Biblical Conceptions of Life.

By

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We can measure a civilization or a religion by the way it treats the idea of life. To primitive men, life was a most mysterious thing. They knew not whence it came or whither it went. One moment a man would be active, full of power and vigor, the next, he would be a limp mass of flesh. His breath being gone, they reasoned that life was in his breath and was something like the wind, invisible but powerful. Or they noted that his life ebbed out with his blood. Blood, therefore, must have life in it and be a mysterious power for good or ill.

So in primitive society, life was held to be sacred, and was hedged about with fears and prohibitions, for life belonged to the realm of the supernatural. Thus, eating was not a simple matter, but as one of the sources of life was full of mystery and subject to strict laws. Every meal was a sort of sacrament. Certain things might not be eaten at all. Eating together created a sacred bond between table companions. And the sacrificial meal, shared with a deity, was most sacred of all, for it caused one to partake of the god's life.

Even more mysterious was life at its beginning. The mother, guardian and source of a new life, was regarded with fear and driven out of the community till her child was born. Then only after elaborate rites of "purification" could she be brought back. So with everything connected with the reproductive function. The book of Leviticus is full of such
survivals from primitive ages. But most of them are based on the ancient belief that life is mysterious and powerful. Men of that time looked upon it much as ignorant men today look upon electricity, precious, but beyond comprehension and dangerous.

One of the survivals mentioned above is the teaching in Leviticus concerning blood. The idea is taken over from the past with no attempt to explain it save to say: "The life of all flesh is in the blood thereof" (Lev. 17:14). This is just what primitive man must have concluded when he saw the life stream flowing away. For that reason, this fluid was held to have an extraordinary power both for good and for evil. No one dared to eat of it, and yet it was considered the most effective agent to work a thorough purification. Somehow it had power to counteract invisible and malignant forces. They rubbed it on the corners of the altar which had been polluted by the presence of an unclean person (Lev. 8:15). When the so-called "leper" had been cured, they anointed various parts of his body with this "magical disinfectant", as one scholar has called it (Lev. 15:25). Also when the High Priest was consecrated he was purified in the same way by a like application of blood (Lev. 8:23). It was also believed that blood had power to ward off the demons of disease. A survival of that idea may be seen in the blood-smearred door-posts in Egypt which kept the destroying angel from the Hebrews' dwellings (Ex. 12:21-23). So powerful was this substance, seat of that mystery called life. Life was no trifle to the men of olden times, rather something supernatural.

But the Hebrews progressed and got over some of their fears. Then life appeared as something good, something to be enjoyed, full of activity and pleasure. The idea is well expressed in Ecclesiastes (2:24, 3:22, etc) "There is nothing better for a man than that he should eat and drink and
rejoice in the works of his hands," that is, in achievement. The only trouble was, life did not last long enough. The evil days came on all too soon, and after that there was no hope. Better, says Koheleth, the life of a healthy laborer than that of a senile rich man (5:12, 6:12), and he quotes the proverb "a living dog is better than a dead lion" (Eccl. 9:4).

So length of days, a full span of life, became the great desideratum and an untimely end the greatest tragedy. How often in the Old Testament, life seems merely equivalent to length of days. "He asked life of Thee, Thou gavest it him, even length of days for ever and ever" (Ps. 21:4); "What man is he that desireth life and loveth many days that he may see good" (Ps. 34:12). This sounds very superficial as if the value of one's life consisted in its duration. But we must remember the background from which it comes. To these thinkers, this life was all. Whatever there was to be of satisfaction or richness must be experienced here and now, for the future was only a dim shadow world. "There is no work nor device nor knowledge nor wisdom in Sheol whither thou goest" says Ecclesiastes (9:10). And even the pious Psalmist could hope for no communion with his God after death: "In death there is no remembrance of Thee; in Sheol who shall give Thee thanks?" (Ps. 6:5).

So to these men, fulness of life inevitably depended on length of days. Abundant life must at least be long life. But we wrong the men of genius who wrote the Old Testament if we think that duration was all that life meant to them. "Many days" were nothing unless they were filled with the best things. The long life of a wicked man, a man of violence and oppression, was regarded as something abnormal to be sure, but certainly nothing to be desired. Length of days, as such, had no value. It all depended on what was put into the days. Prosperity, health and happiness, of course, but these must be had with honor and
righteousness.

But the poets and prophets of Israel reached an even higher level in their thought of what constituted the ideal life. They held that life was to be found at its fullest in the experience of communion with God. To them, God was the living God, the giver of life. To keep His commandments, to do His will, was really to live. At the end of that most spiritual of law codes, Deuteronomy, we find these words: "Behold I have set before thee life and death. Therefore, choose life that thou mayest live, to love the Lord thy God, to obey His voice and to cleave unto Him. For He is thy life and the length of thy days." (Dt. 30:19–20.) This plainly teaches that true life depends on loving God, obeying Him and cleaving unto Him. What is this but fellowship?

The Psalmist puts it into more impassioned words: "With Thee is the fountain of life; in thy light shall we see light" (Ps. 36:9) (To him, as to John, the life was the light of men.) or "Thou wilt show me the path of life; in Thy presence is fulness of joy, at Thy right hand are pleasures for evermore" (Ps. 16:11), and again: "The Lord is my salvation, The Lord is the strength of my life" (Ps. 27:1). All this tells of an experience of life here and now, rich in the consciousness of God's favor and fellowship. Nowhere is this better expressed than in these words: "Whom have I in Heaven but Thee, and there is none upon earth that I desire besides Thee" (Ps. 73:25). "Whither shall I flee from Thy presence—in the uttermost parts Thy hand shall lead me and hold me" (Ps. 139:7 ff). What a sense of the abiding presence of God! Have such utterances been surpassed by any pious soul? This was fulness of life to the Old Testament saints.

The Sages of Israel who wrote the Proverbs seem to us at times very worldly-wise and materialistic. But their wisdom was based on a very real religious faith, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom" (Pr. 1:7, 9:10)
is the keynote of their philosophy. And they too had a conception of life as the sharing of God’s life through partaking of the Wisdom which was His. “Happy is the man who findeth Wisdom. She is a tree of life to them that lay hold on her (Pr. 3:13,18) let her not go, for she is thy life (4:13).” And in that very famous passage where Wisdom is personified as existing with God before all worlds, she cries out to men: “Whoso findeth me findeth life, but he that misseth me wrongeth his own soul. All that hate me love death.” (Pr. 8:35, 36). Nowhere in the Old Testament, it seems to me, does it appear so clearly that life is the partaking of the divine nature; that “death” is the condition of the soul, here and now, which refuses the divine gift. In other words, we have, even in the Old Testament, the idea that life and death in their deepest meanings are not physical terms at all, but spiritual qualities and consist in a relation to Him who alone is the living one, as well as perfect goodness and wisdom and love.

During the centuries that separate our Old and New Testaments the religion of the Jews underwent a tremendous development, being enriched from many sources. There were sages who carried on the tradition of the Wise Men of Israel in the light of Greek philosophy. One of them, whose book is called the Wisdom of Solomon, has a conception of the indwelling Wisdom of God hardly to be distinguished from Paul’s doctrine of the indwelling Holy Spirit. Only those in whom Wisdom thus dwells can be said to live. This divine life is a quality called deathlessness and has nothing to do with time or duration. It is immortality, and consists in the possession of a nature like God who is righteousness. Such men have a knowledge of God, whom thus to know is life eternal (Wisdom 15:3). (cf. Kenkyu, vol. VIII, No. 2: “A Greco-Jewish conception of the Kingdom of God.”)

At this same time there were seers, perhaps influenced
by Persian ideas, who looked for an age to come when the righteous should enjoy God's presence forever. There crept into Hebrew thought the idea of a resurrection and a future state, of life in a new age to come. This is to be sure a cruder conception than the idea of immortality as timeless and which consists in deathless righteousness, but it is a great advance over the old ideas in which there was no hope at all for the future. All these ideas came in to enrich Judaism, and were inherited by the early Christians.

Then at last He was revealed who in Himself brought life and immortality to light. In Him were summed up all the ideals of the Old Testament saints and of the later teachers as well. Never before had these ideals been stated so clearly; never before or since have they been so incarnate in a human being. The teaching of Jesus had to do with life in the Kingdom of God. Often he calls this: "eternal life." It is in essence what the psalmists held it to be a life of communion and fellowship with God, a fellowship based on sharing His purpose. In its perfection, he taught, the Kingdom of God lay in the future, but might be enjoyed here and now by all who would accept God's sovereignty in the spirit of a little child. His disciples were bidden to make this Kingdom their chief aim; all other earthly values were to be as nothing. The whole world was not to be compared with this attainment of true life.

To Jesus, the supreme proof that one is a son of God, that one has His life within, is the willingness to love and serve and sacrifice to the uttermost. "For whosoever shall lose his life shall find it." And our Lord sealed these words by losing his life on the cross, only to find it, by becoming through his resurrection a lifegiving spirit.

No one of his disciples understood this truth so well as did Paul. It was he who had perfect sympathy with his master through the fellowship of his sufferings. As we read
that list in the eleventh chapter of Second Corinthians we realize how Paul had given himself to the uttermost to attain that knowledge (II Cor. 11:24-28).

Paul’s experience of the divine life dwelling within, controlling a man’s actions, empowering him to get the victory over sin and fear and death, how vivid this is made to us in his letters! “No longer I live, but Christ liveth in me” (Gal. 2:20), “The law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus made me free from the law of sin and death” (Rom. 8:2); “If Christ is in you—if so be that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you—ye are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, and the Spirit is life because of righteousness” (Rom. 8:9-10).

Here is a fellowship with God which is not a matter of rare moments of mystical exaltation, nor is it gained through mere contemplation. Rather it is a constant experience found in every-day living, a union with the divine so close that all one’s acts seem prompted by a power above and beyond oneself. It dwells within. Paul calls this newness of life by many names, but oftener describes it as being “in Christ.” There is the secret of it all. Paul had found his new life not through painful effort after goodness. He had tried that, and it had brought only failure and heart-break. It was in response to God’s love revealed in Christ that he became a new creature. Because he saw God in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself he felt himself in contact with the source of all power and goodness. He had only to open his heart, or as he puts it “believe,” and the divine life entered and filled him.

This is something that we do not find clearly expressed in Judaism, the idea that God Himself is seeking us, that He has given His own life to the world and all we need is to receive it. There are to be sure gracious words of Jehovah to his people: “Ho every one that thirsteth come ye to the waters” (Isa. 55:1) and there are the invitations of the
Divine Wisdom (Pr. 1:20-23; 8:1-11 etc.), but here the idea is warm and real and living, incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth and those who have felt the contagion of his spirit. It is life, not poetic abstractions, that begets life. It was indeed a new moment in the history of religion when the Word became flesh. "In Him was Life."

Paul had felt this. It remained for John to put it into even clearer words. Now we stand at the summit of the whole development we have been trying to trace. All that is of value in the conception of life from primitive man to Paul finds expression in the Fourth Gospel. John's very purpose, as he states it, is that we may see God in Christ, and responding, or as he says believing, may have life through Him (Jn. 20:31).

"Life," "Eternal Life," where do we find the words so often as in the pages of John's Gospel? It is his central idea. Life is something God has in Himself, but because of His great love for the world He desired that all men should share it and sent His son to reveal and impart it. Like Paul, John speaks often of Christ dwelling in the believer, or the believer in Christ, and in the same breath describes this experience as "living" through him. Sometimes this mutual indwelling is called mutual knowledge, that is, a personal relation of intimacy, the closet possible fellowship (Jn. 10:14, 15; cf. 17:21). And once he comes very near a definition when he says "This is life eternal, to know Thee, the only true God, and him whom Thou didst send" (17:3; cf. Wisdom 15:3, quoted above).

At first sight, all this seems very abstract and metaphysical. This were true if the God whom John worshiped were simply infinite Substance or Being or Absolute Force. Then contact with Him would be a rather shadowy affair. But here is where John builds on the best in Judaism and in Christianity. God to him is not an abstraction. That life
which He has in Himself is best expressed in personal terms. He is more than Cosmic Force or the World-Soul. He is perfect goodness, self-giving love. He is best seen in the Man of Nazareth, who was no phantom as some were then trying to teach. And knowledge of such a being is a personal matter, it means the possession of a nature like unto His. It is a fellowship of will. The end of the whole matter, the last word of the Gospel, the burden of the high-priestly prayer is not a vague "I in them and Thou in me" but rather "that the love wherewith Thou lovedst me may be in them and I in them" (Jn. 17:26). Only he in whom love dwells is in the Father and the Son! How John drives this truth home in his letter to the churches! Only those who love can really know God, that is, share in His life. He who loves not, is in a state of death. "We know that we have passed out of death into life because we love" (I Jn. 4:7–21; 3:14 etc.).

It is this knowledge of God, fellowship with Him in loving, which is life eternal. Here it is that the gospel for the individual and the gospel for society meet. For fellowship with God means to share His purposes for the world, to build up here and now on earth that society in which His will may be done as it is in Heaven. He who is conscious of the divine life within him will not be content with a mystical experience, nor with mere inward satisfaction. He will look on the world about him as God looks at it, will grieve over manifestations of hate and selfishness and cruelty, will give himself to the uttermost to make the world the home of men of goodwill. In so doing he will be not merely saving his own soul, but creating conditions wherein others may more easily attain to the same knowledge of God which is life eternal.

What higher life could there be than this? Life is indeed mysterious, supernatural, just as primitive man con-
ceived it. Long life is also a good, if only it be filled with the best things, and the best things are beauty and truth and goodness, above all, love. They are best acquired through fellowship and communion with their source. Fellowship with God, the Israelites indeed achieved. But it was a comparatively rare experience, and attained with difficulty. So in the fulness of time God sent His Son that we might through him have life and have it more abundantly. Through him, Galilean fishermen obtained a power that conquered the Roman Empire. And men of like passions with ourselves, from the first Christian century until now, have experienced this renewal, this quickening of their spiritual being.

Men of today talk much about self expression, of making the most of life, of winning a rich experience. It is normal for a man to desire abundant life. The trouble is, he often seeks it by the wrong road. His aim is to gain the whole world for himself, to enrich his own personality. Alas, he usually finds that in so doing he has lost his own soul. For he who would find his life must lose it by merging it with the divine life. Then for the first time he knows what it is to live, for then an infinite life flows through him. Such a man has not gained the world, he has overcome the world.