

Prophets, Poets, and Philosophers of the Ancient World

BY

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LIBERTÀ VA CERCANDO

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OF THE ANCIENT WORLD



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PREFACE

THIS book appeared three years ago under the rather blind title of *Deliverance*. It may have suffered also from the lack of a preface to explain its character and contents. Its object was to set forth, in the briefest possible compass, the various ways in which some of the wisest men of the Ancient World approached the ultimate problems of humanity, and solved them. Their solutions embraced convictions concerning God and man, concerning human righteousness and happiness, and the principles of thought and action. Thus these thinkers satisfied their natures, and reached some sovereign reconciliation, some personal adjustment between their conception of the world about them and their own physical and spiritual experience.

All of them recognized the fundamental conclusion of the practical reason, that the doer of an act, the thinker of a thought, will not escape its consequences. This was their common agreement. Yet as they were of divers races, their temperaments differed; so did their convictions touching God and man, and their conceptions of man's noblest aims and highest good. They could not reach the same

self-adjustment or reconciliation with the powers of life. In fact, their thoughts, projected along diverging lines, opened the many ways by which mankind was to explore its destinies.

Our own thoughts are very old. They have done duty in the minds of bygone men. They were first harnessed in the systems of those Great Ones (to whom I have been referring), those apparent sources of the world's convictions, who in their time set in new-found relationships, and made living, the *disjecta membra* of human experience and casual reflection. Yet the thoughts may be ours as well as theirs, by virtue of the very same title of having them flash joyfully upon the mind.

One realises a universal kinship in human need and aspiration when following such thoughts seemingly afar in the minds of these Founders who have passed on. They who may have died ages ago are nearer to us than the alien masses among whom we move. They are the spiritual fathers of us all, and we make ourselves consciously their sons by coming to know them in their achieved or striven-for adjustment of themselves with the eternal, and in their attunement of their desires to human limitations. Some men live in the eternities, and must at their peril keep in tune with them. The need of adaptation belongs to them peculiarly. Yet, in some degree, it pertains to all who are touched with meditation; and the endeavour for it, which is an

endeavour for peace and spiritual freedom, is an element of life which carries across centuries and millenniums. Although that which those Ancients reached, or even that which they tried for, may not be for us, still the contemplation of their efforts is as the effect of noble sculpture and poetry, bringing something like the final calm, the emotional purge, of tragedy.

The plan of this little book is to attempt some ordering and statement of the ways in which our spiritual ancestors of all times and countries adapted themselves to the fears and hopes of their natures, thus reaching a freedom of action in which they accomplished their lives; or, it may be, they did but find peace; yet brought it forth from such depth of conviction that their peace became peace for thousands and for millions.

I shall not enter at large upon the antecedents or even the setting of these men, or trace the fortunes of their influence. My intention, rather, is to set forth simply and by themselves those great individuals who illustrate the ways of human adjustment with life, its limitations, aspirations, and conceived determining powers, working within or from without.

But however we may seek to simplify our reflections, we cannot limit ourselves to any one category of adjustment. The needs of men are not the same universally; and the human adaptation may relate

to conduct or to speculation, to distress at life's chain of torment, or to fear of extinction; it may relate to the impulse to speculate and know, or to the need to be "saved." For one man shall find his peace in action, another in the rejection of action, even in the seeming destruction of desires. Another shall have peace and freedom through intellectual enquiry, while another must obey his God, or love his God, and may stand in very conscious need of divine salvation. The adjustment sought by Confucius was very different from that which drew the mind of Plato, or led Augustine to the City of God. Often quite different motives may inspire the reasonings which incidentally bring men to like conclusions. The Absolute Brahma of the Upanishads and the Being of Parmenides have certain common metaphysical foundations; but the motives impelling the Hindu and the Eleatic to somewhat similar results were as different as the Greek and Indian temperaments, — as different as those which likewise brought Gotama and Heraclitus to the conviction that existence is ceaseless flux. The life-adjustment of the early Greek philosophers had to do with scientific curiosity; they were seeking hypothetical explanations of the world about them, themselves perhaps implicitly included; they were not, like Gotama, seeking relief from the tedious impermanence of personal experience, any more than they were seeking to assure their own

eternal welfare in and through the love of God — the motive around which surged the Christian yearning for salvation. Evidently every “religion” is a means of adjustment, or deliverance; but there are other adjustments, which are not religious in any current acceptation of the word.

There is an advantage in commencing, and it may be ending, with the seers of the ancient world, and their early Christian successors to the suffrages of men. For they are fundamental, verily elemental in their exemplifications of the main divisions of the human need for an adjustment between the instincts and faculties of human nature and the powers conceivably controlling its accomplishment and destiny. We shall never altogether issue from between the projected lines of their achievement, however far we may seem to have advanced.

CHAPTER I

CHALDÆA AND EGYPT

WHEN did the need for adjustment begin? To answer this is to answer the unanswerable question — when did men begin? Thirty thousand years ago, on the cave walls at Altamira, there were paintings of animals, possibly carrying totemistic import. Without disturbing these “pre-historic” enigmas, we may more fruitfully consider “historic” beginnings, say in Chaldæa and Egypt, — these being ancient times for us, when men’s so-called minds were filled with notions which human experience has since found irrational and indeed incomprehensible.

It is always difficult for one time to understand another; among contemporaries mutual understanding rarely extends beyond the range of congeniality! With physical needs fundamentally the same, men have always been desirous, restless, apprehensive, anticipating evils real or imaginary, striving to guard against them, — evils of this life or touching existence after death. Although archaic adjustments with imagined anxieties seem so foolish now, the underlying human nature and human need are related to ourselves. Hundreds of thousands

of men and women are seeking to adjust themselves with the eternal ways, and hope to see the everlasting stars. All is mystery still, albeit the forces holding man are no longer "supernatural," and the desired adjustment refers little to the life to come. Let no one think that he has shaken off the past! We are in and of it, if we are also of ourselves. Our thoughts and the images in which we clothe them, what ancestry they trail out of a dim and ever lengthening distance, back through Rome to Greece, and through Greece backward still and eastward to the valleys of the Nile and the Euphrates. And there the receding trail only begins, for further back it passes, not ceasing, only to our blindness vanishing in a remote and semihuman past.

It is well to recognise the pit from which we have been digged. Therefore, if for no other purpose, let us contemplate, for a little, one or two ancient lines of attempted adjustment, of endeavour after some sort of spiritual deliverance, to which the name of no individual attaches, but rather that of a people or a land, in this case Mesopotamia and Egypt. The peoples of Mesopotamia as well as the Egyptians accumulated a colossal material equipment, and made a large advance in the social ordering of life. A certain King Hammurapi has of late years become the central figure of Mesopotamian history. At the opening of the second

millennium before Christ, he established the Kingdom of Babylon, and reigned as a King of law and righteousness, as well as might. It was a period, it was indeed a land, of trade and agriculture, regulated by law and custom. Hammurapi issued a code of laws, the most signal legal document of far antiquity, and a worthy predecessor for the civil law of Rome, of which it may have been a remote and partial source. Thus the Babylonian people show how deftly they had settled themselves in their human relationships, and had reached some facile freedom of conduct. Yet their lives were overhung with dread. They were very fearful of the unseen — of the imagined powers which they sought to coerce by magic, or move through prayer. They had thus devised nostrums for their hampering fears, and yet had found no sure stay for their furthest hopes — dreary at best, and at worst filled with horror, was existence within and beyond the grave. No spell or prayer had been devised to help the dead. Magic and prayer, the warning of the sheep's liver, the portents of the storm, the phases of sun and moon and stars, availed only the living.

As the centuries went on, the Babylonians and Assyrians improved their conceptions of the Gods; ascribed justice to them, beneficence, righteousness, even pity. Yet always with fear and abasement: "Thy slave who bears the weight of thy wrath is covered with dust"; and centuries later Nebu-

chadnezzar says that he *loves* the fear of God. There had also come to the Babylonians and Assyrians quite positive thoughts of their own shortcomings, omissions, social crimes. All such delinquencies, when thought of with reference to the gods, fell within the category of *sin*. They bewailed their sins prostrate before their gods, and begged forgiveness. Yet they never distinguished clearly between involuntary oversight and intended wrong. Ceremonial omission, eating or treading on the forbidden thing, brought divine anger with plague and punishment, just as quickly as fraud, incest, and murder. There also rose among them the wailing cry of perplexity over the good man brought low, the cry of one who has done his best and yet has been afflicted: "If I only knew that such things were pleasing before God! But that which seems good to a man is evil before God. Who may understand the counsel of the gods in heaven?"¹

At all events, for him who has been guilty, as for him who can find in himself no sin, penitence and abasement can only affect the remainder of his days on earth. After death the same fate awaits the evil and the good, and no help for either. Satisfaction, vengeance, sense-gratification, the pleasures of daily life and the tranquillising occupations of

¹ Zimmern, *Babylonische Hymnen*, etc., pp. 27, 29. Jastrow, "A Babylonian Parallel to Job," *Journal of Biblical Lit.*, Vol. XXV.

labour,— all were had in this rich river land ; its material welfare and order, the degree of civilisation there attained, attest the existence of a sufficiency of practical justice and law-abidingness. But Mesopotamia never evolved either a religion, a philosophy, or an ethical scheme that could lead the human spirit to freedom or peace.

It may be doubted whether the Egyptians thought more clearly ; but their temperament was different, and their lives would seem to have been calm and stable. All this, however, is no explanation of the marvels of constructive foolishness, no explanation whatsoever of the grossly impossible continuation of life after death, which they fabricated. It is natural as well as universal not to think of death as ending all ; the natural man has neither the data nor a sufficient clarity of mind to reach the notion of extinction. His impulse is to imagine how the dead can go on under conditions so obviously changed. But any elaboration of such imaginings is apt to bear an inverse relation to his intelligence and power to discern inconsistencies. The Egyptian fabrication of a cumulative scheme of life beyond the tomb was unhampered by any sense of the impossible. Provision for it had to be made on earth, and the expense was beyond the means of all except Pharaohs and the great nobles. Pyramids bulwarked the post-mortem life of Egypt's kings. The texts within set forth the further means whereby

that existence should be continued and supported, should be filled with authority, dignity, occupation, supplied with dainty food and with pleasures distinctly of the flesh. Every measure was taken to make the post-mortem life of Pharaoh and his nobles as luxurious as if they still commanded countless slaves on earth. Their tombs were furnished with symbolical conveniences, with serving statuettes, and chapters from the Book of the Dead, which magically caused these statuettes to do the work of men in the nether world. The venal sacerdotal imagination encompassed that subterranean life with dangers at every turn, and even devised conditions of sinfulness, so that priests and scribes might also furnish, for a price, charms to quell the dangers and scrolls to disavow the sinfulness, just as Indulgences pertaining to the nether world were to be bought for money three thousand years afterwards. Yet during those early Egyptian centuries, a clearer morality introduced rewards and punishments into the scheme of the life to come. To some extent, the post-mortem welfare of the great, and possibly of the lowly, became dependent on the virtues of their lives on earth.

In this combination of ethical thought with means magical, religious, or material, for supporting life beyond the tomb, lay the most striking Egyptian endeavour to free the human spirit from fear, and adjust man to the conditions and possibilities