the living centre of the Jewish Creed these words were recited every day by faithful Israelites—morning and evening, and at the close of each act of worship. They were bound about the forehead and the right hand, they were affixed to the doorpost of every room; and they were the last words on the lips of the dying. When

Lord Beaconsfield was at the point of death he feebly articulated certain words; he was repeating the familiar formula: "Hear, O Israel: the Lord is our Lord, the Lord is one; and thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might."

This, then, is the full and final expression of religion, in doctrine and in practice.

## I

The *doctrine* is contained in two propositions: "The Lord is our God," and, "The Lord is one".

(a) *The Lord is our God.* Jehovah is the covenant name. God has drawn near to men, and has entered into a relation of friendship and kindness with them. The book of Deuteronomy repeatedly brings before us what Moses calls, "This glorious and fearful name, The Lord thy God". In this covenant of grace God gives Himself in the fullness of His tender mercy to the children of men. All that He is, all that He has, all that He has accomplished, is for us. As Jacob Böhme has it, "There is nothing alien in God". God, even our own God, shall bless us. And this, as Ebenezer Erskine was wont to say, is "the marrow of the Gospel". As he lay on his deathbed, he noticed that his daughter, who attended him, was bending over a book: He asked her what it was that she was reading. She replied, "Your sermon on 'I am the Lord thy God'". "Lassie," he said, "that's the best sermon I ever preached." A few days before his departure one of his elders visited him. "Sir," he said, "you have many times given us good advice. May I ask what you are now doing with your own soul?" "Just what I have often said to you; I am laying it down on that word, 'I am the Lord thy God'."

(b) *The Lord is one.* As there is unity in nature, so there is an unbreakable unity in the spiritual sphere. The reign of natural law controls planets and suns and systems, a single formula embraces all the movements and energies which pervade the universe. Similarly, in the region of the spirit there is one controlling law, the law of love.

"The Lord is one." Therefore the love of God is shed abroad in the earth, and all men come under its constraint. The Jewish fathers were so much impressed by this thought, that, when the Creed was repeated in the synagogue, these words were always added: "Blessed be His name whose glorious

kingdom is for ever and ever. And the Lord shall be king over all the earth: in that day shall there be one Lord, and His name one." This is the Old Testament anticipation of the great gospel word: "God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth on Him should not perish, but have eternal life."

## II

*Doctrine leads to practice.* Therefore the Creed continues: "And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thine heart, with all thy soul, and with all thy might."

Has the verb "to love" an imperative mood? we sometimes ask. It has, but it is responsive to one call only: love begets love. Almost immediately Moses leads us to the birthplace of love in God: "The Lord did not set His love upon you . . . because ye were more in number than any people . . . but because the Lord loveth you." The Jewish doctors understood this so well that they inserted among the sentences introductory to the "Shema" these words: "With abounding love hast Thou loved us, O Lord our God. . . . Blessed art Thou, O God, who hast chosen Thy people Israel in love." In the New Testament we read: "We love, because He first loved us." And in our Christian worship we repeat words like these:

"Chosen not for good in me,  
Wakened up from wrath to flee,  
Hidden in the Saviour's side,  
By the Spirit sanctified;  
Teach me, Lord, on earth to show,  
By my love, how much I owe."

(a) We think first of the loving-kindness of the Lord. He sends the sunshine and rain upon the evil and the good. His gentleness and His liberality are as angels attendant on us in life's pilgrimage, so that the recipients of His mercy may gratefully sing: "Blessed be the Lord, day by day He carries our burdens for us: Blessed be the Lord, day by day he loadeth us with benefits."

(b) Again, we think of the grace of the Holy Spirit. As the Spirit of God is wont to work in silence we are, for the most part, only partly aware of His gracious actings towards us. He restrains us from open sin, He entreats us to receive

the mercy that is offered, He impresses upon our spirits the seal of His acceptance; above all, He witnesses to the glory of Christ and the love of the Father.

(c) Once more, the love of God is revealed to us in the Lord Jesus. It is He who taught us to pray, saying, "Our Father". He encourages the distressful children of men to rest in the watchful care of Him who marks the sparrow's fall. "Believe in God," He says, "believe also in Me." Believe in Me as you believe in God, so shall your heart be untroubled. He Himself endured the most severe afflictions; all God's waves and billows passed over Him. Yet His witness to the faithfulness of God never faltered. Even on the cross of shame He reposed Himself upon the eternal love. Now, as we stand at the cross-foot, we say with deepest emotion: "Herein is love; not that we loved God, but that He loved us, and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins."

(d) In Christ we have come to know God: "No man hath seen God at any time; the only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, He hath declared Him." A question much debated by the Schoolmen was, "Can we contemplate the Divine Essence?" The answer most frequently offered was, "We cannot"; but some said, "We can; for the very Being of God is love; and hereby know we love, because He laid down His life for us". Love is the sum of the divine attributes: Wisdom, Righteousness, Truth and Grace are all manifestations of the divine perfection. Thus by Christ we come to the pure love of the saints for God; a love that finds satisfaction not merely in His gifts, but in Himself: we love Him for His own name's sake. The familiar story of Thomas Aquinas may find a place here. According to the legend, the Spirit of the Father said to him: "Thomas, thou hast spoken well concerning Me, what reward shall I offer thee?" The renowned theologian answered, "Nothing, Lord, except Thyself".

### III

"Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might." The heart is the seat of the active powers; to love with the heart is to obey. The soul is the life, the self; to love with the soul implies dedication without reserve to the holy will. And to love with all one's might is to do this with intensity and passion.

(a) To love with the heart secures a perfect obedience, an entire concurrence in the will and word of God.

The will of God is to be embraced, even when it expresses itself in some biting pain. An accepted sorrow may become a choice means of grace. The Florentine poet, who had ranged through the seven circles of hell, came to the convent of the Holy Cross clamouring for "Peace". In the process of the years he came to that country "afar beyond the stars", where peace reigns. "In His will," said he, "is our peace."

Their defeat and slaughter in the battle of Moncontour shattered the fortunes of the Huguenot party. The general, Gaspard de Coligny, was being carried from the field bruised, broken, almost choked in his own blood. One of his most intimate officers and counsellors, L'Estrange, himself dangerously wounded, but forgetful of his own pain, said to his leader, "Que Dieu est doux"—How gracious the Lord is! Coligny afterwards confessed that those words fell as balm on his wounded spirit. He acknowledged that the will of God was acceptable, perfect, good.

But the will of God is not only to be accepted, it is to be done. "My Father worketh hitherto, and I work," said the Master; and we are called to be fellow-labourers with Him. Of the first Christian missionaries it is written: "They went forth, and preached everywhere, the Lord working with them, and confirming the word by the signs that followed." They bore the glad news of a Saviour from sin, a Divine Comforter, and a Father of loving-kindness, over land and sea, even to the uttermost part of the earth, and all to the glory of God.

Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. That was His mission, His lifelong service. And in this He has given us an example that we should follow His steps. In his Autobiography Rudyard Kipling tells of a passage of arms which he had with General William Booth, of the Salvation Army. At Invercargill, New Zealand, the General came on board the little vessel in which Kipling was a passenger. A crowd of well-wishers came to bid the Chief God-speed. He was walking backwards over the uneven wharf while he beat a tambourine in the face of the crowd who had come to see him off. Kipling ventured to criticise to the Leader himself his unconventional action on the pier. General Booth bent his brows, and replied: "Young feller, if I thought I could win *one* more soul to the

Lord by walking on my head and playing the tambourine with my toes, I'd—I'd learn how." Kipling adds, "He had the right of it (if by any means I can save some), and I had decency enough to apologise".

(b) To love with the soul involves the devotion of oneself to the cause and kingdom of God. We are not our own. We belong by the right of nature to Him in whom we live and move and have our being. And we belong to Him with a straiter bond of allegiance, because we have been purchased by covenant blood. The devotion that is required of us is illustrated by the self-oblation of the Redeemer. As He gathered the little company of His followers round His person, He offered Himself in the presentation of His high-priestly prayer: "For their sakes," He said, "I consecrate Myself, that they also may be consecrated in truth". As He poured out His soul unto death, let us yield ourselves without reserve to the living God. Abailard, writing to Héloïse, who was searching for some deed of penance which she might execute, expresses in moving terms this law of the kingdom of God: "He has bought thee, not with what He has but with Himself. . . . What, I ask, did He see in thee—He who has need of nothing—that to win thee He did battle, even to the last agonies of a death so full of horror and of shame? What, I say, does He seek in thee, *except thyself?*"

(c) The heart and the soul are the entire personality. But the "Creed" affirms further that these are to be fastened intensively on the love of God. Our love to God must not be passive merely; it must be impassioned—a very "fire-flame of Jehovah", as Canticles expresses it. As the hart pants for the water-brooks, so should our souls cry out for God, the living God. "O God, Thou art my God, early will I seek Thee." "My God, my all."

The Lord Jesus strengthens this thought by adding these words to the Creed—"And with all thy mind". In this clause the Saviour sums up the exhortations that follow (verses 6-9). The father in the Hebrew home is charged to give all his thoughts to this blessed announcement. From morning till night he is constantly thinking about it—he sets the Lord God always before him. He repeats the glad news unweariedly to his children and to the inmates of his house. Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh. As he passes down the road, or labours

in vineyard or field, he talks of God. Every meal is sacramental; it is hallowed by the adoring utterance of the Divine Name. The law of love is engraven on the hand, the breast, the brow. One does not suppose that Moses was framing the law of the phylacteries, but rather reminding the true Israelite, as St. Paul did afterwards, that to present our bodies—hand and eye and brain—a living sacrifice to God is a most reasonable service, made free and lovely by the continual remembrance of the mercies of God.

But the Mezuzah became an outward and visible sign of a spiritual reality. A cylinder, into which the Creed and certain related scriptures were inserted, was affixed to the right hand door-post of every room in the house, and also to the outer door. An opening in the cylinder allowed even the youngest child to touch the name of God with his finger. Then he would kiss the finger which had been pressed upon the Sacred Name—thus embracing God with a pure love; after which he would repeat Psalm cxxi. 8: “The Lord shall preserve thy going out and thy coming in, from this time forth, and even for evermore.”

But the New Testament lays on us a still heavier requirement. The love which is exacted from us and is “manifested in us” is the very love which the Father showed when “God was in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself”. The rabbis were accustomed to say that the requirement of the Hebrew Creed was “the yoke of the law”. It was no doubt with reference to this sentence that our Saviour said: “My yoke is easy, and My burden is light.” The burden that He carried was the world’s sin and pain, the yoke that supported the burden was allegiance to the divine love: it was the Master’s meat and drink to do the Father’s will.

A touching story comes to us from Rumania. A priest of the Orthodox Church not long ago paid a visit to the Holy Land. There the Spirit of God came upon him. Let us read his own words: “I went to Jerusalem . . . I wept on the spot where the Lord was crucified for me and my sins. With burning tears I made the promise, on that very spot to put my whole life into His service, to sacrifice myself for Him and His work, to live only for Him and His work. On the spot where His cross stood . . . I prayed: ‘O Jesus, my beloved Saviour! Thou knowest that I have brought here a decision. I brought the decision to live with Thee, to live a life only for Thee, to sacrifice

myself for Thee and Thy work. I have brought here this decision to make it strong by Thy blood, for without this seal my decision has no power whatever. I lay down before Thy cross this my decision, and I beg with burning tears for the seal of Thy blood. I stand under Thy cross to let drop on me incessantly the blood of my forgiveness and my reconciliation with God. Wash with Thy blood my sinful past, and give me grace and power to begin a new life. . . . Give me power, O Christ, to be crucified with Thee, and henceforth not to live of myself, but do Thou, O Lord, live in me (Gal. ii. 20). Help me not to be mine own, but Thine—wholly Thine, only Thine—because Thou hast bought me with so great a price.' ”

From that hour, through sickness, persecution, suffering, this man has been as a flame of fire in the service of the Kingdom, and through grace has turned many hundreds to God.

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