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Stewart A. McDowall

Excerpt

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I

LIVING AND THINKING

And this is life eternal, that they should know thee
the only true God, and him whom thou didst send,
even Jesus Christ. Jn 17. 3.

THE object of these lectures is to formulate a Theory of Knowledge which shall be consonant with the established facts of biological science, while not neglecting that spiritual interpretation of Nature which is the essential characteristic not only of revealed religion but also of the best metaphysical systems.

In order to achieve this object it is necessary first to examine the Biblical view of Knowledge, and then to consider those questions of evolution which bear upon the growing acquaintance of the animal with its environment; dealing as briefly as possible with both of these in order to devote more time to the construction of our theory. We shall finally seek to discover a place for Revelation, and, finding that the concept is actually implicit in the thought structure we have erected, we shall in this way be led back full-circle to our starting-point, the Christian idea of knowledge. Often it will not be possible to enter fully upon the more technical aspect of the matters under discussion; though I hope to have the opportunity of remedying some few omissions in print.

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Yet the avoidance of some difficulty, and even some technicality, will not be possible in the second and third lectures; and with this I must ask you to bear.

In the Old Testament we find a remarkable absence of metaphysical speculation. Intellectual knowledge is at a discount. The only true knowledge is the fear of the Lord. Isaiah, in his poetical parallelism, actually identifies the spirit of knowledge with the spirit of the fear of the Lord¹, and for him perfection dawns when the earth is full of the knowledge of the Lord². Earlier we find Hosea proclaiming the value and lamenting the lack of this knowledge³. In the Psalms not the intellectually ignorant but the workers of iniquity are said to be without knowledge⁴. It is ignorance of righteousness that brings the nation into captivity⁵.

With the aid of a concordance it is easy to multiply instances.

Clearly the genius of the Jewish nation did not lie in the direction of abstract thought. Nevertheless abstract thought was at times forced on individuals and even upon the nation, though here too we find it concerned with ethico-religious problems. Speculation dawns with the great dilemma of the suffering of the righteous and the prosperity of the wicked. Sheol offers no redress, for righteous and wicked alike there drift in an aimless gloom; and in this life the wicked

¹ Is. 11. 2.² Is. 11. 9.³ Hos. 6. 6, 4. 1.⁴ Ps. 14. 4, 53. 4.⁵ Is. 5. 13.

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often prosper to the end—yea, and their children's children unto the third and fourth generation. Further examination leads some to the conclusion that there is no moral order in the Universe; God is omnipotent, but not good. This is the solution of the book of Job, though subsequent redactors have endeavoured to soften it by an appeal to a characteristic doctrine of the exilic and later writers that God is inscrutable and man cannot know His ways, but must worship in silence¹. This doctrine amounts to intellectual agnosticism, though on the religious side it is saved by the tacit assumption that man's imperfection alone bars him out from a fuller understanding: that there is an explanation, though man cannot grasp it.

Later we begin to find the influence of Greek thought darkening, not illuminating, the problem. The Jew seems to have been no philosopher, and from Greece he borrows the least worthy elements of her thought. In Ecclesiastes we find complete scepticism, apart from some later redactions. The writer gives up the moral problem as insoluble, and adopts a Stoic attitude in a world which shows no divine government. All is vanity: sensual pleasure and the search for wisdom are alike empty. A subsequent editor goes even further and adopts a corrupt epicureanism like that of the *Rubáiyát*².

In the book of Wisdom some light dawns. The

¹ Cf. Is. 45. 15; Zech. 2. 13; Joel 2. 14.

² Cf. Siegfried, *H.D.B.*, Art. Wisdom.

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influence of Plato is evident, and the writer's object is to bring the discoveries of the Greek search after knowledge to bear upon the national and moral perplexities which beset the Jew at the end of the second century B.C. The chosen race can no longer avoid the great tide of Gentile culture which is lapping on the shores of Palestine. The Jew must be able to give, to himself at least, a reason of the faith that is in him, in terms of the thought of his day. Belief in the resurrection of the dead, still uncertain and far from universal, has begun to lighten the darkness of the problem of evil, and Plato's doctrine of the soul gives further aid. But it is from the Divine Wisdom that help must come; and the writer, following the book of Proverbs, premises that Wisdom is an attribute of God; that Wisdom is readily accessible, though it is in constant conflict with an evil, earthly wisdom; and that through knowledge of the Divine Wisdom there is escape from agnosticism into the realisation that the essence of God is Love¹. The curious, almost gnostic, dualism of Proverbs, in which Wisdom appears as a kind of Demiurge², or created creator, is to a great extent avoided. Rather, the concept of Wisdom seems almost to represent an attempt to formulate a doctrine of Divine Immanence; and indeed she is frequently personified.

Roughly, then, it is true to say that in the Old Testament one doctrine of knowledge alone

¹ Cf. Siegfried, *H.D.B.*, Art. Book of Wisdom.

² Prov. chh. 8, 9.

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stands forth triumphant; that knowledge is the fear of the Lord. The goal of man is *visio Dei*. Look up the word "see" in a concordance, and you will find again and again this insistence on spiritual vision as the mark of the righteous. Prophet and Psalmist alike dwell upon it; it underlies the judgments of the Historian. At times this guiding principle is lost, and other inspiration is sought, and here we find for the most part failure. Unaided, the Jewish thinker is overwhelmed in pessimism or agnosticism; aided, he is too uncritical to weigh the ideas which he adopts and is lost in a maze of irreconcilables. Of this stage Ecclesiastes as it stands today is the notable example.

The faithful spurn the new Gentile knowledge, the faithless embrace it and the accompanying office or emolument, and desert their faith.

A cleavage results in the nation. But, as we have seen, at the last, outside the canon, something new and valuable does emerge. In the book of Wisdom a premature embryo is born. Through the dawning of the idea of Immanence the old, kingly Jahweh, and the Transcendent God find closer touch with the wayward heart of man, craving always the intimate relation we call *love*, that can only grow in the atmosphere of understanding: of real knowledge. Here is a hint of possible reconciliation between Jewish religion and Gentile thought. Knowledge may still be worship, wisdom be still *visio Dei*; yet there is something to be gained through search after

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intellectual knowledge. To the seeker after wisdom the immanence of God is revealed; his voyage of discovery is worth while, for it teaches him true things, and ultimate.

In the New Testament the situation is changed. On the one hand our Lord stands out proclaiming the *visio Dei* with the immediate certainty of one who speaks with authority of what he knows; revealing truth; preaching passionately the essential heart of the old Jewish doctrine that the knowledge of God is an immediate knowledge of the spirit, not an intellectual knowledge of the mind; that the goal of man is primarily a life of relationship with God, through and in Christ Jesus. On the other hand a group of followers, architects of the church of Christ, educated men who could not ignore the secular learning of their day, write to establish the doubtful, and to guide those who were confused by the many tongues of Hellenistic and Latin doctrine, as well as to warn and correct those who fell short in the high calling wherewith they were called.

The teaching of Christ was in a large measure definitely revelation. Through the medium of a historic event in Time the Immanence of God was shown forth as concrete individual fact. Man, living in Time and Space, sees God face to face in Time and Space. He that hath seen Me hath seen the Father—the Father Immanent in His world; Love. Only in personal fellowship is this knowledge of God possible. Knowledge is the living of a life. There is no dead fact to be

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known; knowledge is a perpetual becoming; it is Life, and Life is eternal. "This is life eternal, that they should know thee the only true God, and him whom thou didst send, even Jesus Christ." Knowledge is thus a continuing mutual relation. By implication it is clear that knowledge is only achieved and can only be achieved in personal relation, love; and that revelation is an essential factor. And we further note that revelation is an activity, a becoming.

What, then, of the Transcendence of God? Transcendence *per se* is non-existent. Immanence too is non-existent. Because the earlier Jewish saints had concentrated on God as Transcendent they had been unable to formulate any reasoned statement of their creed, and had laid themselves open to the dangers which overwhelmed the writers of Job and Ecclesiastes as soon as they tried to find an intellectual basis of faith. So, at the other extreme, in our own day as in the day of Heraclitus, a doctrine of Pure Becoming discovers no place of rest for the weary.

Only the passionate pleading of the prophets who proclaimed the one firm truth that righteousness, the fear of the Lord, was wisdom kept the Jewish heritage from destruction. Their Transcendent God was not quite a myth, an impossible parody of the truth; but the intellectual situation was only saved by the realisation that He was active in the world, and entered into some kind of personal relation with His creatures, thus implicitly removing Himself from pure

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Transcendence. There is no such Reality as Pure Being, any more than there is a Reality which is Pure Becoming. God is Love. Love is process, or Becoming. Only in Love, process, God *is*: His Being is substantiated by His Becoming; and this activity determines His Reality. A moveless, uncreative God would not be Real at all. Christ teaches this truth, that Transcendence and Immanence are inseparable correlatives. The Kingdom of Heaven is the multiplicity of life, becoming; a growing seed, a working leaven, a net drawn through the sea; because of this it is Real, a treasure in a field, a pearl of great price, a Unity substantiated in Multiplicity.

Only he that willeth to do the will of God can *know* of the teaching¹. The old Jews were right in believing that knowledge was a life, not an intellectual exercise, but in Christ and His teaching we see *why* they were right; these make possible a reasoned faith by presenting to mankind the Godhead as a Life; as the active process of loving. This, I think, is briefly what our Lord taught about the knowledge of God; but it is important for us to remember that not teaching but revelation was the fundamental thing in His Ministry, for to this we shall return in our last lecture.

Of the apostolic writers by far the most important for our purpose is St Paul², for he was

¹ Jn 7. 17.

² St John is so clearly influenced directly or indirectly by Greek thought in his Gospel, in which practically all of

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constantly brought up against the opposition of Greek thought, and perforce gave much attention to the intellectual side of Christian doctrine.

He admits that a natural knowledge of God is possible¹. He preaches its existence to the agricultural population at Lystra². But this is not the knowledge which bringeth salvation; the knowledge which gives the complete certainty of immediate experience; rather it is inferential. What St Peter calls "faith unto salvation³," what St Paul calls being "wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus⁴," is the essential thing; a knowledge that comes through personal contact with God, in the living of a life. Mere *γνώσις* is not enough. *Ἐπίγνωσις*, full religious knowledge—not only a deeper comprehension of the Christian revelation in itself, but a deeper insight into its practical significance and obligations⁵, is needed. Without it all is vain⁶; with it we may all attain unto the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a full-grown man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ⁷, unto all the riches of the full assurance of understanding, knowing the mystery of God, even Christ, in whom are the teaching of his epistles is present, that one must regard his version of our Lord's words as definitely coloured; but I think there is sufficient in the other Gospels to bear out what I have said of our Lord's teaching, even though the phrases I have used are derived in part from St John.

¹ Rom. i. 18-21.² Acts 14. 17.³ 1 Peter i. 5.⁴ 2 Tim. 3. 15.⁵ Driver, *H.D.B.*, Art. Knowledge.⁶ Rom. i. 28.⁷ Eph. 4. 13.

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all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge hidden¹.

But for St Paul there is a wisdom which is foolishness, and that is abstract knowledge; the *φιλοσοφία* of the Greeks with which he is specially in touch when he is in Rome. Concerning it he warns the Colossians² and, in different phrase, Timothy³. In the letters from Rome it is always in his thought. True wisdom, for Paul too, is in a life that brings immediate knowledge through contact with a Personal God in Christ Jesus.

We need not stay longer over the doctrine of knowledge in the Bible. What has emerged from our survey is clear. All through, in spite of ebb and flow, and alien tides, there is shown a growing realisation that knowledge of ultimate Reality is possible, and that such knowledge is always immediate, and always wrapped up with the living of a life. The ultimate Reality is not even God, but God and man in relation: our relation to Him and His to us; a personal thing, manifested fully in Christ Jesus. But notice again that the knowledge is always and essentially dependent on a revelation. The final stage of that revelation is compressed into three words "God is Love." The revelation can therefore be expressed in language, and so used in argument, but the expression is not the thing itself, only a dead precipitate. Reality is alive, knowledge is a life. To abstract the life from Reality is to make

¹ Col. 2. 2, 3.² Col. 2. 8.³ 1 Tim. 6. 20.