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THE REALITY OF INDIVIDUAL PIETY IN THE OLD TESTAMENT.

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An important question in the history of Old Testament religion has come to be—Did individual piety, up to the time of the prophets, exist in Israel at all? Putting the question in another way, did the individual distinguish himself, in his relation to God, from his nation or tribe, or possess any distinct consciousness of personal obligation or responsibility? Or if he did, how far did this extend? Was it only germinal, overshadowed by the stronger national or tribal consciousness? Or had it the pronounced character of a really personal religion?

This question, as everyone familiar with recent critical discussion is aware, is rendered necessary by the very unqualified assertions sometimes made on the point by writers on the pre-prophetic religion of Israel. According to these writers, the development of an individual as distinguished from a natural or tribal consciousness of Israel, consequently of even the possibility of an individual as distinguished from a corporate piety, was of quite late growth. It was unknown in earlier times, and is first seen coming to clear expression in the teaching on individual responsibility of prophets like Jere-

miah and Ezekiel. The individual, it is contended, knew himself related to Jehovah as a member of the community, not otherwise. Of a relation of God to him as an individual person, involving the laying upon him of an individual obligation, and the taking account of him as an individual in reward and punishment, either in this world, or in an after life, there is no conception. Much stress is laid on this view in various theological relations, as also in the interpretation of the Psalms¹ and other Scriptures, but specially, perhaps, in explanation of the development of eschatological conceptions, and of the rise of belief in personal immortality. So long as there was lacking this consciousness of personal relation to God, there necessarily could be no proper belief in individual immortality; with the rise of the individualistic consciousness, the latter became a necessity of faith.

It is hardly needful to occupy space with quotations of authorities in illustration of these positions. From the time of Vatke on they are found in abundance. Examples might be given from Stade, Marti, Smend, Cheyne, and many others, but we take only the following from Stade, in his "Geschichte des Volkes Israel," and a sentence or two from Dr. Charles in his work on "Jewish and Christian Eschatology," to illustrate the point. "Not the individual Israelite," says Stade, speaking of pre-prophetic religion, "but the whole people of Israel, was a religious quantity. It was the national misfortunes that first raised the question of which even the prophets had never once thought, how the fate of the individual stood related to his own actions on the one hand, and to the fate of the people on the other."² Dr. Charles builds largely on the view now stated. It is one of his fundamental positions that till near the time of the exile religion in Israel was not individual—that Jehovah was conceived of as concerned with the well-being of the people as a whole, not with that of its indi-

¹ E. g., by Smend.

² Op. cit. I. pp. 597, 513; II. p. 24.

vidual members. As he puts it, "The individual was not the religious unit, but the family or tribe * * *. The individual was related to Yahwe only as a member of the nation, and as such shared, whatever his nature and character, in the national judgments, and thus had no individual worth. The nation was the religious unit."³ There was, therefore, as he contends, no room for affirming an interest or jurisdiction of Yahwe in the existence of the individual beyond the grave, i. e., in Sheol.⁴ On the whole it is the same view which is presented in Dr. G. A. Smith's "Modern Criticism and the Preaching of the Old Testament," though, somewhat earlier, speaking of the story of the fall, Dr. Smith had very justly said, "It is usual to call the morality of early Israel a purely tribal morality like that of all their Semitic kinsfolk. But the nation which produced this story almost certainly before 700 B. C. has already within it minds far advanced beyond the stage of a tribal morality."⁵ But the ruling thought of the book is expressed in the words, "The unit of religion was the living tribe: they were the interest and care of the Deity; with whom the individual had no part or portion except in his place as a living member of the tribe."⁶ "To the ancient Semite, God did not deal with the individual, but with the tribe as a whole. It was the tribal existence which the divine honor was obliged to maintain: so long as that was preserved on earth, the fate of the individual, after he fulfilled his length of days, mattered little * * *. The same ideas prevailed in early Israel. Up to Jeremiah's time the religious unit was almost exclusively the nation."⁷

This will suffice for quotation; in this paper it is proposed to inquire whether the representation contained in

³ Op. cit. pp. 58, 60.

⁴ Pp. 19, 35.

⁵ Op. cit., pp. 93-4; cf p. 133; "In the story of Joseph * * * the responsibility of the individual to God in matters deeper than those of a tribal morality is taken for granted."

⁶ P. 130.

⁷ P. 197.

such passages is correct, or, if there is truth in it, with what limitation it is to be received. A good many critical positions and presuppositions are, of course, involved in such a discussion, but we shall seek, as far as possible, to avoid introducing these. Let the newer critical analysis and dating of documents or books be assumed, if one pleases; the plain facts to which we shall call attention are not greatly affected by them, though perhaps they may be by the theory of religion very commonly connected with the criticism.

First, however, let the endeavor be made to do justice to what is true and undeniable in the contention just exhibited, one-sided in great measure as we cannot help taking it to be. It is not necessary to dispute that to the early Semite, indeed, to ancient thought generally, the individual was bound up with, and may be spoken of as merged in, the family, or tribe, or nation, to a degree which is not known among ourselves. The individual consciousness and the tribal were never clearly dissociated from each other. The individual belonged to his family and tribe, and had few rights as against it; the tribe, on the other hand, had claims upon the individual, and exercised over him an authority only partially limited by usage and prescription. Dr. Mozley in his book on "Ruling Ideas in Early Ages" lays great stress on this principle—though he too, probably, carries it too far—in his dealing with certain difficulties of the Old Testament. He points out that "when we examine the ancient mind all the world over (not merely the Semitic), one very remarkable want is apparent in it, a true idea of the individuality of man; an adequate conception of him as an independent person—a substantial being in himself, whose life and existence was his own. Man always figures as an appendage to somebody—the subject to the monarch, the son to the father, the wife to the husband, the slave to the master. He is the function or circumstance of somebody else;"⁸ and he says that, "the same

⁸ Op. cit. p. 37.

defective idea of human individuality, and the right and property of the individual in his own life, which prevailed in early ages generally, is traceable even in the Patriarchal and Jewish mind."⁹ This is true, though it has its limits, and is not quite the same thing as the merging of the individual in the tribe or in the nation. In the family, e. g., the father may have absolute rights, as he had in Roman law, over wife, children, and slaves, but if these dependents have their individuality denied, the same cannot, at least, be said of the father: his individuality is exaggerated beyond its proper dimensions. What we have to do with in the tribal conception is rather the idea of corporate unity, in which family or tribe is reckoned as one person, and the crime of the individual, or wrong to the individual, is held to be the crime or wrong of all, and is punished or avenged accordingly. We have illustrations in the custom of blood revenge, and in the infliction of punishment on the household or tribe for the sin of the individual—the case of Achan, for example. There is here certainly an inadequate conception of personality, but, before passing from it, it is well to remember that it has in it also an element of abiding truth. If it is wrong to make too little of the individual in his relation to the society, justice must be done also to the fact that there is a corporate and organic relation of the individual to his kind, and that this likewise carries with it responsibilities from which no one can set himself free. No man liveth to himself, and no man dieth to himself. We are members of a race, of societies, of families, of groups of various kinds, and we are rightly called upon to take our share in the responsibilities which these relations entail, and sometimes also may have to suffer heavily through our share in their liabilities. When war breaks out between nations, e. g., these are still treated as units in which the individuals are merged, and bombardment or assault is directed against any of the enemy's possessions. In

⁹ P. 43.

national life many ladies of our time still think that their individuality receives imperfect recognition, and in a recent British law case it was decided that women graduates had no votes in a University election because in the eye of the law they were not "persons." The trend of modern social opinion is to emphasize the solidarity of society, and the greatest problem of modern times is to secure the right balance between individual rights and social obligations and responsibilities.

Meanwhile, before leaving this, attention may be called to the fact that in speaking vaguely of the family, tribe, or nation as a religious unit we are apt to lose ourselves in some confusion. In Israel, for example, what is it that is held to be the "unit"? If the nation, then it cannot be the tribe; if the tribe, then it cannot be the family. The nation is made up of many tribes; the tribe is an aggregation of many families; the family in turn is made up of individuals. Within the larger unity of the nation, that is, there are smaller unities, and within these unities others still smaller, each with its relatively independent character; finally, within the smallest collective groups there are the individuals, who also may have their place and rights accorded to them without denying their dependence on the whole. What is meant is, that as the family has a relative life of its own, while yet a part of the tribe, and the tribe a relative life of its own, while yet a part of the nation, there is no contradiction in supposing that the individual has his own sphere of duties, rights, and interests, and as included in that his personal religious life and responsibility, while yet sharing in the larger life of his family, tribe, or people. This we believe to be the case to an extent very far from being adequately recognized in the current representations of pre-prophetic piety in Israel.

Coming directly to the question at issue, we confess it has always been a problem and mystery to our mind how students of the Old Testament could possibly entertain the idea that there was not from the earliest time of

which we have any knowledge, a vigorous and earnest personal, as distinct from a merely tribal, piety in Israel. There is, indeed, as already said, through the Old Testament a solidarity of the individual with his family and tribe, but not at any period to the exclusion of a personal relation to Jehovah, or of an individual moral and religious responsibility. The evidence of this is so abundant, and meets one so palpably on almost every page of the Bible, that it is difficult to understand how it is got over. Appeal may be made here first to the religious *biography* of the Bible. From beginning to end the Old Testament presents us with a portrait gallery of saints and servants of God, standing in the most individual possible relations to Him, exercising faith and hope in His promises, sinning and repenting, sorrowing and rejoicing, often standing alone in their protest against the wickedness around them, sometimes yielding up their lives in fidelity to God and righteousness. This is as true of Patriarchal and Mosaic, and even of pre-Patriarchal times, as of later periods. The pictures thus given are not affected by critical questions of date and documents, or even by the contention that the Patriarchal figures are merely personifications of tribes or of the nation. Even were this true originally of such figures as Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph, which there is no good reason to believe it is, there can be no question that long before the legends or traditions, however one chooses to name them, were reduced to writing, as we now have them, these Patriarchs had come to be regarded, and are certainly portrayed, as individuals in the strictest sense, and their histories stand out to the minds of the people as models for all time of individual piety. Dr. G. A. Smith makes a large admission when, in an article in the "Quarterly Review" January, 1907, he allows that Wellhausen and Prof. Robertson Smith were wrong about the date of the Patriarchal narratives, and signifies his adhesion to Gunkel in carrying back these narratives to about 1200 B. C. In any case the narra-

tives which contain these stories are, even on the critical view, as old in their written form as the 9th or 8th century, i. e., older than, or as early as, the time of Amos and Hosea. Prof. Henry Preserved Smith, indeed, says in his "Old Testament History," "Amos and Hosea, at any rate, had little idea of the Patriarchs as individual men."¹⁰ If he and others can persuade themselves of this, they must do so, but the narratives really are there to speak for themselves, and the mind must be strangely constituted that can read the history, say, of an Abraham or a Joseph, with its rich biographical detail, and not see that as it stands it is given as the biography of an individual.

If, however, this is so, it bears with overwhelming directness upon the question of the familiarity of minds in Israel with the idea of a personal piety. Before the national, in the Biblical history, is the Patriarchal age; before that again the story of the beginnings and early growth of man. In these earliest periods we have not yet advanced even to the tribal stage. At the outset we have the creation of a first man and woman, and of God's dealings with them when as yet there were no others in the world but themselves. As Dr. G. A. Smith truly says, this is not "tribal" morality or religion. The next story, that of Cain and Abel, is a story of individual contrast in the family, Abel is accepted, and Cain, with his brother's blood upon his hands, is punished. Of Enoch it is recorded that he walked with God, and was not, for God took him. Noah is an individual who walked with God, and obtained favor for himself and his household when all the world had become corrupt. It is not necessary to pursue the history in detail. Abraham, Jacob, Joseph, as already said, are all of them to the readers of the history individuals; Sarah, though a woman, does not strike one as a mere "appendage" to Abraham; Moses, Joshua, Caleb, are individuals; if there had been ten righteous persons in Sodom it would have been spared;

¹⁰ Op. cit. p. 38.

it was as an individual that David sinned, as an individual he repented and was forgiven; kings in the histories are judged or condemned according to their individual character. So with a myriad other persons, who appear in the sacred story. Can it be denied that individual faith is represented as the root of the character of these persons; that it is as individuals that Jehovah appears to them, encourages them, or it may be rebukes and warns them; that it is by individual hope in God they were sustained in their trials and afflictions? Could we conceive a more instructive or beautiful personal history than that of Joseph in his relations with his father, with his brethren, with Potiphar and with Pharaoh; was it not as an individual he was tempted, and as an individual he repelled temptation? The Book of Ruth may be put late—one does not see the need of putting it late—but what a charming picture of individual piety in the time of the Judges have we in those pages. David's life is surely individual, if ever there was one, and his trust and hope in God in the time of his persecution by Saul, and of the rebellion of Absalom, are among the most conspicuous things in it. The Book of Job is another work that goes down with many to that convenient receptacle, the post-exilian age, but it reflects, at least, Patriarchal conditions, and Job's piety is that of an individual man, and the sacrifices he offers weekly for his sons imply personal responsibility on their part as well. How, in face of these plainest facts of the history, it can be held that individual piety has no existence in the earlier times of Israel and before the prophets, we repeat that it is difficult to imagine.

It is not different, when from biography and history we look to *law* and its operation. We leave aside the Levitical laws, though there is no need to do so, for whatever the age of the compilation of the laws, there is a growing tendency to recognize in them the embodiment of usage, and sometimes of very ancient usage. It would be easy to show in a number of ways how entirely that

corpus of legislation is penetrated by the idea of the religious standing, duty, and responsibility of the individual. In the sacrifices, e. g., how particular are the directions for the bringing of sin and guilt offerings for the ordinary Israelite, as well as for those of higher standing. "If any one sin," such is the rubric, "he is guilty and shall bear his iniquity;" there is individual confession, individual sacrifice, individual forgiveness.¹¹ In the Code known as the Law of Holiness the individual is the subject almost throughout. "If a man" do this or that; "whosoever he be that giveth of his seed unto Molech; he shall surely be put to death: the people of the land shall stone him with stones." "Ye shall fear every man his mother, and his father, and keep my Sabbaths,"¹² and so on. But take what are allowed to be the oldest laws and observances of the nation. No one, we think, would doubt that the celebrated Code of Hammurabi, so much older than Moses, is a Code of individual prescriptions, sanctioned by individual penalties. Is it otherwise with the laws in Exodus? The Decalogue, e. g., though addressed to the nation by the God of the nation, is yet a code of individual duties.¹³ "Honour thy father and thy mother," "Thou shalt not kill," "Thou shalt not steal," "Thou shalt not bear false witness," "Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's house, wife, ox, ass," etc. This is individual duty. On the religious side, "Jehovah will not hold him guiltless that taketh His name in vain;" the second and fourth commandments single out the individual, "thou shalt not do any work, thou, nor thy son, nor thy daughter," etc. The iniquity of the fathers is indeed visited upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate God (this still distinguishes them from the nation), but on the other side, mercy is shown unto thousands of them that love God and keep His commandments. Instances

¹¹ Lev. IV. 2ff; V. 1ff.

¹² Cf. Lev. XIX. 3; XX. 2ff.

¹³ Ex. XX. 2ff.

need not be adduced from the civil code of Exodus, which, like the Babylonian, has to do almost wholly with the individual. "Keep thee far from a false matter, for I will not justify the wicked;"¹⁴ just as Abraham had pleaded for Sodom, "Wilt thou also destroy the righteous with the wicked? * * * That so the righteous should be as the wicked; that be far from thee; shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?"¹⁵ Sometimes in solemn acts of public justice we see the influence of the idea which connects the house with the individual, as when Achan and his house are stoned,¹⁶ and Dothan and Abiram with their families are swallowed up,¹⁷ but this is rare even in ancient Israel. The sin of one may bring wrath upon the whole tribe, but as a rule the individual answers for his own transgression. Even in the fierce strain of the Song of Deborah, the closing note is on the lofty key, "Let them that love Him be as the sun when he goeth forth in his might."¹⁸

The *devotional* literature of Israel finds its embodiment in the Book of Psalms, and here again can it be reasonably questioned that every mood of the soul in its most earnest personal relations to God is pictured in the most intense and real manner? We may be told, of course, that all this belongs to the worship of the 2nd Temple, or, as by Smend, that even when the Psalms seem most individualistic, it is not an individual but a Church consciousness that is expressed. Here again, however, the Psalms must be allowed to speak for themselves, and while there are undoubtedly, as in our hymns, expressions of the Church consciousness, it is beyond reasonable question that the bulk of the compositions, especially in the earlier part of the Book, spring from the experience of the individual. Indeed, as Dr. Jas. Robertson very forcibly argues in his "Religion and Poetry in

¹⁴ Ex. XXIII. 7.

¹⁵ Gen. XVIII. 25.

¹⁶ Josh. VII. 24ff.

¹⁷ Num. XVI. 32.

¹⁸ Judg. V. 31.

the Psalms," whence would the materials for depicting such a consciousness be obtained, if there did not lie behind it the experience of individual joy and sorrow, faith and repentance, trust and triumph?¹⁹ It may be safely contended that many of these compositions belong to pre-exilic times, and express the piety of Israel as far back as David himself, the classical founder of this type of praise. The 18th Ps. which surely it is hyper-criticism to deny to David, and an inversion of sound reasoning to attempt to carry down to the exile, is a splendid monument of personal religion. Note should be taken also of the tenderness which pervades both law and Psalter of God's personal care of the poor, the distressed, the widow, the fatherless, even the stranger.

With the Psalter may we not join here the *wisdom-utterances* of the Book of Proverbs, the basis of which, again, it is hyper-critical to deny to the Solomonic age. This again is no new thing. As we find in the Code of Hammurabi a forecast of the individualism of the Mosaic Book of the Covenant, so, far back in the *Precepts of Ptah-Hotep* in the 5th dynasty of Egypt, we have something startling like the Book of Proverbs, and not less individualistic in its admonitions, expostulations, and warnings. How completely the Book of Proverbs is steeped in this individualistic spirit, surely hardly needs illustration. "My son" is the refrain of the appeal. "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom,"²⁰ and wisdom is shown in the resolute adherence to righteousness in every walk of life.

There remain the *prophets*, and it is not denied that here, at least in Jeremiah and Ezekiel, the individual relation of God to the soul, and of the soul to God, does clearly enough appear; only we would contend that the need of individual piety, and the call for it, appeal as clearly in *all* the prophets as they do in these and in the Psalms.

¹⁹ Op. cit. pp. 281ff.

²⁰ Prov. IX. IV.

Stress is frequently laid on the repudiation by Jeremiah²¹, and Ezekiel²² of the proverb, "The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge," with their affirmation of the opposite truth that "everyone shall die for his own iniquity," "the soul that sinneth it shall die." There is here, indeed, a sharpening of the idea of individual responsibility, and disengaging of it from necessary implication in the doom of a wicked nation; but these passages are misread if they are set in contradiction with the higher teaching of the earlier times. We already read, e. g., in Deut. XXIV. 16; "The fathers shall not be put to death for the children, neither shall the children be put to death for the fathers, every man shall be put to death for his own sins;" a precept which in 2 Kings XIV. 6, Joash of Judah is said to have acted upon in sparing the children of his father's murderers. The enunciation by these prophets of the principle of individual responsibility is not in contradiction of the patent fact, which both prophets elsewhere plainly recognize, that in their corporate existence the righteous often suffer for and through the sins of others—was not Jeremiah himself an outstanding example of such suffering, and was not Ezekiel a captive in Babylonia through his nation's sins?—but simply supply the balancing assertion that no man will perish for the sins of his fathers, should he not make these sins his own, and that the worst entail of a father's wrong-doings can be cut off by personal repentance and right doing. It is the same Jeremiah who wrote the above who already himself had declared that the children *did* suffer for the sins of the fathers: "I will cause them to be tossed to and fro among all the kingdoms of the earth, because of Manasseh, the son of Hezekiah."²³ So we cannot read the early chapters of Ezekiel, with his denunciations of judgment on Jerusalem for the sins, not only of that

²¹ XXXI. 29, 30.

²² XVIII. 2. 10.

²³ XV. 4.

generation, but of all the past, without seeing that there is need for care in importing into his teaching in Ch. XVIII an exaggerated individualism.²⁴ This indeed implies that there is something deeper in his declaration, "The soul that sinneth it shall die," than merely falling under the sword of the Chaldeans, which many good men did; a meaning which already points into the beyond. Still, the fact that the nation was falling to pieces, was being carried into captivity and scattered to and fro, no doubt did throw the individual back more and more upon himself in his relation to God, and so heightened the conception of his own personality as distinct from his share in the life of his nation.

Individual piety, these considerations show, was no new thing in the life of Israel in the prophetic age, but was a necessary element in the religious life of the nation from the beginning. Piety, indeed, as it appears first in the pages of the Bible, is a very simple and elementary thing—a walking with God, and calling upon the name of Jehovah, expressing itself in simple acts of prayer, and vow, and sacrifice; yet ever has its root in faith, faith in a God who has in some measure revealed Himself, and is known. Examples are seen in the history of the Patriarchs and of Job. Even under the law it seems to us that we greatly mistake the ordinary religious life of the pious Israelite, if we do not think of it as extremely simple, very little different in its essential elements from our own. Even supposing the whole ritual law of the Levitical books to have been in force, and under the monarchy, at least, it is certain that a ritual hardly less splendid and complex was in operation, it deserves to be remembered how large a part of this law was an affair of the Temple, and of the periodical public feasts, and how little it touched, except in tithe-paying, care about foods, and rules of uncleanness, the everyday life of the average Israelite. To fear God, with thankful acknowledgement

²⁴ Cf. the language of Jesus on Jerusalem, Matt. XXIII. 35.

of His goodness, and prayer for His blessing, and to discharge in a faithful spirit the duties of his calling, must have constituted then, as it does now, the staple of religious obedience. This is why one likes the quiet pictures in such a book as that of Ruth. Naturally when, as so often happened, idolatry, lawlessness, godlessness, with its violence and lasciviousness, overflowed the land, things were very different, but the quiet in the land would still be there in their several spheres, waiting, praising, hoping, till a better day dawned.

It would have been interesting, had space permitted, to have gone back on the point referred to at the beginning, of the bearing of all this on the hope of immortality. The subject, however, is too large to attempt to enter upon it here. It may only be remarked that if individual piety had the place here given to it in the early religious life of Israel, there must be modification of the view taken of the part it played in giving rise to the hope of individual immortality in the later prophetic and exilic age; it must rather be asked whether the presence of such piety is not likely to have germinated in such hopes at an earlier period than the newer reading of the history of religion in Israel assumes. We may be permitted to think that if the matter were fully gone into, good reason could be shown for believing that it did. Wherever there exists deep-rooted faith in God, and consciousness of life in His fellowship, there is present that out of which the confidence cannot but blossom that the darkness and gloom of Sheol is not the last word in God's dealings with the faithful ones. If the older theology fell into the error of reading too much into its Old Testament, we are persuaded that the danger now is the opposite one of reading often a great deal too little into the hopes and aspirations of pious men from the Patriarchs downwards. "These all died in faith,"²⁵ so Jesus and the New Testament

²⁵ Heb. XI. 13.

writers taught; and our conviction is that it was they, and not our modern scholars, who had the right to it.²⁶

²⁶ It is interesting to notice that in his recently published work, "Geschichte der Alttest. Religion" (p. 173), Ed. König strongly upholds the view that while the Covenant at Sinai was certainly made with the "people" of Israel, it was with the people as "a totality of single, independent, and individually—responsible personalities"—this against the modern contention that in the older time it was the people alone, and as such, that was "the subject of religion."