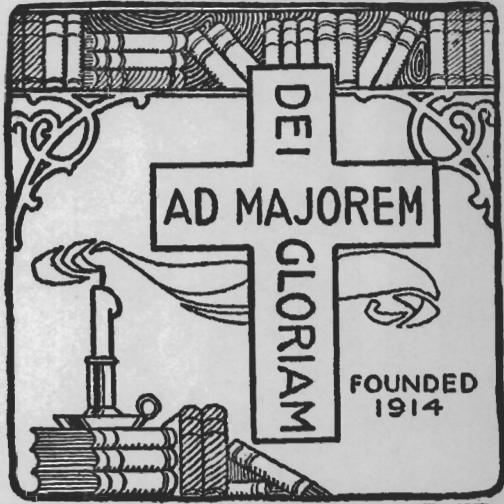


THE ETHICS OF THE PSALMS

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THE ETHICS OF THE PSALMS

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
INTRODUCTION	i
Chapter I THE ETHICAL PHILOSOPHY OF THE PSALMS	1
Chapter II THE WICKED AND THE RIGHTEOUS	
A. The Wicked	11
B. The Righteous	17
Chapter III THE DOMESTIC AND SOCIAL CONCEPTIONS	
A. Domestic	22
B. Social	23
Chapter IV PERSONAL VIRTUES OF THE PSALMISTS	28
Chapter V CONCLUSIONS	32
BIBLIOGRAPHY	36

INTRODUCTION

It is hard to study objectively those things that lie near one's heart for, in such an effort, one is biased even before beginning the study. It is too easy for a person to agree with his own viewpoints and to disagree violently with those that are different from his own. The old maxim "Love is blind" can be as true of our mental and spiritual likes as of "affaires du coeur". Down, through the centuries the Book of Psalms has been very near indeed to the hearts of the Christians and the approach of the average person to the Psalms is that of one who comes for inspiration and help and, after feasting thusly in their riches, he does not like to examine these beloved treasures critically. It seems sacrilegious to admit that some of the ideals and standards of the writers were not on the very highest level and many are almost unwilling to admit the presence of unworthy elements in these hymns. It is for this reason that the student must be fortified before entering on such a study as this one. He must remember that even the writers of the great Psalms were a part of their day and would, for that reason, reflect the standards of the world in which they lived. He ought to realize with great humility that these men wrote before the coming of our Master. They wrote long before the time of the development of many of the ideals of the Christian faith. Under the circumstances, only a people with true religious genius could have lived so close to God and understood him as well as did these people. When

placed side by side with the great spiritual insights the Psalms have given to the world, whatever defects there may be in some of the ideals expressed lose their importance and can, for the most part, be dismissed and forgotten after they have been noted and studied. The standards of these early Hebrews may have been below ours in some ways, but the important thing is that their passion for righteousness was strong and they were probably much more zealous in their effort to find and live the truth. In the last analysis, it is not where they were, but where they were going that really matters most. Any study of ethics in the Old Testament, involves the study of a people who were paving the way for the present-day heritage of religious faith as they sought to know and understand God, and it is too much to expect them always to have put into concrete living the insights which they were gaining into the nature and the will of God. These Hebrews were the pioneers in the growth of ethical religion and Christians today should be inspired by their earnestness and religious devotion instead of being depressed because they did not find and live all of the truth of religion at once.

The Book of Psalms gives one of the finest pictures of Hebrew worship to be found in the Old Testament because it is not an historical record or a theoretical discussion of religion, but is rather the actual worship experience of the Hebrew people. While some of the Psalms represent ritual elements and some the songs and chants of the religious service, in others the psalmists come to God with their problems and

prayers and, in an agony of need and devotion, drop all pretenses and set formulae and open their hearts in expressions of penitence, need and devotion. They are not theorizing about living and worship, they are living and worshiping. Other Old Testament books may contain what the writers were thinking but the Psalms contain, more than any other book, what they were feeling. It is for this reason that there is no well regulated system of ethics throughout the Psalms, for they are not the studied and systematic thought of religion so much as the cry -- and often the broken-hearted cry -- of a people desperately seeking for a God to whom alone they may look for help. Such ethics as can be studied must be those that were incidently revealed in the accident of expression without any system other than that to be found in the kindred feelings of some of the psalmists and the resemblance due to the similarity between the situations in which the psalmists wrote. The form of religion often reflects the group, but the inner experience of worship is a personal matter. The Psalms were written by individuals -- individuals in their worship, even though their thinking may have reflected somewhat the orthodox ideas of traditional Judaism -- and as such must be considered. These Psalms are far too human and spontaneous in nature for them to be completely idealistic and without some of the imperfections that go with humanity. If interpreted as expression of ideals, or if studied without a realization of the background from which they sprang, neither the Psalms nor their ethics can be understood.

The best ethics will be found outside of the Psalter for it is not a handbook of morals, but a hymn-book. It is on that account all the more reliable as a witness upon these matters. That data it presents are not selected to bolster up any theory or proposition, but are incidental to the main purpose of the anthology, which is prayer and praise. They reveal the mind and heart of the Hebrew as no formal treatise of morals could ever do. We see Him in the Psalter as He really is, devoid of all pretense and pose.¹

1. J.M.P. Smith, The Moral Life of the Hebrews, p. 220

CHAPTER I

THE ETHICAL PHILOSOPHY OF THE PSALMS

The study of the ethics of a people is the study of their conceptions of right and wrong and of their efforts to put into practice that which they believe. Because the standards of morals for individuals and for races or nations are invariably higher than the norm of their actions, a study of their ethics must involve their ideals for living as well as the way they actually do live. Therefore, in an effort to understand what the psalmists thought was right action, it will be helpful to turn for a moment to the philosophy of their actions and ethics.

The Motivation for Right Conduct in the Psalms

The examination of any particular act in an effort to evaluate it as to the motives involved will, of course, bring out any number of pertinent facts to be considered in rendering a judgment. On the other hand, in dealing with the whole field of human actions, it is necessary to limit the consideration to the more universal principles that influence all of the actions of all individuals. While they may be subject to much subdivision, there are four primary beliefs that lie back of man's effort to do those things which he feels are right and good.

1. Righteousness is worthwhile for its own sake. Considered apart from all thought of results and rewards, goodness has value in

itself.

2. The belief in immortality.
3. The obligation to be good for the sake of its effect on others.
4. Goodness pays dividends in temporal happiness.

A close study of the religion of the Psalms indicates that the psalmists practiced the conception of goodness as being of value in itself, but such a view does not seem to have been exactly expressed as a clear-cut philosophical idea. As to whether or not the Psalms reflect any belief in immortality is debatable.¹ However, the expression of this hope was certainly limited and without question was absent from the majority of the Psalms.²

Some of the books of the Old Testament reflect the idea that a part of the mission of the Jews was to suffer for the redemption of mankind, but there is little evidence of it in the Psalms. Any conception of the value of right living in terms of others would, for the most part, have been given a very local and personal interpretation and, at best, would have included no more than the Jewish people.

The psalmists' answer to the question as to why men should be

1. Cf. J.M.P. Smith, The Religion of the Psalms, p. 96
 2. Cf. R.H. Charles, Religious Development Between the Old and New Testaments, p. 100

Cf. J.M.P. Smith, Ibid., p. 225
 W.O.E. Oesterley, Immortality and the Unseen World, pp. 217-220

H.G. Mitchell, The Ethics of the Old Testament, p. 383
 K. Kohler, Jewish Theology, p. 279

good was very clear: men should be good because it pays to be good. This is not to say that their view was a selfish one. Such a statement need not pass any judgment on their motives, for this view was a part of their ethical thinking rather than being the standard by which decisions of personal conduct were made. It is not necessary to feel that these Hebrews calculatingly went out to do exact amounts of good that they might be rewarded proportionately, but it is necessary to realize that their ethical philosophy centered in a system of temporal rewards. For the psalmists, the rewards of goodness come in this life and they are very concrete rewards. Prosperity, peace, and happiness are the rewards for goodness; not only for the individual, but for the nation (1; 5:12; 6:1; 9:6; 11:5-7; 34:10-11,19-20; 84:12; 91; 92:12-15; 103:1-18; 112:1-9; 127; 128:1-4; 144:12-15). Their hope for this prosperity was in the present life and so one of the greatest rewards of goodness was a long life of prosperity (34:12-14; 37:25). The righteous man shall prosper but the ungodly man shall come to an evil and early end (Psalms 37; 11:6 f.; 9; 62:12; 75:10; 92:7-12; 96:15; 7:6-8; 145:20; 147:6; 58:10 f.; 149:6 f.). The discordance between this view and the facts did not escape all of the psalmists for in Psalm 94 we find the writer giving a refutation of the idea that the righteous will not ultimately win, suggesting that the opposite view was held by some at least.

The absence of the hope of immortality made a great ethical problem for a people who estimated to a large degree the value of reli-

gion in terms of the tangible good derived therefrom. In times of prosperity and plenty it would not be so acute, but considering the suffering and oppression that were in the background of many of the Psalms, it must have become a very difficult and personal question.

The ethical problem of suffering was rendered more poignant because, in the absence of any appreciable amount of dualism, both good and evil were attributed to Yahweh. It is not surprising that some of the psalmists were unable to escape the pessimism that, considering their philosophy, would naturally be the concomitant of much sorrow and suffering.

Jehovah, make me to know mine end,
 And the measure of my days, what it is;
 Let me know how frail I am.
 Behold, thou hast made my days as handbreaths;
 And my life-time is as nothing before thee;
 Surely every man at his best estate is altogether vanity.
 Surely every man walketh in a vain show;
 Surely they are disquieted in vain;
 He heapeth up riches, and knoweth not who shall gather
 them. (39:4-6)

When thou with rebukes dost correct man for iniquity,
 Thou makest his beauty to consume away like a moth:
 Surely every man is vanity. (39:11)

Surely men of low degree are vanity, and men of high
 degree are a lie:
 In the balances they will go up;
 They are together lighter than vanity. (62:9)

Surely in vain have I cleansed my heart,
 And washed my hands in innocency. (73:13)

Oh remember how short my time is:
 For what vanity thou created all the children of men!
 What man is he that shall live and not see death,
 That shall deliver his soul from the power of Sheol?
 (89:47,48)

The days of our years are threescore and ten,
 Or even by reason of strength fourscore years;
 Yet is their pride but labor and sorrow;
 For it is soon gone, and we fly away. (90:10)

Jehovah, what is man, that thou takest knowledge of him?
 Or the son of man, that thou makest account of him?
 Man is like to vanity:
 His days are as a shadow that passeth away. (114:3-4)
 (See also 9:10; 10:18; 94:11)

Fortunately, not all the psalmists took this attitude and some, in the face of every contradiction and in spite of sorrow and suffering, still maintained their faith and their hope. Not all of them had such a low conception of the worth of man. Psalm 8:4-8 gives quite a different picture. There is nothing more wonderful about the religion of the Old Testament than the continued hope and faith that could make its people able to live for their religion and willing to die for it, when at most times they had but little hope for this life and none for the next. The problem which is indirectly treated by the psalmists is the great problem of the Drama of Job.¹

In spite of all of the troubles and suffering that came upon the Hebrews as a nation, they never lost their conviction that they were the chosen of Yahweh. They were equally certain that sometime they would be vindicated on those who had subjected them to bondage. The main compensatory device of the psalmists and the Hebrews of the later Old Testament age was that Jehovah would send them a deliverer to vindi-

1. Cf. A.C. Knudson, The Religious Teaching of the Old Testament, pp. 290 ff.

cate them upon their enemies, and prove their innocency. This is apparent throughout the Psalms.¹

The Standard of Righteousness in the Psalms

The way to be righteous was to follow the Law. An actual understanding of the ethics of the psalmists involves an understanding of the ethics of the Law. Not all of this Law was contained in the canonized Book of the Law, and one cannot always be sure when the psalmists used the Hebrew word Torah whether they meant the Law in its accepted form or whether they perhaps meant the word to be interpreted in its wider meaning of teachings. While it is true that the influence of the prophets was toward the keeping of the spirit of the Law rather than merely the ritualistic following of it, by the time of the writing of a majority of the Psalms, the Law represented the will of Yahweh for the Hebrews and keeping the Law made one acceptable in his sight.² Both prophetic and priestly influences are to be found in the Psalms,³ and, as a result, not all of the Psalms are in agreement as to the exact relation of the Law to goodness. However, even the most reactionary of the Jews would have held that the Law and the Teachings were the guides for right living even though they objected to making the observance of the Law more important than keeping the spirit of it. It is safe to

1. Cf. Ibid., pp. 351 ff.

2. H.P. Smith, The Religion of Israel, pp. 319-320
I.J. Peritz, Old Testament History, p. 277

3. Adam C. Welch, The Psalter in Life, Worship and History, p. 90, also 94 and 95

say that the Way of Goodness for the psalmists was the way of the Law.

A code of rules, the following of which makes one righteous, tends toward the creation of a feeling of righteousness on the part of those who are sure that they are keeping the provisions of such a code. Thus certain psalmists assert their own righteousness on such a basis. In Psalm 59:3, the writer makes the protest that his affliction is not due to his sin:

For, lo, they lie in wait for my soul;
The mighty gather themselves together against me:
Not for my transgression, nor my sin, O Jehovah.
(59:3)

Speaking of the self-righteous, J. M. F. Smith says:

Such psalmists were the predecessors of the one whose prayer began: "God, I thank thee that I am not as other men are." They had never, like Paul, a later Pharisee, noticed that the law contained a command: "Thou shalt not covet," and who was led thereby to discover the impossibility -- apart from a change of nature -- of controlling desire.¹

The important thing is that they thought of the Law as the basis for righteousness in the eyes of Yahweh. The righteous man is one who studies day and night in the Law (1:2). In nature is found the perfect work of Yahweh and in the Law is found his perfect revelation (19). In setting forth the Law, Psalms 77, 78, 83, 105, 106, 114, 135 and 136 contain retrospects of Israel's history. The Law is to be passed on from generation to generation for by means of it men are to know God and set their hope and faith on him (78:5-7). In 81:13 there

1. Op. cit., p. 205

is reference to the tradition that if the people would keep the Law the day of Yahweh would come. In 105:44-45 the Law is represented as being an end in itself and the idea is that the Hebrews were chosen for the glorification of God through the keeping of the Law (Cf. 78:7). In 40:7-8 the psalmist delights in the knowledge that in the account book Yahweh keeps, it is written of him that he keeps the Law. If it is not kept punishment will result (50:16; 78:56; 86:11; 89:30; 94:12). The keeping of the Law brings blessings from Yahweh (25:10; 37:30; 103:17-18). A failure to keep the Law might cause Yahweh to hate his inheritance in the Hebrews (78:9-11; 106:40). The writer of Psalm 119 cannot say enough about the Law.¹

If the attitude of the psalmists toward the Law reflects the priestly influence, it is equally true that the writers of the Psalms, in their interpretation of the meaning of the Law, reflect a prophetic influence. In the Psalms there is the retention of a great part of the old sacrificial and festival practices, but the writers sought to re-interpret these rites and adapt them to the prophetic ideals and teachings. The emphasis is on the character of the God so worshiped and what he can do for his people; and, secondly, on the right motives and character of the worshiper as he performs these acts of ritual. Thus, in the attitude of the psalmists, there is a compromise between priestly and prophetic ideals. They agreed with the priests as to the value of

1. J.M.P. Smith, The Origin and History of Hebrew Law, p. 235
Herbert L. Willett, The Jew Through the Centuries, p. 196

the sacrificial and ritual practice, but they held that this ceremonial observance was only valuable in connection with an inner life related to God. It is interesting to note that in 106:37 ff. the writer sharply condemns the human sacrifices made by the forefathers.

The only passage where independent value seems to be attributed to sacrifices is 20:3, where the writer expresses the hope that Yahweh will remember all the offerings and accept all the burnt offerings of the pious prince to whom the Psalm is addressed. However, as has been shown, in many of the Psalms sacrifices seem either definitely to be approved or to be accepted as customary procedure. There are some passages where the writers declare that God does not require sacrifices (40), but sometimes they go on to pray that the offerings may be brought regularly (50:23; 51:21; 66:13-15). It is very possible that J. M. P. Smith is correct in thinking that in Psalm 51 there is direct refutation of any desire on God's part for sacrifice. This is easily seen if, as he thinks, the last verses of this Psalm were added by a later redactor. The same is perhaps true of verses 14 and 15 of Psalm 50, for definitely there is a break in the Psalm after these verses, and it is likely that the original psalm ended with verse 13. If this be true, the writer seems to have been very positively opposed to the idea that there is any true value in sacrifices. It is entirely likely that the same thing occurred in a number of places in the Psalter and the legalistic attitude of the Psalms may be more due to the priestly compiler than some have thought up to the present.

It is possible, however, that there is another and perhaps

better explanation for this opposition -- or seeming opposition -- of certain of these Psalms to sacrifice. The fifty-first Psalm is a penitential psalm and it is possible that the writer is reflecting the Hebrew attitude that there are some sins for which there is no sacrificial absolution. For the worst forms of willful sins there were no sacrifices that could remove the taint. The sacrificial system was largely for those who had sinned unwittingly and whose sins did not break the great moral laws. Perhaps the reason for many of the prayers of the Psalms lies in this truth. It is easy to think of Psalm 51 representing David as saying that sacrifice had no meaning for him as his sin was outside of the cleansing that might come from any sacrifice. The Psalm as a whole seems to carry this meaning rather than a general declaration of the invalidity of sacrifice. The gaining of forgiveness for such sins had long been a problem for the Hebrews. The man who had been guilty of breaking the great moral laws must seek to recover the favor of Yahweh in some other way than mere sacrifice.¹

The psalmists constantly revealed that, after all, the great thing for men was the knowledge of the favor and love of Yahweh. This nearness of God is declared to be the highest good (73:28).²

1. Cf. Oesterley and Robinson, Hebrew Religion, p. 202

2. Cf. William Fairweather, The Background of the Gospels, pp. 75-76

CHAPTER II

THE WICKED AND THE RIGHTEOUSA. The Wicked

There are many references throughout the Psalms to those who are called the wicked. Who were these wicked? Were they Jews or were they Gentiles? J. M. P. Smith gives the suggestion that they were Jews who had turned away from the old ways and were taking up the ways of their oppressors.¹ They were an irreligious group who had complained that they had served God and kept his ordinances in vain. Evidently they were in the majority, were rich and prosperous (49:7; 37:7); they were the proud, the violent, and the corrupt (78:6,8); they hated instruction and forgot God (1:17,22). If this interpretation is correct, the question at issue seems to be that of the supremacy of the Law.² The other view is that they were non-Jews. In which case, they would represent the governments and the peoples by whom the Jews were held in subjection. In either case, the main issue is that of preserving the old Jewish religion and the integrity of the Jewish nationality.³

Perhaps the answer to this problem is to be found in a combination of the two above explanations. There certainly are times when foreign enemies are referred to as in 44:22; 79:2 f. and 83:2, but

1. Cf. J.M.P. Smith, The Moral Life of the Hebrews, p. 232
William Fairweather, The Background of the Gospels,

2. Cf. J.M.P. Smith, Ibid., p. 233 f.

3. Ibid.

in 35:11 and 41:6-11 the reference is to false friends. The truth of the matter seems to be that the term "wicked" is used to refer to any and all who are not in the class of the "righteous", the followers of the Law and faithful to the tradition and precepts of Yahweh.

1. The Character of the Wicked

The implications that the psalmists make against the wicked need not always be taken too literally, neither can one judge accurately as to the psalmists' own standards by the sins they point out in the wicked. The faults that they cite in the wicked are sometimes so colored by their own prejudices that the two cannot be separated very easily. Many of these accusations would be made against any who dared refute the claims and requirements of the Hebrew religion and the Law.

The wicked are accused of atheism, but, as there seems to be very little true atheism either in this period or in the Old Testament as a whole, likely the reference was to a form of functional atheism. It was not that the wicked did not believe in God, but rather that they had ceased to fear the threats of retribution for their sins. From observation, these "wicked" saw that the sins of the people against the moral and Mosaic laws were not punished by any lack of prosperity and physical blessings, and, as they had no conception of future reward or punishment, they said God would not visit disasters and afflictions upon them because of their sins.

The fool hath said in his heart, There is no God.
They are corrupt, they have done abominable works;
(14:1; 53:1)

The wicked, in the pride of his countenance, saith,
 He will not require it.
 All his thoughts are, There is no God. (10:4)

They are also accused of idolatry. Throughout the Old Testament, from the time of the first code, there had been no worse sin for the Jews than the worship of other gods. Idolators are often referred to as harlots in the attempt of the prophets to adequately describe the sin of idolatry. The same expression is used two or three times in the Psalms. This was not quite so pronounced in the Hebrew thinking after the time of the great prophets who proclaimed the conception of Yahweh as the one God. It is quite unlikely that the Psalmists were polytheists. They were not thinking of many gods that might be worshiped by one people, but some of them must have been henotheists (Note Psalm 137:4). Such may have been the case with the wicked against whom the writers of the Psalms make the accusation of idolatry. A consideration of the different epithets the psalmists applied to those whom they considered idolators might give some insight into their ethics. However, it is possible to include only a few quotations to show their attitude toward the worship of other gods.

Their sorrows shall be multiplied that give gifts
 for another god:
 Their drink offerings of blood will I not offer,
 Nor take their names upon my lips. (16:4)

Blessed is the man that maketh Jehovah his trust,
 And respecteth not the proud, nor such as turn
 aside to lies. (40:4)

I hate them that regard lying vanities;
 But I trust in Jehovah. (13:6)

The iniquity of the wicked is not represented as some passive or static quality but as a very dynamic and active principle. It is ever seeking to find expression in acts of ill-will against the "righteous" or the "faithful". The wicked inflict injury without provocation and basely return evil for good (7:4; 35:12; 38:20). The wicked are accused of seeking to slay the "righteous" in 7:2; 27:2; 31:13; 70:2; 71:10; 86:14; 94:6; 109:16; 119:95. In Psalms 10:8; 14:4 (53:4); 94:6 they are spoken of as having accomplished this purpose. They are therefore called "men of blood" (Psalms 5:6; 26:9; 55:23; 59:2; 139:19). They lay traps to ensnare the pious and they bribe authorities to pervert just decisions (15:5; 26:9; 31:4). They are characterized by a spirit of pride and arrogance and hauteur, holding the pious in contempt and making slanderous remarks and spreading evil reports even about their neighbors (1:1; 5:5; 15:3; 40:4; 101:5 and 10:3-11; 12:3,4; 38:19 ff.; 73:3-12). False swearing (24:4), deceit and lying are especially characteristic of them, and at the same time particularly hated by Yahweh (5:6; 7:14; 12:2; 43:1; 101:7). Hypocrisy is prevalent among them (28:3; 50:16-20).¹

The term "violence" is used quite a lot and, from the historical knowledge of the period, it was a characteristic evil of the time. (See 54:3 and 140:1 ff.) This violence, as it is represented by the writers of the Psalms, did not always take the form of actual personal and individual attacks. There are many passages that show the preva-

1. H.G. Mitchell, op. cit., Cf. p. 395

lence of oppression, or subjection, of one person or class of persons, to the real or imaginary advantage of another. The "wicked" are the oppressors (Psalms 10:7; 17:9; 73:8; 89:22; 94:5) and the poor and helpless, or the "righteous", are their victims (Psalms 10:18; 12:5; 72:4,14; 74:21). The violence of the wicked is condemned not only when it is directed against the actual person, but also when it takes the form of robbery and theft (Pss. 50:18; 10:3; 35:10). Sometimes it appears that instead of using such direct methods, the wicked accomplished their purpose by borrowing and not returning (Psalm 37:21).

2. The Imprecatory Psalms

In any ethical study of the Psalms, the most striking problem is the attitude of certain Psalms dealing with the enemies of the writers. There is no necessity for being embarrassed by them in our use of the Psalter, for they represent the feelings of a somewhat primitive people, even if there is a resemblance in them to some of the feelings exhibited by so-called Christians in like situations.¹ The psalmists were, after all, human beings and as such were subject to the same basic reactions men still show in times of war and oppression. Not only were they normal men and, as such, subject to human reactions, they were also Jews and were filled with the parochialism of the Semite intensified by the narrow nationalism of this peculiar race. In study-

1. A.P. Stanley, Lectures on the History of the Jewish Church, Vol. II, Cf. p. 130

ing their history in the light of these facts, the wonder is not that there is some of this spirit shown, but that there is not more of it to be found in their literature.

True, the language of these Psalms is revolting to the modern mind, nor is it in accordance with our conceptions of Jewish ethics; but we must also remember that these are figurative poems, written with the bold metaphor and startling hyperbole which is the true characteristic of Oriental style.¹

The natural reaction of the Hebrews to their enemies was complicated by the fact that at this time they had so little conception of a future reward for themselves in another world and perhaps no thought of punishment for the wicked after this life. Judged by any standards, the Hebrews were more pious and more moral than the nations that were oppressing them, and yet these nations were receiving the only rewards that the Hebrews knew for goodness while the Jews themselves were knowing sorrow and oppression. They were being wrongfully robbed and mistreated while the very robbers and oppressors were reaping the rewards of the righteous! No wonder they were indignant. The passionate hatred of these psalmists for those who had oppressed Israel is but the obverse of their passion for justice.

The most intensive of these Psalms of hatred are: 58; 59; 69; 83; 109; and 137. Closely allied with them are the hymns of war: 5:10; 35:4 ff.; 40:14 f.; 41:10; 68:1 ff.; 70:2 ff.; 71:13; 79:12; 92:11; 96:10-13; 98:8,9; 140:9 f.; 149:5-9.

1. M.H. Farbridge, Judaism and the Modern Mind, p. 108

B. The Righteous

In contrast to the many references to the wicked, are the passages that speak of "the righteous". The term seems to suggest not only those who are good, but seems to refer to a group. It is difficult to know at all times just who "the wicked" are, but there seems to be no question but that "the righteous" refers to that group of Hebrews who have in the days of dispersion and oppression remained true to Yahweh in precepts and action, and who now keep His covenant. When this group is referred to, they are not always called "the righteous" but are sometimes called "the poor" or "the needy". Psalms 9:17 ff.; 10:2,9; 12:5; 18:27; 35:10; 72:4,12-14; 109:16,20-22,31 contrast these with the wicked. Psalms 74:21 and 113:7 use the term without the connection with the wicked. At times the adjectives "poor", "helpless" and "needy" are used in the same sense.¹ This is made clear by those passages where first one and then the other is used for the same meaning. (See 14:5 f.; 22:24; 34:6 f.; 37:14; 40:12 f.; 40:15 f.; 68:9 f.; 69:28,32 f.; 70:2 f.; 72:12; 74:19; 107:41 f.) (For further study of the meek, see the references to "Humility", p. 28.) It is unlikely that the references to these descriptive terms for goodness always refer to the group, but as there is evidence for a pre-dominance of such meaning, this paper will deal for the most part only with the righteousness of the group.

1. H.G. Mitchell, op. cit., p. 399 f.

1. The Character of the Righteous

The terms "righteous" and "righteousness" when applied to Yahweh usually have to do with that quality of his being that makes him render justice to the nations and help to those who serve him. These expressions have at times approximately the meaning of helpfulness and again nearer that of deliverance. It is not so much a moral characteristic in general as it is an attitude toward men. (See 5:8; 22:31; 24:5; 31:1; 35:24,28; 36:10; 40:9,10; 51:14; 65:5; 69:27; 71:2, 15 ff.; 85:10,11,13; 88:12; 89:16; 103:6,17; 116:5; 118:19; 123; 9; 143:1,11; 145:7,17).

In turning from the picture that the psalmists presented of the wicked to their portrayal of the character of "the righteous", it helps to keep in mind that the opinion is likely to be a biased one. For this reason, to ascribe to "the righteous" the myriad virtues attributed to them as a group, is as unnecessary as it is to believe that those referred to as "the wicked" were all as bad as the dark picture painted of them. However, the righteous man is not presented as being as good as the wicked man is bad.

First of all, the righteous man is a Jew, with the characteristics that would go to make a good Jewish citizen in the light of his conceptions. He has small interest in a brotherhood of men. Sometimes he is narrow and exclusive in his outlook and he is mainly interested in his own people. He is of that group of Jews who were the narrowest and most reactionary in their outlook, and is entirely orthodox. He

could be called modest, honest, generous, kind, straight-forward, faithful and entirely self-respecting. He is filled with fear and reverence for Yahweh (5:7; 33:18; 34:9; 25:9,14). He feels the need for God's mercy and has a great fear of the outpouring of his wrath (4:1, 6:2). Discouragement and doubt are often his (22:6; 74:1 ff.; 77:7 ff.). The good man can only be good and follow the laws of Yahweh when he has Yahweh's help (25:4; 19:12-14). He feels that it is possible for the righteous man to enter into communion with Yahweh from whence cometh his help. He recognizes that man is in his very nature sinful and he needs a forgiveness and pardon that cannot be gained through sacrifices and ceremonialism, but through a personal relationship with and appeal to Yahweh (25:7,11; 66:13). He is filled with depression as he sees the success of the wicked who are reaping the rewards that should belong to the righteous (12:1). As he sees this prosperity of the wicked, he even allows himself the pleasure of a bit of envy and self-pity (73:3 ff.). He differs from the wicked in that he lacks their arrogance and pride and thinks of himself and his people as the poor and the weak.¹

The pious are not very interested in other nations, but among themselves they are generous to the poor, dealing kindly with them and lending them money for which they charge no interest. They will even be kind to those Jews who deal harshly with them (35:13,14; 41:1-3; 37:25 ff.; 112:5). Their attitude toward their enemies is entirely

1. J.M.P. Smith, op. cit., pp. 235-243

different. The righteous hate their enemies bitterly (7:6 ff.; 18:40 ff.; 21; 28:3 ff.; 35:4 ff.; 40:13-15; 41:7 ff.) and rejoice when evil comes upon them, for they that love Yahweh hate his enemies (35:9; 54:7; 55:16 ff.). This hatred is not a personal thing, but it is part of their religion.

The righteous man is certain of his own goodness and integrity and knows that he will have a long life and a prosperous one, for these are the heritage of the pure and peaceful men who follow the precepts of Yahweh. (See Pss. 1; 17:18; 25:9; 26; 44; 101; 131; 134; and 34:12-14; 37:27; 92:13 ff.). He knows that prosperity comes to the good man and he appreciates the great value of it and wants it, but he recognizes that wealth cannot change the ultimate fate of mankind and that high and low alike meet the same fate at last (41:12; 101:16 ff.; 112:3; 49:6 ff.).

In his religious life, he is very much of a legalist (1;2). However, he recognizes that the Law cannot mean everything in itself and knows that man must have a right spirit within, but he is sure that the divine will for men can be found in the Law and it is Yahweh's glory for him to follow it. J. M. P. Smith says:

The pious is the favorite of God, and enjoys His protection, delights in His law, is grateful for its bounty, and loves to praise Him (1:2; 13:6; 18:20; 40:8; 4:3,7,8; 9:14; 24:6 ff.; 74:12). He delights in the temple and its services; he loves companionship with his fellow-saints; and identifies the interests of the pious with the interests of God (16:3; 26:4,5; 69:9; 35:1). He prides himself upon his uprightness

of heart and his righteousness (24:3-6; 25:21; 73:1;
7:9; 11:7; 18:20; 43:1,2).¹

Such is something of a picture of "the righteous". It cannot be a true picture for it is a compilation of the attitudes of many men who would not and did not all stress the same things, but it is something of a composite picture of the ideal individual from the viewpoint of the psalmists. It remains to treat briefly two or three Psalms of exceptional merit in their portrayal of the ideal of the righteous man.

The three most outstanding of these are Psalms 15, 24 and 26. Psalm 24 is the most individualistic of the three, the other two speaking more in terms of the relation with the group. Psalm 24 is also thought to be the oldest, while Psalm 26 is the most devotional. Psalm 26 reflects some of the persecution after the Exile and is not free from bitterness and hatred. In all three, the basis of the religious life is in a deep-seated inner morality. The stress is laid on the moral side of the Law rather than on any form of legalism. This depth of insight is reflected in many of the Psalms -- as has been noted -- but the depth of its expression in these three Psalms is scarcely duplicated elsewhere in the Psalter.

1. Op. cit., p. 238

CHAPTER III

THE DOMESTIC AND SOCIAL CONCEPTIONSA. Domestic

Here there is a decided lack of definite references. For instance, while a right attitude is demanded toward one's brethren, but little is said about what it involves. The attitude toward adultery is shown by references that call idolators adulterers (72:27; 106:39). Nothing is said to indicate just what the psalmists would include in adultery or their general conceptions of marital faithfulness. Psalm 51:5 suggests that all sex relations are sinful.

Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity,
And in sin did my mother conceive me.

Psalms 27:10; 103:13; 127:3 f.; 128:1; 69:8; 123:2 show that many children are considered a blessing, and in Ps. 127:3 children are called the heritage of Jehovah:

Lo children are a heritage of Jehovah;
And the fruit of the womb is his reward.

It is difficult to get an idea of the place of women in the mind of the psalmists other than their function of child bearing. There is an absence of any condemnation of David for his sin with Bathsheba, but as there is no specific reference to the nature of his sin, this does not prove anything.¹ Perhaps in Psalm 45 there is a very vague reference

1. Cf. L.T. Hobhouse, Morals in Evolution, pp. 197-200
Cf. S. Schechter, Some Aspects of Rabbinic Theology, p. 252 ff.

to polygamy but it is a rather indirect reference.¹ Verse 9 says:

King's daughters are among thy honorable women:

The lack of comment in the field of domestic relations would suggest that the psalmists were more or less in accord with the spirit of their own age.

B. Social

1. Within The Nation

There is not as much material in the field of social ethics as one might hope. There are many passages dealing with those who neglect social duties with praise for those who observe them, but there is a scarcity of detail. Justice is highly praised and injustice condemned, but little is said as to what constitutes such justice (45:6; 72:1 f.; 106:3; 119:21). There are many references to the meek (Psalms 10:17; 22:26; 25:9; 34:2; 69:32; 72:9; 147:6; 194:4) but, as has already been suggested, the reference is usually to the faithful Hebrews as a group rather than to those who are socially humble. There are a number of references to the poor, but they seem to be in the same category. The keynote of most of the expressions of sympathy and pity for the unfortunate in the Psalms seem to be expressions of self-pity rather than true sympathy for the unfortunate. There are very few expressions

1. Cf. G.A. Barton, Hebrew Marriage, "Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics", edited by James Hastings, pp. 469-70

of definite nature about social ethics as the term is ordinarily used. The widow, as an object of charity, is mentioned only three times (68:5; 9:6; 146:9), and in these cases it is usually divine charity that is referred to.

Jehovah preserveth the sojourners;
He upholdeth the fatherless and widow; (146:9)

The orphan is mentioned six times, and the stranger twice, and from the sum total of these references -- eleven in number -- seven refer to the attitude of Yahweh and the other four represent complaints against evil judges and the proud (10:14,18; 68:5; 82:3; 94:6; 146:9). There are but a few passages in which an attitude toward the poor, as such, is dealt with (15:5; 37:21; 26: 41:1; 112:5). Out of these, 41:1 is of a general nature, 15:5 forbids the taking of interest on loans and 37:21,26 and 112:5 are commendations of the man who gladly lends or gives of his substance to the poor. And in 18:25, such charitable deeds are made the basis for securing reward from Yahweh.

There are a few references to wealth in the Psalms, but about the only place where it is dealt with as such is in Psalm 49. In this Psalm, the emphasis is placed on the foolishness of trusting in riches. From the general attitude the psalmists took toward prosperity as a reward for goodness, they evidently endorsed the typical Old Testament sentiment that the possession of wealth was a sign of virtue.¹

1. Cf. Edward Day, The Social Life of the Hebrews, p. 174

There are a few indefinite references to slavery. The only thing that they can possibly suggest is that the psalmists were entirely familiar with it. It might be possible to read something into Psalm 123:2 with reference to the treatment of slaves, etc., but it would not be anything more than guess. A good presumption is that the attitude of the psalmists was about the same as the other Jews of their day.¹

For lack of a better place it is noted here that there are three or four mentions made of the use of intoxicating drinks (69:12; 78:65; 104:14,15). Of these, 69:12 is the only one that can possibly be considered as in the least condemning it, and this is much weakened by 104:14,15 where wine is definitely spoken of as a blessing that Yahweh has given his people.²

William Fairweather has a good paragraph on the brotherliness among the pious:

Feelings of cordial brotherliness pervaded the circles of the pious. In the fellowship of religious worship all true-hearted Israelites were united by a closer tie than that of blood-relationship (cxix:63). They "took sweet counsel together, and walked into the house of God in company"; (cxxii:8) they had discovered "how good and how pleasant a thing it is for brethren to dwell together in unity" (cxxxiii). The pilgrim in Jerusalem felt himself among brethren (cxxii). It was usual for those who feared the Lord to strengthen each other in mutual conference, (Mal. iii:16) while to offend against the generation of God's children was viewed as a serious crime (lxxiii).³

1. Cf. C.W. Harris, The Hebrew Heritage, p. 194 f.

2. Cf. Edward Day, op. cit., p. 174.

3. Op. cit., pp. 76-77.

2. Toward Other Peoples

The psalmists may have expressed a brotherly spirit toward fellow Hebrews but were not always so inclined toward other peoples. Psalms 79 and 83 reflect a bitter resentment and hatred for the Syrian oppressors of the Maccabean age, while the much earlier Psalm, 137, reflects hostility to the Babylonian oppression with its deportation of the inhabitants. (See further Psalms 89:50 f.; 118:10; 149:7 f.; 9:5,13,17,19,20; 10:16; 59:5,8). In none of these Psalms is there other than a negative reaction to Gentiles. However, there are some Psalms which teach that God's purpose includes all men. Yahweh is the creator and supreme ruler of all men and he holds them responsible for their actions (33:15; 47:8; 66:7; 99:1; 103:19; 96:10,13; 98:9). There are certain Psalms that suggest that Yahweh is interested in other peoples and desires to make them acquainted with his works. There are suggestions that Gentiles ought to be witnesses of his vindication and glory (7:8; 9:11; 49:1; 57:8; 77:14; 96:3,10; 97:6; 98:2; 105:1; 108:3). The interest of the psalmist is that Yahweh should be recognized as the one and only God (Psalms 66:3 f.; 67:2 f.). In 96:7 f. the psalmist says:

Ascribe unto Jehovah, ye kindred of the peoples,
Ascribe unto Jehovah glory and strength.
Ascribe unto Jehovah the glory due unto his name:
Bring an offering, and come into his courts.
O worship Jehovah in holy array:
Tremble before him, all the earth.
Say among the nations, Jehovah reigneth:
The world also is established that it cannot be moved:
He will judge the peoples with equity. (96:7-9)

The psalmists repeatedly voice the expectation that this end will eventually be realized, and in 22:27 one says:

All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn
unto Jehovah;
And all the kindreds of the nations shall worship
before thee.

In 68:31,32 (the text is confused but this does not materially affect its meaning):

Princes shall come out of Egypt;
Ethiopia shall haste to stretch out her hands unto God.
Sing unto God, ye kingdoms of the earth;
Oh sing praises unto the Lord. (Cf. Psalm 2)

The main theme of the psalmists is, however, that when the nations come to recognize Yahweh is God -- in the day of Yahweh -- all peoples will be under the rule and domination of the Hebrews.

Ask of me, and I will give thee the nations for
thine inheritance,
And the uttermost parts of the earth for thy
possession. (2:8)

(See also 18:43; 47:9; 60:6 ff.; 72:9; 110:6.) This conception was perhaps very largely the result of the enlarging idea of Yahweh as the one God, and the feeling that all nations will come under the domination of the Hebrews is the added thought of the Jews as the chosen people (7:6; 9:7; 18:43; 22:27; 53:2; 33:8; 72:11; 82:8; 86:8; 89:11; 98:9; 138:4; 114:11). There are certain references that show different attitudes toward the sojourner, but they are almost too vague for adequate discussion.

CHAPTER IV

PERSONAL VIRTUES OF THE PSALMISTS

With the exception of some two or three, there are very few discussions of personal virtues. Except as these virtues affected their religion, the psalmists were not vitally interested in them. Also, keep in mind that all the psalmists say about these virtues will be colored by their religious conception.

Humility

The emphasis upon humility as a characteristic of the righteous and the stress upon pride as an evil are very noteworthy. It will help to keep in mind the references already made to "the meek" in comparison with "the wicked". With faithfulness, or truth, and righteousness it forms the trinity of the virtues stressed. It is likely that there is a very definite connection between this and the complex that had been built up in the minds of these oppressed Hebrews against those to whom they were in subjection (18:27; 36:11; 37:10 f.). Nowhere else in the Old Testament is it so stressed for its own worth. The great stress on humility centers around Yahweh's liking for it and his hatred of its opposite.

The arrogant shall not stand in thy sight:
Thou hatest all workers of iniquity. (5:5)

(See also 18:27; 19:13; 36:11; 37:10 f.; 131:1; 138:6).

Truth and Falsehood

The early Hebrew, while highly regarding an oath, felt no com-

punition about deception for the sake of personal advantage. He was typically oriental in that respect. It is a characteristic sin of an oppressed people. The prophets gave but little consideration to it and many passages in the Old Testament can be cited where deceitfulness was considered clever and admiration was shown for it. In the Psalms, by way of contrast, it is the one offense that is stressed more than any other. Ordinarily, its use in the Psalms suggests that falsehood was particularly evil when it represented a falling away from the Hebrew religion.

The terms "truth" and "trustworthiness" seem to be used about alike. It is a chief characteristic of Yahweh and is often spoken of in relation to his faithfulness, righteousness, kindness and justice (Psalms 25:10; 30:9; 31:5; 40:10 f.; 57:10; 69:13; 71:22; 86:1; 86:24,33,50; 89:8; 91:4; 92:2; 96:13; 98:3; 100:5; 111:7; 115:1; 117:2; 119:20,75,138; 132:11; 143:1; 146:6).

Thy lovingkindness, O Jehovah, is in the heavens;
 Thy faithfulness reacheth unto the skies.
 Thy righteousness is like the mountains of God;
 Thy judgments are a great deep: (36:5,6a,6b)

Righteousness and justice are the foundations of
 thy throne:
 Lovingkindness and truth go before thy face. (89:14)

In the same relation, the Law is also trustworthy because it comes from Yahweh (25:5; 26:3; 43:3; 119:30,86,142,151,160). Because Yahweh is trustworthy, he requires that men should be so (32:2; 51:6. See also 37:3 f. and 85:10 f.). In 15:1,4, the writer says:

Jehovah, who shall sojourn in the tabernacle?
 Who shall dwell in thy holy hill?
 He that walketh uprightly, and worketh righteousness,
 And speaketh truth in his heart;
 He that slandereth not with his tongue,
 Nor doeth evil to his friend,
 Nor taketh up a reproach against his neighbor.

There must have been many who fell far below this conception
 of trustworthiness: Psalm 52:2-4:

Thy tongue deviseth very wickedness,
 Like a sharp razor, working deceitfully
 Thou lovest evil more than good
 And lying rather than to speak righteousness.
 Thou lovest all devouring words,
 O thou deceitful tongue.

And 116:11

I said in my haste,
 All men are liars.

(See Psalms 10:7; 35:20; 36:3; 50:19; 59:12; 109:2.) Psalm 120
 suggests that straws should be forced through the tongues of the liars.
 (Compare 5:61; 31:18; 63:11; 101:7; 109:2.) False testimony and
 slander are condemned in 27:12; 50:20; 101:5; 119:69. Treachery is
 denounced in 5:9 and Psalm 55. References to a number of other types
 of falseness may be found in 12:2; 25:3; 26:4; 28:3; 41:6; 59:6;
 62:4; 119:158 and 144:8,11.

Retribution and the Golden Rule

There is really very little of the golden rule in the Psalms.
 The psalmist seems to have thought more along the line of "an eye for
 an eye". Indirectly he even suggests that it is the natural thing for
 one to return evil for evil.

If I have rewarded evil unto him that was at
 peace with me
 (Yea, I have delivered him that without cause
 was mine adversary); (7:4)

But mine enemies are lively, and are strong;
 And they that hate me wrongfully are multiplied.
 They also that render evil for good
 Are adversaries unto me, because I follow the
 thing that is good. (38:19,20)

They that hate me without a cause are more than
 the hairs of my head: (69:4a)

When an offense has been committed against him, he desires vengeance (Note the Imprecatory Psalms). In 41:9 he prays that he may get well to have the chance to revenge himself on an erstwhile friend who has rendered evil unto him. (See also 55:12-15.) In 35:13 f. the writer speaks of his own goodness to enemies who in return did an evil thing unto him. Psalm 141:5 might, by reading between the lines, be made to say that the psalmist is expressing the principle of good for evil, but he spoils such a conjecture when he prays in the last verse for the downfall of the wicked. It appears to have been one of the ethical principles of the righteous to hate those that were not followers of Yahweh (139:21,22).

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSIONS

In seeking to understand the ethics of a people from an examination of their literature, it is often quite as informative to note the things that are not mentioned as it is to study the things that are said. The writer reveals through his writing the things he is thinking about but it is also important to know what he is not thinking about. The moral standards of a people may be well measured by their problems. The higher the ethical standards are, the more numerous and complex the problems. Where there is quite a large body of literature to study, it is fairly safe to assume that the problems that are not mentioned either do not exist or else the writers do not think them important.

The Law was the established code of conduct for the Hebrews of that day. It was their rule for both religious and secular activities. The general silence concerning it and the relatively few references to any opposition would indicate that, for the most part, the social, domestic and personal ethics of the psalmists were those of the Law.

The lack of references to personal ethics suggests that the interests of the writers were mainly religious and that the religion of that day did not concern itself with any general ethos outside of that, which came within the religious law.

In this large number of hymns of worship, the few possible references to immortality at least indicate that the psalmists must have been limited in their conceptions of it.

In such a comprehensive cross-section of the thinking of Hebrew worshipers, it is almost inconceivable that there would have been so little expression of the principles of the Golden Rule if it were a part of their thinking.

The absence of the idea of vicarious suffering is quite significant. What other idea would have been as logical for a persecuted and oppressed people to put into their religious songs? It would have been at least some explanation for the suffering they have endured. Such an attitude toward others would likely have come out in these expressions of religion if most of the people had felt that they were suffering for the salvation of others.

A study of what the psalmists did not say reveals much as to their interests and the lines along which they were thinking. A truly comprehensive analysis would of necessity include a detailed study of these silences. For if a man says a lot by the thing he writes about, he often tells much more in what he does not say. The true ethics of the psalmists can only be understood from a viewpoint that includes both.

This study of the Psalms clearly shows that they were not written by perfect individuals, but by human beings. They had their faults -- many of them. Instead of always being high, their ethics have been at times regrettably low. There are passages that have no place in the worship literature of the Christian, and passions and attitudes foreign to the thinking of his better moments. It will

be easier to use the Psalms in worship in this day if the inadequacy of some of them can be quite honestly admitted. On the other hand, some of the Psalms stand out as the finest expression of great religious insights. But, all in all, there is something more important than either the negative or positive side of their ethos. The writers of the Psalms had developed a consciousness of God and a fellowship with Him. They were inspired with that vision that was leading them -- and has led the world -- on to those higher standards which they did not have then. The student comes away from a study of them with wonder for their faith in their times of trouble, especially so because of some of the great insights that were lacking in that faith. The writer has been inspired by their finer ideals and has a better understanding of some of their weaknesses and low standards. But, most of all, he has come away awed by the reality of the thing that led them on and their passion for Yahweh and His truth. With all of our advance in thinking and the heightened level of our living, mankind today is but standing on their shoulders. Only a like passion for righteousness and the goodness of Jesus Christ can hope to help this still primitive world make a corresponding advancement over our day to the progress made over theirs.

The Psalms are loved because they present men facing life even as it must be faced now and because they express the changeless and eternal needs of men. These poems were written in the same long stream of life in which man today is struggling and in them there is the same effort to know and worship God.

...We all know that even the sun has spots, and yet it is and always will be to us the symbol of brightness and purity. So we may admit that there are some dark spots in the Psalms, and yet we may justly hold to their predominantly sunny quality; they offer us relatively so much more that is purely and truly human that even from this standpoint we need not feel compelled to surrender their claim to a place in universal literature.¹

1. C.H. Cornill, The Culture of Ancient Israel, p. 154

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