

THE BIBLE AND THE CONSCIENCE.

(*Extracted.*)

That every man has a conscience is a truth of the last importance. God has taken care that man, falling into sin, should, in and with the sin, acquire the knowledge of good and evil—a profound and admirable ordering of divine wisdom, as it was impossible he could have that knowledge before. The knowledge of good and evil, in One necessarily above all evil in nature, is the sphere of, and inseparable from, holiness. In man this is impossible. He is in innocence, or with a conscience in sin. But then, if conscience come with sin, while in itself it is the knowledge of good and evil (*i. e.*, of the difference of right and wrong), it may be deadened, perverted; it gives no motives more than approval and disapproval, no power, no living object, save as fear of judgment may come in.

To man in this state, a revelation from God is made from the beginning, a promise of deliverance *in another* than himself; the all-important principle we have seen of the mind being taken out of self—affection, thankfulness, adoration of heart introduced in contrast with judgment, while the truth of judgment is owned, law confirmed, but deliverance given from it. But God gives a full revelation as to the whole of His relationships with man, in responsibility, and in grace. That is, He either puts Himself in relationship, or shows a relationship which exists, with the being who has the con-

science. We must consider it in both these lights. The latter is law, the former grace. Both were already seen in Paradise. In and out of Christianity, men have sought to reconcile them: out of Christ they never can. But there they were, responsibility and life—a command (not knowledge of right and wrong, but a command), and free communication of life; responsibility, and giving of life. Man took of the first tree, and never ate of the second. He goes out a sinner, with death on him, and judgment before him—the promise of a Deliverer, but in another; no promise *to* him (for he was in sin), but *for* him; the seed of the woman, which Adam specifically was not. The first creature, man, flesh was no longer in communion, or heir—he was lost. Then came God's witness to men, and temporal judgment of the world on that footing, *i.e.*, the flood; then promise unconditional, again confirmed *to* the seed, to that one only, as Paul says, and as is strictly and profoundly true. (Gen. xxii.) No question of responsibility is raised; God would bless all nations in the promised Seed. But could the question of righteousness be left as indifferent? Impossible. It is raised by law—obedience and blessing, disobedience and the curse. This is broken, before it is formally given, in its first and chiefest link—that which bound man immediately to God. They made other gods—turned their glory into the similitude of a calf eating hay. Then, after various dealings in mercy, the work of God comes, not dealing *with* the responsibility of men, but recognizing it (grace, which brings salvation, sealing

the truth of all the previous responsibility, for otherwise salvation were not needed, but going on another ground and meeting the case). Christ takes the effect of the broken responsibility on Himself, dies for sin, and is the source of life, and that according to righteousness. The whole question of the two trees of Paradise, life-giving and good and evil, and man's ruin in this, is settled for those who receive Christ for ever, with the largest, yea, a perfect revelation of God as Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, in all His riches and ways. Two points come before us here : how are we to view the Bible, even the doctrinal parts of it ? and is conscience to be between us and the Bible as supreme interpreter ?

The whole question is, Is there a revelation ? Is anything heavenly to come within the scope of man's thoughts ? Has God to be known, or merely right and wrong discerned ? And if He has to be known, must He not reveal Himself ?

Now I say, if we are to be blessed, God must be known. If I am away from God in sin, and so the Scripture treats man, and conscience cannot deny it, doing right and wrong cannot be settled but by returning to God. If a child has wickedly abandoned his father's house, he may leave off particular faults, but he can never be right till he returns and submits to his father. But the true knowledge of God is lost, and the more man reasons in sin, the more it is lost. God must be good : I can say that, when once He has been revealed, for heathens did not know this as truth, though instinct looked for it—wants looked for it. They did not in their notion of God rise above the passions of men. When they did rise above them, they held that God could not have anything to say to men. But now God has been revealed ; and even

the poorest man knows God must be good. But if I begin to reason, what do I see? An innocent child, perishing in agony, the mass of the world degraded to the lowest degree by heathenism—how is He then good? An infinitesimal part of the race, for centuries, alone knowing the unity of the Godhead, and they almost worse than their neighbours; sin having power over myself, brutality in families, wars, tumults, and miseries—how is He good? If I say, Ah! but that is fallen man, departed from God. Then I ask, how then can he be received back again? I cannot with any sense deny that he is a sinner, and if God did not make him bad, he is fallen. The cravings of nature prove he is. How can he be back with God, whom I must then think to be holy and pure?

A revelation from God, and of God, is the first necessity of my nature as a fallen being. I get both in Christ. "He whom God hath sent speaketh the words of God." I set to my seal, on believing Him, that God is true; but then it is not only the word received from above (that a prophet, that John, had, and spoke of earthly things, moved in the sphere in which God dealt with man as a creature on earth responsible to God); but He came Himself from above. God spoke in the Son; His words were in a personal and complete way, though a man, the words of God. They were spoken by the Lord. Now, he that receives His testimony sets to his seal that God is true. And note how this is stated. No one is ascended into heaven, but He who is come down from heaven, even the Son of man who is in heaven, and what He hath seen and heard, that He testifieth. Oh what a blessing is here, which none else can give, for none else has gone up to heaven to tell us what is there! In this poor dis-

tracted, sin-beset world, I have the sweet and holy ways and divine objects of heaven brought down to my heart, by One who is the centre of its glory and delights, and come to bring them to me in love, yet without leaving it.

If it be said that there is a conscience which must and does judge what is before it (*e. g.* a God not good and not holy), I answer how long has this been the case with man? Did ever conscience make a difficulty, when a revelation had not been given? Was there ever such a thing as a holy God thought of, or the need of holiness in God dreamt of, in any religion but a revealed one? We may find partial traces of goodness as to human need and deliverance from tyranny in India, in the avatars of Vishnoo, in that otherwise monstrous idolatry. But all idolatry everywhere proves that the notion that goodness and holiness were required in a divine being by the conscience of man is utterly false. The gods were the reproduction of men's passions with a superior degree of power. *When* revelation was given, and redemption was made known by God, then holiness and goodness were made known and estimated, but nowhere else. That is, instead of the conscience being between us and the Bible or a positive revelation, there must be a revelation between God and us and our conscience, or if you please, between God and us, in order that the conscience may feel that God must be good and holy to be God at all. When the revelation has been given, the conscience recognizes it, *but never before.*

Now this is essential and conclusive on the question before us, and shows us that conscience within is wholly incapable of judging. But there is a conscience, and when a divine revelation of light comes to it from God, it is susceptible of im-

pressions from it, so as to have a right judgment, but never without, as to what is divine. Modern infidels are reasoning from the effect of divine light, to deny its necessity. As when light comes in, the eye can see ; with none it cannot, and would never know it could. Scripture is true : when men had the knowledge of God, they did not *discern to retain* God in their knowledge.

Men have not weighed these facts, or rather, have not thought of them ; but they are true, and they certainly put the pretensions of infidelity and of man's mind in a very peculiar light. They are really vaunting themselves as competent to judge Christianity ; whereas the only light they have to judge it by, they have got from it, or from Judaism. Without it man's mind sunk into the grossest idolatry and moral degradation. A revelation alone enabled them, by revealing what God really is, and so forming their understandings to judge of what He ought to be. There is another point strikes me. How little their themes bear the test of history and facts. They make boast of philosophy, but it is well known that up to Socrates, it was little but Cosmogony, and Plato's morality was communism, and his theology demonism, perhaps metempsychosis. This argument from conscience is what they are least able to meet, for one was conscious that an unholy God, or one that was not good, could not have been borne for a moment.

And it is less possible, because men have a revelation. It is their great theme abroad. But it is useful to meet infidels on their own ground—I mean *on its untenableness*. If God is simply good, and the fall and redemption are not God's truth, explain to me the state of this world, three-quarters heathen, and of the other, a great part Mussul-

man or Papist, and every kind of misery and degradation dominant, and selfishness the dominant spring of all its activities, where lusts and passions are not so. If man be not fallen, where is God's goodness? And if God be not good, what is? Christianity tells me man is fallen, and reveals to me God in goodness in the midst of the misery, and redemption as an issue out of it : and the history of man, not succeeding generations sacrificed to rationalists' theories of progress of the fifty-ninth century ; but revelations of this goodness and deliverance for faith to lay hold of from the day of man's fall, though the time was not come to accomplish the thing promised. And allow me to ask you, if man be so competent, how comes it there is so much difficulty, and conflict, and uncertainty? Why is there so much difficulty in finding out God? Why any question of discovering Him, if men have not lost Him? Why did men believe in Jupiter, or Siva, etc., or Odin King of men, or Ormuzd and Ahriman, or Khem, or a host of others, which it is useless for me to follow?

Why have they such difficulty, when it is owned God must be good and holy, in coming to Him and walking with Him? No; it is evident man has got away from God, many horribly, degradingly; and the fairest of Eve's daughters caring more for a pretty ribbon, and of her sons for gold or a title, than all which God presents to them, to win their hearts in the Son of God's sufferings, and offering up Himself in grace for them. No; man is fallen, has lost the sense of what God is, and of His love—has not his heart's delight in that which God is, or what is supremely good. Nothing proves it more than his not finding it out. God has given a conscience; but it does not judge

the word: the word of God judges it. In one sense, every man must judge; but his judgment reveals him in the presence of the word. A man's judgment of other things always reveals his own state. He is certainly lost, condemned, if he does not receive the word. God speaks, and gives adequate witness of who He is. "He that believeth not is condemned already." Light is come into the world. If men prefer darkness, it is not their conscience. Their will must be at work.

I ask, is man bound to receive the love of God or not? There He is to test every man's soul by His reception, or the contrary. It does test the soul. He has a right to judge, you tell me. If he does not receive Him he proves himself bad, bad in will. He has to judge; but if he rejects what is perfect in goodness, his own state is shown. He is judged by his approval or disapproval of what is there, because perfection, because God manifest in the flesh, is there—because God is speaking, woe to him who does not hearken. Yes, he has to judge. It is not his right: he is a lost creature; but he is tested by it—it is his responsibility. How he can meet it, I do not enquire here. I believe the grace of God is needed; but there is God speaking—speaking in grace. Is He received or not? The two things John speaks of here are the words of God, and One come from above who is above all. Am I not bound to listen? Am I not bound to receive? You tell me, must I not judge whether they are His words, and whether He came from above? I answer, yes; but you are judged by the result you come to, because God knows He has given a perfectly-adapted and gracious witness; yea, that He is it. If you have rejected this, you have rejected Him, and remain in your sins and under wrath.

MEDITATIONS ON THE BOOK OF JUDGES.

(Continued from page 180.)

CHAPTERS XVII-XXI.

MANIFESTATION OF THE RUIN AND FINAL RESTORATION.

Religious and Moral Corruption of Israel.

Chapters XVII-XIX.

The Levite of Judah.

Chapter XVII.

Chapters xvii. to xxi. form a kind of appendix to the book of Judges, an appendix of all importance for the completion of the moral picture of the declension of Israel, but which, in reality, as to time, precedes the opening of the book we are considering, and goes back to the last days of Joshua and of the elders that outlived him. It was important to show that if, on the one hand, declension was gradual, that on the other, the ruin was immediate and irremediable from the moment that God had confided to the people the responsibility of preserving the blessings bestowed on them at the beginning. It was important, too, as we shall see later on, to demonstrate that *the end God had in view* was not the ruin, but the restoration of a people who might dwell before Him in unity, after the chastisements had run their course. It was, furthermore, of importance to show the connection of the priesthood with the ruin, and how it was associated therewith, and contributed

thereto. All these weighty subjects, and many others besides, are touched upon in the small compass of the chapters which we are about to consider. The date of them is shown us in three passages which I mention for those who are interested in the *arrangement* of the book, and also that it may not be necessary to refer to them again. The first of these is in chap. xviii. 1. We learn from Joshua xix. 47, that the tribe of Dan took possession of Leshem (the Leshem of Joshua being the Laish of Judges), at the time when the twelve tribes were called to conquer their inheritance. In the second passage, chap. xviii. 12, "Mahaneh-dan" received its name from the expedition of Dan, whereas at the commencement of the history of Samson (chap. xiii. 25) it was a place already known. Finally, in chap. xx. 28, "Phin-eas, the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron, stood before it (the ark) in those days;" from which we necessarily conclude that those days followed immediately what is related in Joshua xxiv. 33.

These details established, we find in chap. xvii. and xviii. the picture of the religious corruption of Israel whilst still in possession of their original blessings—a picture which does not offer a single spot where the heart can rest amid the ruin; and, when we come to examine it by the light of the word, we shall understand that our only refuge in this terrible flood of evil is God Himself.

These chapters are linked together by a characteristic phrase occurring four times. "In those

days there was no king in Israel, but every man did that which was right in his own eyes" (xvii. 6 ; xxi. 25). "In those days there was no king in Israel" (xviii. 1 ; xix. 1).

Thus the state of the people is depicted by two facts. First : "There was no king in Israel." The time had not yet come when Israel would say : "Make us a king to judge us like all the nations" (1 Sam. viii. 5). Hitherto the people had Jehovah as their king ; now, God was forgotten or set aside, although royalty after the manner of the nations was not yet established. The people had abandoned the system of divine government, without having as yet proclaimed that of the world, and this fact characterizes also Christendom in our days.

In the second place : "Every man did that which was right in his own eyes." They had, as in the present day, *the reign of liberty of conscience*. Each laid claim to having the "light of his conscience" for guidance, whilst the true light of the word of God was set aside and no longer referred to. How greatly these times differed from those of Joshua, when the word was the only guide and the only authority for Israel, in all that they undertook (Josh. i. 7-9 ; see also, amongst others, chap. iii., iv. 6 ; viii. 30-35, etc.). Now in reality, conscience, notwithstanding its immense value for man, is not a guide, but a judge—a wholly different thing. This judge which he does not listen to, man pretends to honour by choosing him as a

guide. But how will it lead him, when perhaps it may become asleep, hardened, or even seared? These chapters show us where it led the Israelites when every man did that which was right in his own eyes. Idolatry had taken root alongside of some religious forms which still continued. They followed the impulses of their own hearts provided they thought they were doing right, and were precipitated into frightful iniquities. "They thought they were doing right" is in the present day, as it was formerly, a current phrase used to sanction even what is apostasy from Christianity.

Utter disregard of the injunctions of God's word characterized Micah, this man of Mount Ephraim, and his mother. The one stole, when the law had said, "Thou shalt not steal" (Ex. xx. 15), and his conscience was untouched when he avowed the fact. The mother "had wholly dedicated the silver unto Jehovah" for her son "to make a graven image and a molten image" (ver. 3), although it had been said: "Thou shalt have no other gods before me. Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image" (Ex. xx. 3, 4). She joined Jehovah's name to her idols, a worse thing than mere idolatry, and her conscience was silent. She set up a form of worship of her own, with which her guilty son fully identified himself. The so-called worship of the religious world in the present day does not differ so much from this as would at first appear; for the Lord's name is mixed up with many things coveted by the natural

heart, as to all of which it is said: "Little children, keep yourselves from idols" (1 John v. 21). Art, music, gold, silver and articles of value adorn what is called divine worship; and man makes room for what the world esteems and runs after, wealth, influence and worldly wisdom.

"Micah had an house of gods, and made an ephod and teraphim," associating the false gods with the ephod, a valueless part of Jewish worship when separated from the high priest who wore it. Then "he consecrated one of his sons, who became his priest" (ver 5). More than ever was the word of God forgotten. His son had no right to the priesthood and Micah had no right to consecrate him.

A fresh circumstance arose. A Levite of Judah, having as such a connection with the house of the Lord, but without any right as to the priesthood, happened to pass that way looking for a place wherein to sojourn. Micah got hold of this man, who brought him *a semblance of religious succession*. "Dwell with me, and be unto me a father and a priest, and I will give thee ten shekels of silver by the year, and a suit of apparel and thy victuals" (ver. 10). Micah was getting on; he had *installed* a bona fide Levite in his house; valuing him more highly than his son, he *supported* and *paid* him. This was a ministry of man's appointing, constituted on the same principles as what we have all around us in our days. Let us notice, in passing, how God recounts these things.

He does not censure, nor express indignation ; He enumerates the facts, and places them before us. Those who are spiritual discern what God condemns and what He approves of, and learn also to keep aloof, as He Himself does, from all the principles of which this chapter gives us so sad a picture. The carnal man continues in his blindness. Micah, in doing that which was right in his own eyes, thought to conciliate the favour of Jehovah ! “ Then said Micah, Now know I that Jehovah will do me good, seeing I have a Levite to my priest ” (ver. 13).

Dan and the Levite of Judah.

(Chapter xviii.)

This chapter shows us the connection of one of the tribes with the religious system which we have seen set up in chap. xvii. Dan had proved himself to be the weakest of the tribes of Israel. Forced into the mountains by the Amorites (chap. i. 34), and lacking the faith to take possession of his inheritance, he sent out five men to reconnoitre, in order to search the portion he still lacked. Laish, a quiet and prosperous town, was situated at the northern extremity of Canaan, far from the Zidonians to whom it belonged, and did no business with any one. This city afforded Dan an opportunity for an inglorious conquest, but presented besides everything that the natural heart could desire. “ A place,” said the messengers, “ where there is no want of anything that is in the

earth" (ver. 10). Apart from its wickedness, Laish, like Sodom before its destruction, was like a garden of the Lord; a conquest worthy of a Lot but not of an Abraham, but which was a temptation to the tribe of Dan in their enfeebled and lax state. Dan had a battle to fight, a victory to gain in his own boundaries, over the Amorites of the valley; but this combat would have cost him too much; he preferred a conquest without danger, won at the extremity of the land far from the eyes of Jehovah's witnesses and from the place where his real enemy was, who was left without a word in possession of Dan's true inheritance.

On their way, these five men met the Levite in the house of Micah and asked him: "Who brought thee hither? and what makest (doest) thou in this place? and what hast thou here?" (ver. 3). These questions ought to have opened the eyes of the Levite, if anything could have done so. What answer, in fact, could he give? His own will had *brought* him there, for he sought to establish himself; he *did* what Micah told him to do; he *had* money, a salary—just so many characteristics of all ministry of human appointment, which can go on entirely without God, being dependent upon men, and working for a salary.

"And they said unto him. Ask counsel, we pray thee, of God, that we may know whether our way which we go shall be prosperous" (ver. 5). Of such an one do the men seek direction as to their course, and they get the answer that they

desired: "Go in peace; before Jehovah is your way wherein ye go" (ver. 6). Under penalty of not being considered a properly appointed minister, it was necessary to mix up the Lord's name to this false pretention of being the oracle of the people.

Later on, when the tribe of Dan were again passing by armed, the first thing they did was to carry off Micah's gods and take absolute possession of his priest. They set before the latter in the most dazzling way the promotion that he would obtain: "Is it better for thee to be a priest unto the house of one man, or that thou be a priest unto a tribe, and a family in Israel?" (ver. 19). He got a call to a more influential and lucrative position. As to the will of God in the matter, that never entered the mind of the priest. His "heart was glad" at being called away to a new post, and taking "the ephod, and the teraphim, and the graven images, he went in the midst of the people" (ver. 20). He took away his idols with him, and it is with this one whom the men called "their priest" that idolatry assumed an *official* character in Dan.

Micah ran after these spoilers and said: "Ye have taken away my gods which I made, and the priest, and ye are gone away; and what have I more?" (ver. 24). What language! They had taken away his religion and the minister that he had appointed and he had nothing left! A man of faith would not have felt the loss of these things;

God Himself, His word, His priesthood and His house at Shiloh would have still remained.

The children of Dan went their way, smote Laish, seized upon the city and "called the name of it Dan, after the name of Dan their father" (ver. 29). The name of Dan had more importance for them than that of Jehovah. Such was, in a few words, the dark picture of the religious history of Israel.

The Levite of Ephraim.

(Chapter xix.)

Chapters xvii. and xviii. have shown us the religious condition of Israel and the influence exercised over them by the pseudo-sacerdotal class. This self-styled priesthood, religiously corrupted, kept up religious corruption among the people. If the scenes with which chapter xvii. commenced, belonged as we have seen to the times preceding the Judges, their transmission was necessary in order to set before us a picture of the solemn gradation of evil in Israel. It is somewhat the line which the Spirit of God follows in Luke's gospel, where the facts are grouped out of their chronological order, for the purpose of giving effect as a whole to certain moral truths.

Samson, the last of the Judges, still invoked Jehovah on certain memorable occasions of his life. The Levite of Judah only invoked Him over the head of his images and teraphim. The Levite of Ephraim, whose history we are about to con-

sider, did not, alas ! invoke Him at all. As far as he was concerned it seemed as if Jehovah no longer existed ; and yet this man belonged to a class set apart to the service of Jehovah, for that of the priesthood, and of the house of God.

In chap. xix., we have the Levite of Ephraim in his connection not with the *religious*, but with the *moral*, state of the people. The latter was even worse than the former. The woman that the Levite had taken, left him, after being unfaithful to him. He went after her, following the bent of his own heart, and united himself to this degraded woman, doing just what pleased himself. This satisfied the woman's father, who saw therein the reinstatement of his daughter. Alas ! this act was also, without his being aware of it, the justification of the evil and a sanction to the defilement—all the more serious, carrying with it, as it did, the weight of the sacred position of this man. The father detained his son-in-law, for the longer he remained, the more public and conspicuous did the reinstatement of his daughter become. The kindness of the world is manifested toward us in proportion as we serve its interests ; it does not object to alliance with the family of God. The Levite allowed himself to be belated on his way. Having only his conscience, instead of God, as his guide, he yielded to the influence of others, missed his opportunity, and fell into evil.

This man, who had allied himself to a prostitute, would not turn in to the Jebusites. It is sometimes thus with Christians. They shrink from open association with the world, whilst at the same time the hidden springs of their own lives are impure. It is possible to be very strict as to one's public walk and yet very lax as to personal holiness. " We will not turn aside hither into the

city of a stranger, *that is not of the children of Israel*" (ver. 12). The Levite was more attached to his people than to Jehovah, or rather, he did not take the latter into consideration at all. Avoiding the Jebusites from national pride rather than from piety, he seemed to imply that whatever came from Israel must necessarily be all right, when Israel had already outrageously abandoned Jehovah. These principles remain unchanged, and the ruin of our day is as much characterized by them as that of God's ancient people. Every sect in Christendom is boasted about in contrast with the heathen nations; when, as to matter of fact, Christendom itself has become the haunt of every sort of corruption, moral and religious. The Levite soon perceived that he was not received in the midst of a people whom God had expressly commanded not to forsake the Levite (Deut. xii. 19). Corrupted profession did not offer a shelter to the servant of Jehovah. (I do not speak here of the moral character of this man). We see in verse 18 the feelings which such treatment produced in his heart: "I am now going to the house of Jehovah; and there is no man that receiveth me to house." An isolated stranger who sojourned amid the corruption of Gibeah, and like Lot in Sodom, aware of it, for he said: "Only lodge not in the street" (ver. 20), received the traveller into his house. A frightful thing ensued. The impure passions of men who bore the name of Jehovah equalled in horror those of the accursed city. Such things, taking place in Israel, were worse than the history of Lot, for, as dead flies cause the ointment to stink, so the corruption of the people of God is the worst of all. Moreover, we do not see any intervention of angels to deliver the just. Like Lot, the host of the Levite speaks

at the door, accepting one evil to avoid a worse, and this is necessarily the principle of action of believers who go on with the world. God preserved this man from seeing his house defiled by these infamous wretches, but *for him* there was no other way visible. The Levite gave up his wife to dishonor. This issue might have been avoided by an appeal to God, remembering His protection in former days. Could He not, as formerly, have smitten the people with blindness? But no cry of anguish went up to Him; from the heart of the Levite to Jehovah the passage was barred.

The wretched woman, recovered from her earlier course of prostitution, without repentance or exercise of conscience, died from the dreadful consequences of what she formerly hankered after. God allowed the evil to run its full course, but, as the succeeding chapters will inform us, out of this frightful evil He brought glory to Himself.

The word of God presents two great subjects to us. What God is on the one hand; what man is on the other. God never attempts to cover up man's actual state, for, if He did, He would not be the God who is light; and His word would be false in both its presentations. As to man, God depicts him as indifferent, amiable, or religious according to nature, violent or corrupt, always selfish, hypocritical, ungodly, apostate; without law, under law, under grace, and that in all circumstances and in every degree—while God also shows us the work of His grace in the heart of man under all its forms and in all its gradations. We obtain thus a divine picture of our state, and are forced to the conclusion that we have no resource in ourselves, and that our only resource is in the heart of God.

(*To be continued, D.V.*)