

But, of course, the emphasis which they laid on these things was an exaggeration, and they were constantly exposed to the temptation of satisfying conscience with these petty observances, while the weightier matters of the law were neglected.

This weakness of the ceremonial type of the religion was dealt with finally and most effectually by Christ. But it was not dealt with then for the first time. More than one of the prophets called attention to the uselessness of offering the required sacrifices and observing the appointed festivals, unless their lives were made to correspond. In the Talmud it is said that David (Psalm xv.) reduced the 613 commands of the law given on Sinai to eleven; Isaiah to six (xxxiii., 15); Micah to three (vi., 8); Amos (v., 4) or rather Habbakuk (ii., 4) to one. A glance at these passages will show that the reductions are simply an emphatic statement of the ethical virtues which are well-pleasing to God, as over against all ceremonial observances. As long as the observance of ceremonies helped to make men live right lives they were of use; the moment they became a substitute for right living they came under condemnation.

The ascetic type of piety has been far more characteristic of Christianity than of Judaism. But that it was not altogether wanting there is evidence from the fact that at the time of the Christian era there was a sect known as Essenes, who lived a sort of monastic life and practised all the traditional forms of self-denial with a view to the attainment of holiness. The source from which this impulse was derived is not altogether clear. Most authorities seem to think it is to be traced to some foreign origin, either Persian or Pythagorean. But though there is little in the teaching of the Old Testament to account for it, the ascetic habit might have pleaded in justification of its existence the practice if not the preaching of the prophetic order. When John the Baptist appeared, preaching the duty of repentance, it was as a sort of hermit of the wilderness, who "had his raiment of camel's hair and a leathern girdle about his loins; and his food was locusts and