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J. K. Mozley

Excerpt

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THE IMPASSIBILITY OF GOD A SURVEY OF CHRISTIAN THOUGHT

INTRODUCTION

THE purpose of this study is primarily historical. It is an attempt to state what has been believed with regard to God's incapacity for suffering, rather than to examine and evaluate the belief itself. No such study can, of course, be purely in the nature of a record. The causes of beliefs and the ways in which they have been stated must throw some light upon the beliefs, must serve to some extent as a criterion for appraising their worth. And much harm results from inattention to the historical background. Whether the idea of a "suffering God" be true or false, exponents of this conception would have been well advised to discuss it in the light of the Christian tradition.

THE OLD TESTAMENT

We may start with the Old Testament. Two facts are obvious and relevant; first, that Hebrew thought, at least from the period of the writing prophets, always involved what we must call a transcendental element in its notion of God, secondly that in the Old Testament there is hardly anything we can call metaphysical speculation. The transcendentalism is to be seen in the radical distinction between God and the world, and God and man. Pantheism, whether in a materialistic or spiritualistic form, such as proved attractive in various aspects of Greek thought, was wholly alien to the Jew until he

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came under the influence of Greek ideas, and then we connect it with Alexandria not with Palestine. Nor can we say that this transcendence is of the character of such a superhumanity as is manifested in the Homeric deities of Olympus. On the contrary, it is bound up with the thought of moral distinction. Here we recognize something of fundamental importance in connexion with Jewish religion, and we cannot date its beginnings with the eighth century. Professor Wheeler Robinson emphasizes the anthropomorphism of early Jewish thought, especially as found in J, but in the earlier period he sees that sense of God's moral character upon which Amos, Hosea and Isaiah laid such stress. He refers to the cases of Nathan and Elijah, and to the evidence of the Book of the Covenant, while of J and E he says that they "similarly show a moral conception of Yahweh that effectually unites the period of David with the eighth century¹."

On the other hand, the unspeculative character of the Hebrew mind prevented the prophets and writers of Israel from feeling those difficulties in connexion with the notion of divine personality of which the

¹ *Religious Ideas of the Old Testament*, p. 67; cf. Prof. W. G. Jordan in Peake's *Commentary*, article "The Religion of Israel." Like Professor Robinson he connects the moral character of God with the relationship which unites God and His people. "Though the idea of a 'covenant' between Yahweh and Israel has been expanded and presented from different points of view by later prophetic and literary activity, it is no doubt here in a simple form and has a real *ethical* character. . . Here, though the situation is a narrow national one, it is at a higher plane than any mere 'nature' worship or absolutely local deity" (p. 84).

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THE OLD TESTAMENT

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Greek thinkers were conscious, and which comes to striking expression in one of the fragments of Xenophanes, and from hesitating to make use of highly anthropomorphic expressions. What we need to attend to is not the language of J and its ascription to God of bodily characteristics (*e.g.* Gen. iii, 8; viii, 21), but the picture of a mental and emotional life in God which is common to the prophets as well as to the earlier documents. God was absolutely other than man in His perfect holiness and in His eternal being. Isaiah's vision is the classic passage for the first; God's assurance, "As I live for ever," in the Song of Moses (Deut. xxxii, 40) is one of the many instances of the second. But these convictions were in no way incompatible with feelings being attributed to God, even as to man. God is indeed constant, trustworthy, faithful to His covenant and promises; it can be said "I, the Lord, change not; therefore ye, O sons of Jacob, are not consumed" (Mal. iii, 6), but we are in the presence here of no such metaphysical immutability as belongs, for instance, to Aristotle's notion of God. Love, joy, anger, jealousy, "repentance," are all ascribed to God, differing from the corresponding feelings in men only by their conformity with God's perfect righteousness. There is nothing surprising in the fact that both in the primitive and in the late literature of the Old Testament we read of the sorrow or the affliction of God. In Genesis vi, 6 God is "grieved at his heart" because He has created a race which has morally corrupted itself; in Judges x, 16 the soul of the Lord is said to be "grieved for the misery of Israel," while Isaiah lxiii, 9 gives us the most comprehensive

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statement of all, "In all their affliction he was afflicted," to which is added the saying that despite God's care for His people, "they grieved his holy spirit."

It is just because the metaphysical interest of the Greek was absent from the Jew that we are precluded from the attempt to discover precisely what this picture of God's emotional life meant to the Jew. Schultz in his *Old Testament Theology*¹ devotes a very interesting section to it, but though one may entirely agree with him that the Old Testament epithets "offer certainly in an inadequate form, but still in the only possible one, that which is more important for religion than any philosophical speculations about God," though one may see in the language of the prophets stress laid upon "the full personality of a living God who feels and wills," there seems to be overmuch rationalization when Schultz goes on to show how "the incongruity of form, inseparable from such expressions, is easily explained away," how God's jealousy means that He is not indifferent to human love, while "His wrath and hatred, taken in connexion with His gracious power, are standing expressions for the self-asserting majesty of His living essence." Such may be our interpretation of the picture, but it is dangerous to read it back into an earlier age. We are conscious of a problem; was it so with Amos, Isaiah and the other "theologians" of Israel?

THE NEW TESTAMENT

Nor do we pass into a new atmosphere when we turn from the Old Testament to the New. Principal Franks seems, indeed, to find a strengthening of the earlier

¹ II, pp. 108-10 (Eng. tr.).

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conception when he argues that “the fundamental New Testament doctrine of God’s Fatherhood suggests the very reverse of His impassibility¹.” Certainly it is true that whether we turn to the teaching of our Lord, or to the Epistles of St Paul, or to the Epistle to the Hebrews, or to the Johannine writings, the old implications attaching to the idea of God’s full personal life remain. Especially must we pay attention to the fact that in the New Testament God’s attitude to man can be so differently described. God is love, and in His love He gives His Son for the salvation of men. He would have all men to be saved. He is ever ready to welcome home the repentant sinner. Nevertheless His wrath is as plain in the Parables of the Kingdom as it is in the Pauline theology, and we cannot evade the conclusion that to this extent change is conceived of as actual in God, that wrath can give place to the free exercise of love. Ritschl’s attempt to evacuate of objective reality the New Testament conception of the wrath of God, especially in his argument that our judgments of experience are irrelevant to something which can be truly appreciated only from the “view-point of eternity,” that is, from an understanding of God’s eternal purpose to save men, still seems to me “astonishing².”

In the article already mentioned Principal Franks records the dependence of Dr Charles Hodge, the most eminent systematic theologian of the Princeton Calvinistic school, upon one proof-text Jas. i, 17³ for a New

¹ In *Encyc. Rel. and Eth.*, article “Passibility and Impassibility,” vol. ix, p. 658. ² As in my *Ritschlianism*, p. 210.

³ The Father of lights, with whom can be no variation, neither shadow that is cast by turning.

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Testament doctrine of the immutability of God. This is one definite proof-text; nevertheless, it is proper to bring into consideration the doctrine of God's eternal purposes, as set forth in the Epistle to the Ephesians, though it must not be applied after the manner of Ritschl. As to God's impassibility, apart from such adverse implications as have been found in the character of God as Father, and as arise from whatever suggests that man's conduct affects God, we have the nearest approach to Isaiah lxii, 9, 11 in a passage, similar in terminology to, if not directly dependent upon, the latter of those two verses, where St Paul gives the command "Grieve not the Holy Spirit of God." But when one asks what the significance of such a passage was to the writer, one is bound to remember the wide difference between a context of religious exhortation and a context of philosophical discussion. Moreover, if either context is sharply isolated, there is grave danger of one-sidedness, and, therefore, of inadequacy. A passage such as 1 Tim. vi, 16¹ would seem, in itself, to suggest a conception of God conformable to the presuppositions of Hellenic transcendentalism, but it would be dangerous to draw any very definite conclusions based on such a view of the text. It would be equally rash to suppose that the best reading in Acts xx, 28, "the church of God which he purchased with his own blood," gave any support to Patripassian conclusions. Language of a liturgical or devotional character must not be pressed into the service of theological theory.

¹ Dwelling in light unapproachable, whom no man has seen, nor can see.

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CHAPTER I

The History of the Doctrine of Impassibility

I. FROM THE APOSTOLIC FATHERS TO IRENAEUS

TWO convictions, of theological and controversial as well as of religious importance, are imbedded in the Pauline and Johannine writings respectively. The first is that at the centre of the Gospel stands the Cross not of a man, but of the Son of God who had emptied Himself, taken upon Himself the form of a servant and given Himself to death for men; the second is that Jesus, who is the Son of God, has come in the flesh, a coming which is also described, with direct reference to the Passion, as a coming "in the blood." This emphasis is only partially carried forward into the second century. Ignatius is the nearest in feeling to the New Testament. The intense fervour of his devotion to Christ appears in such passages as "Suffer me to follow the example of the passion of my God¹," and "having kindled your brotherly task by the blood of God²." But the balanced, antithetical statement of *ad Polyc.* 3 shows that we must not attribute to him views of a suffering God outside of the sphere of the Incarnation. "Wait," he says, "for him who is above seasons, timeless, invisible, who for our sakes became visible, who cannot be touched, who cannot suffer, who for our sakes accepted suffering, who in every way endured for our sakes." The thought clearly is that Christ in the incarnate state becomes voluntarily subject to certain conditions which were

¹ *Ad Rom.* 6.² *Ad Ephes.* 1.

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wholly absent till then. Whatever may be true of the Apologists we cannot ascribe to Ignatius a Hellenization of Christianity. We must see in this phraseology the presupposition that God¹, who is essentially spirit, is in Himself beyond those experiences which we know of only in connexion with the life of the world and with human nature. The contrast spirit-flesh, implied in this passage, and quite in line with Ignatius' strong opposition to any Docetic explaining away of the reality of the Incarnation, appears also in the homily to which Clement's name was attached². If Lightfoot is right, Clement in his genuine letter spoke, in the same way as Ignatius, of the sufferings of Christ as the sufferings of God³—"You were satisfied," says Clement, "with the provision of God, and paying attention to His words you stored them up carefully in your hearts, and kept His sufferings before your eyes." At the same time, we must not interpret the language of Ignatius as though the later discrimination in connexion with Christology, which appears with the formulation of the doctrine of the Two Natures, and is applied in such a document as the *Tome* of Leo, were already present. The most striking dogmatic passage in Ignatius, *ad Ephes.* vii, 2, points forward to that formulation, but is too rhetorical

¹ Whether Ignatius does or does not ever speak of Jesus Christ absolutely as God (both Harnack, *Hist. Dogm.* i, p. 189, and Lightfoot on the passages *ad Trall.* vii, 1, *ad Smyr.* vi, 1, x, 1, doubt it) he had no hesitation in speaking of Christ as "our God" (*ad Ephes.* inscription), and using similar phrases.

² *Clem.* ix, 5; cf. also xiv.

³ *Clem.* ii, 1. Lightfoot's arguments for θεοῦ not χριστοῦ being the original reading after ἐφοδίοις are powerful.

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to be construed as exact theology. There also we have an antithesis “first passible and then impassible” which, when taken with the words already quoted from the letter to Polycarp, gives us the notion of passibility as a temporal circumstance attaching to the revelation of Christ our God in the flesh or in man, but possessing no eternal grounding in the divine nature¹.

The language of Ignatius reappears in one of the few fragments which remain to us from the extensive work of Melito of Sardis. Anastasius Sinaita, a Greek ecclesiastic of the seventh century, has preserved for us words used by Melito in the course of a sermon on the Passion. “God,” he says, “suffered at the hand of Israel².” But the extract which Anastasius quoted from the third book of the work on the Incarnation of Christ, written against Marcion, shows that Melito was a much more considerable theologian than Ignatius. He distinguishes with great clearness between the Godhead and the manhood in Christ, remarks on the obvious reality of His soul and body in respect of His human nature which was like to ours³, and declares that “He, the self-same person being God and at the same time also perfect man, gave us a pledge of His two substances (*οὐσίας*)”; it is natural to conclude from the general character of the

¹ The whole passage runs: “There is one physician, both fleshly and spiritual, begotten and unbegotten, God in man, true life in death, both of Mary and of God, first passible and then impassible, Jesus Christ our Lord.”

² Routh, *Rel. Sacr.* I, p. 122.

³ The words in Greek (in Routh, I, p. 121) are τὸ ἀληθὲς καὶ ἀφάνταστον τῆς ψυχῆς αὐτοῦ καὶ τοῦ σώματος τῆς καθ’ ἡμᾶς ἀνθρωπίνης φύσεως. The soul must be the human soul.

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fragment that Melito referred the suffering to the human *οὐσία*, though the oneness of the Person to which he here draws attention, allows him to speak elsewhere of God as having suffered, precisely as later theologians were prepared to do, not in such rhetorical phrases as we shall find in Tertullian, but in considered dogmatic statements which were rendered possible by the doctrine of the *communicatio idiomatum*.

What Loofs calls the “Asia-Minor tradition¹” in Christian theology was, by reason of its strong emphasis upon the Person and work of Christ, the most effective religious rejoinder to Gnosticism. In so far as the Gnostics were concerned, as we should believe them to have been concerned, with religious values, and not merely intent upon theosophical speculations, the orthodox tradition had something better to offer. But more was needed if Christianity was to be vindicated as the true philosophy of religion against both the Hellenic schools and the Gnostic sects. This is the special importance of the work of the Apologists. Justin, in particular, was many-sided. We know how he stated the Christian case, as he saw it, against the Jews, and the Apologies show us enough of the line which he took in contrasting Christian doctrine with Greek philosophy to enable us to apprehend the mixture of conciliation and of controversy in his method. Two discourses against the Greeks are lost, as is the work against all the heresies, and the work against Marcion. How he opposed the celestial mythology of the Gnostics and the dualism of Marcion is sufficiently clear from his conception of God

¹ *Leitfaden*^A, p. 143.