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III. Some Special Phases of Hebrew Religion

The questions selected for this third study are suggested by B. Duhm’s Evercoming Kingdom of God (1911), C. F. Burney’s lectures on Israel’s Hope of Immortality (1909), the first three chapters of Biblical Ideas of Atonement (1909) by E. D. Burton, J. M. P. Smith, and G. B. Smith, and A. S. Peake’s Problem of Suffering in the Old Testament (1904).

Duhm’s booklet is confessedly a popular summary rather than a learned and exhaustive treatise. He does but sketch the outlines of a great movement of thought, leaving it to the reader to work out the details for himself or to fill them in from his own imagination. Nevertheless Duhm’s high standing as an interpreter of the Old Testament warrants us in considering his results as here presented, especially so since there is no English work of recent times that takes up the thought of Israel’s messianic hope in a way at all satisfactory. One strong point in Duhm’s treatment is the fact that he so integrates Israel’s hope for the future with the common, everyday life of the people that we at once recognize the essential similarity between their needs and points of view and our own. The Hebrews are seen to live and move as genuinely human, actuated by the same impulses and motives as we ourselves.

As the history of the idea of the kingdom of God is traced by Duhm, it is seen to be becoming ever more clear and definite and ever stronger. It is one of the marvels of history that this Hebrew people, notwithstanding that it was cast down again and again and seemed always on the verge of total destruction, yet kept its hope for the future bright and indeed grew more and more confident as the days became darker and darker. The only basis for this increasing hope was an indestructible faith in God and his goodness.

In reading Duhm, certain questions should be kept in mind. Are the messianic passages in Amos, Hosea, and Isaiah rightly relegated to the post-exilic age? Why did the thought of a world-disaster first appear in the preaching of Amos? Did it first appear then? Does not Amos seem to imply the existence of a belief in the Day of Yahweh prior to his own day? What did Amos do with this previously existing expectation? Did he simply pass it on as he found it? Or did he impart to it great ethical enrichment? If there was an expectation of a world-disaster prior to Amos, was it an exclusively Hebrew possession, or was it
shared with, if not inherited from, the Semitic race as a whole? In similar strain, did the expectation of deliverance originate with Isaiah? If so, why? Was there any general expectation of this sort entertained in the Semitic world at large? If so, how and when did it reach Israel? What was Israel's contribution to it in such a case? If the messianic passages are all, or nearly all, transferred to the exilic and post-exilic age, how are we to account for the sudden appearance of such a glorious hope just at that time, when there was the least warrant for it in existing conditions and prospects? Did any Hebrew prophet ever formulate the thought of the coming messianic kingdom in any such terms as Jesus conceived of the ever-coming kingdom of God? Did the Hebrew hope ever cease to center itself upon national glorification? Was this glorification presented as a sufficient end in itself or as of importance mainly because it meant the glorification of Jehovah?

Burney's little book is also of a popular character, having been delivered originally as lectures at a summer school for women in Durham, England. But it is recent and reflects the trend of the latest thought upon its theme. We are here concerned with the eschatology of the individual rather than with that of the nation as in the foregoing work. Burney starts out by saying that there was no belief in immortality in Israel prior to the Exile. If that be true, we must look for causes to explain its sudden rise at that late date. Does this book furnish an adequate explanation? But is it possible that Burney's proposition is true? The immortality of the soul had been firmly held to in Egypt for centuries prior to the Exile. Did no hints of it drop upon the soil of Hebrew religion and take root during all those pre-exilic centuries? Was not ancestor-worship almost universal among primitive peoples and does not that involve a belief in the persistence of life after death? Did the Hebrews escape this stage of religious development, or did they let go of the hope of a future life after having once entertained it?

Professor Burney, in accounting for the absence of a strong hope for the future of the individual beyond the grave, urges the view that individuals found very slight recognition even in this life in ancient Israel, the emphasis of religious thought all being upon the nation and its interests. It is true that the nation or group was the first consideration, but to deny the individual any significance is hazardous, in view of the prominence achieved by certain great individuals in the early history. But it is certainly correct to look upon the strengthening of the ideas of personality and individual responsibility as contributing much to the enrichment of the hope for the future. In like manner, the development of a monotheistic idea of God gave much to it. But more than any of these, as Burney rightly represents, did the persistence of the problem of the suffering of the righteous point the way to the future life. Burney's examination of the references to this subject in the Psalter is singularly sane and frank. There is room here for difference of opinion on some questions, but Burney's general conclusion will commend itself
to many as all that is warranted by the facts. The discovery of the teaching of Job upon the subject really resolves itself into a question of textual criticism and philological exegesis. Burney finds clear expression of the idea of a future life in Job 19:25, 26; but the matter is by no means as clear as we should like. Aside from the question of textual integrity, and this is a very vital one here, the terms used are in some cases very ambiguous. For example, does the word rendered by Burney "in after time" really mean that, or is it rather an adjective meaning "as a later one," i.e., as the last witness upon this matter? Does not the phrase rendered "after my skin" just as well signify "behind my skin" (cf. Cant. 2:9), i.e., while I am still alive? Likewise, is not "without my flesh" equally well rendered "from my flesh," i.e., looking out from my flesh, while I still live? Such questions as these, which suggest themselves to the Hebraist, make the interpretation of Job 19:25 f. exceedingly doubtful.

Burney's treatment of the great question of immortality is along right lines. He perceives clearly and sets forth distinctly that this idea was bound up in the bundle of life as a whole and that it cannot be understood or appreciated as a thing apart. The idea was modified, purified, and enriched from age to age according as the nation's religious experience was deepened and enriched by its own inner development and by the impact of the influences that came upon it from without. It is along the line of foreign influence upon the development of the hope of future life that further work needs to be done. Why is it that the idea comes out at length so pronouncedly in the apocryphal and pseudoepigraphic literature? Are the causes purely internal or did outer forces affect the situation profoundly? Is it probable that Persian eschatology, which was so fully developed, shaped or influenced the thought of Israel at all? Does the Hebrew eschatological thought seem to show any resemblances to Persian close enough to compel the hypothesis of borrowing on the part of the Jews? Did the Greek life and thought make any contribution along this line? Was there not a tremendously strong tendency in Judea to hellenize? Was not the Maccabean revolt largely a religious protest against the inroads of Greek customs and ideas? Was this protest so vigorous and effective as to have expelled all Greek influence from Judea? Ecclesiastes and the Wisdom of Solomon are asserted by many to be striking evidences to the contrary. If we look for a moment at the beginning of the history of the idea of immortality, the impressive fact is the very slight allusion to it in the early pre-prophetic and prophetic literature. Is it enough to say that this is due to the fact that individual responsibility was as yet only partially and imperfectly realized? This idea seems in some form or other to have been present among all primitive peoples. May it not be true that this realm of ideas lay outside of the Yahweh-religion at the first? Yahweh was but one, albeit the greatest one, among many gods in early Israel. His sphere of activity and influence was the national life and destiny. Only gradually did he succeed in subduing all ranges of life's interests to himself. Possibly, the
absence of the idea of the future life from early Yahwistic literature is due to the fact that he did not conquer this territory for himself until later days. It is a fact of significance for a right conception of the viewpoint of the Hebrew religion that, just as its monotheism was wrought out upon an ethical basis, so also was its idea of resurrection as presented in the Book of Daniel.

Peake takes up the problem of suffering for its own sake and consequently gives it much fuller treatment than Burney, who was concerned with it only in so far as it contributed to the idea of immortality. He goes at his task from a historical point of view, tracing the rise of the problem and the successive attempts at its solution. He begins his consideration of the problem with its first clear recognition in Hebrew literature, viz., in the prophecy of Habakkuk which reflected the shock caused to faith by Josiah’s untimely death and the dark outlook for Israel due to foreign oppression. It need hardly be said that this does not mean that men never were troubled by the wrongs and inequalities of life before Josiah’s death. Sacrifices and offerings to the gods are, more or less consciously, attempts to secure a better dispensation from the fates and to that extent reflect the recognition of restlessness under the burdens and anxieties of life. The treatment of the problem as presented in the Psalter should be carefully compared with that by Burney of the same subject, and the treatment of the contribution made by the Servant of Yahweh passages should be read in connection with the discussion of the same materials in the book that remains to be considered.

Professor Peake in his last chapter gives more than his title promises, for he here forsakes the task of an interpreter of the Old Testament and seeks to justify the ways of God to men by showing suffering to find its offset in the rewards of a future existence and in the certainty of the love of God. Does it help matters much, however, to make the solution of the problem dependent upon a belief in the Trinity and in the Deity of Jesus? Are there not many minds that will insist that the present life should justify itself and not be under the necessity of recourse to a future life for vindication? And is the love of God of any greater importance than his justice? Can we rejoice in the former without being certain of the latter?

Of the three chapters on the Old Testament ideas of atonement in the last of our four books it is unnecessary for me to say much; they speak for me. They traverse ground that has been covered, in part at least, by both Burney and Peake, as well as Duhm. The angle of approach here, however, is a different one and much fresh material comes into consideration. One result of the study is clear, viz., that there was no hard-and-fast theory of atonement in Israel. Successive generations wrought out new theories and, not infrequently, conflicting views existed alongside of each other. The ideas on this subject were susceptible to change and growth and were largely determined by the social and historical environment amid which they developed. It is particularly suggestive to note how the increasing misfortunes of Israel deepened in her bosom the conviction of sin, and how this in turn reacted upon the practices of atonement so
that in the later days the cultus of the temple became predominantly an atoning ritual. But let no man think, therefore, that the Jew obtained no satisfaction or joy in life. He was a normal human being and lacked none of the longings and capacities that are common to man. A casual reading even of the Psalter, which was the hymn-book of the second temple, will reveal what a passionate love for the law, the temple, the ritual, and for God abounded in the hearts of the faithful and how overflowing with praise and gratitude was all their speech. It also is perfectly evident that the Hebrews in formulating their various theories regarding atonement were answering the religious needs of their own times in trying to think their problems through to their own satisfaction. They were not in any sense being used as demonstration material for the purpose of exhibiting for the benefit of coming generations a right and proper view of the great atonement to be made in the person of Jesus. If we should go to the Old Testament to find our theory of the atonement we should be embarrassed by a superfluity of riches from which to choose.

The following supplementary reading along the lines of the foregoing discussion will be found instructive:


This work would have been used as the basis of this study had it been possible to secure a copy of the second edition in time.


Cf. with this my own article on "The Rise of Individualism" in the *American Journal of Theology* for 1906.


A careful study of the meaning of the Hebrew word for "atonement.

H. Gressmann, *Der Ursprung der israelitisch-jüdischen Eschatologie* (1905).

A very suggestive and original work, setting forth the view that Hebrew eschatology was of one piece with that of the oriental world, the Hebrews having ethicized an inherited system.


An objective exposition of the Old Testament statements regarding the soul and the life beyond.


A good book in its day, but lacking in genuinely historical method and insight.

E. Riehm, *Messianic Prophecy*.

Now out of date, but still the best thing on the subject in English.

G. S. Goodspeed, *Israel's Messianic Hope to the Time of Jesus* (1900).

A work that seeks to present the messianic idea in such a way as to avoid serious disturbance of traditional views.