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# Mercy.

AN EXEGETICAL STUDY.

BY THE REV. JAMES WELLS, D.D., GLASGOW.

## II.

THE aim of this study is to ascertain the biblical doctrine of mercy, especially as it is set forth in the Old Testament. The previous paper was occupied with the word and the conception of mercy; and it also contrasted mercy with 'mercies' and merit. We shall now begin with

### I. Covenant Mercy.

God appears in revelation as a covenant God, and His folk are a covenant folk. The covenant theology is old-fashioned now, and we crave more modern, literary, and supple phrases. No doubt the Federalists, by attempting to run all truth into this one mould, prepared the way for a recoil. But the Old and New Covenants are the correct names for the two parts of the Bible, and the Lord's Supper is the new covenant in Christ's blood. The men of the covenant theology could thus easily justify their theological preferences. And is not he wisest who does not give himself away to either old or new fashions in theology, but who desires to enrich his mind with what is best in both? He who reads Samuel Rutherford, Guthrie of Fenwick, Boston, the Erskines, and the Marrow men, may easily find himself questioning whether our modern favourite evangelistic phrases are more scriptural or effective than the old ones. These men and their spiritual comrades were most successful in lighting up the act of faith and self-surrender, and in displaying the blessedness of a spiritual union with Christ. He who studies their sermons will soon discover that their covenant theology was a chief secret of their spiritual power. They certainly created and nourished a very vigorous and fruitful type of piety. It was also full of inspiring hope, for they never forgot that it was both for self and seed.

A covenant is substantially a promise, but a promise enhanced and ennobled in every possible way; it is a pledge with every advantage and addition, and graciously accommodated to man's weakness. In the same way, a treaty is just an agreement between nations; but it has been sur-

rounded with everything that can add dignity to it. The word of the contracting parties is, or should be, as good as the bond or the oath, but it is not so impressive. The natural crave for some tangible memorial and pledge of weighty covenants is well illustrated by the action of Jacob and Laban at Mizpah (Gn 31<sup>44-55</sup>). They felt that their covenanting had not been completed till they had raised a big heap of stones, and set up a pillar upon it, and consecrated it by a solemn religious function. The covenant mercy of the Old Testament is mercy presented in a very definite form, so that men can easily grasp it. As a covenant is not of one, but of two, it also emphasizes man's free choice of God as his God, and all the ties by which he binds himself to God. The covenant also, rightly understood, reminds us that at the foundation of our life there lies, not a mere convention or legal fiction, but a real union of choice and life.

### II. The Uncovenanted Mercies of God.

This idea is an essential part of the priestly theory of religion. It teaches that Christ has appointed trustees who alone have authority to administer the treasures of grace, and that these trustees are found only among those who profess what is called apostolic succession. But there is not one trace of such a theory in the New Testament. There we find only a priestless religion. Besides, who can prove that he is bound to the apostles by a chain in which no link is lacking?

Modern ritualism is an amalgam of Judaism and Christianity. It carries over into the New Testament the very elements which were meant to pass away, as the blossom is displaced by the ripe fruit. But even a Jew would find it very difficult to harmonize the ritualistic theory with the Old Testament. He would naturally turn to the case of Abraham, his model man of God. He would accept Paul's statement of the facts of this case: 'Abraham believed God, and it was counted unto

him for righteousness. . . . And he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had yet being uncircumcised' (Ro 4<sup>s. 11</sup>). The initiatory rite was not the channel of covenant mercy, but the sign that that mercy had already been obtained by faith. Abraham was justified fourteen years before he received the initiatory rite. Moreover, he and Melchizedek were drawn together by the force of their common piety, and Abraham honoured him as a true priest by giving him the priestly tithes. These facts show that even in the Jewish Church covenant mercy was not necessarily dependent upon ritual. Further, the Old Testament informs us in countless passages that the Messiah would introduce a more spiritual and a priestless religion. Again, this theory unchurches millions of the most saintly, whom Christ has churchied.

One of the most striking features of the New Testament is its freedom from every tincture of ritualism. Christ has promised to be with every two or three who meet together in His name; and therefore men cannot unchurch them, for Christ Himself has *churchied* them in the most emphatic manner. 'Whosoever will do the will of God,'—priest or no priest, ritual or no ritual,—'the same is My brother, and My sister, and My mother.' He, simply as a doer of God's will, stands to Christ in the nearest and dearest of all conceivable relations.

### III. Temple Mercy.

This name may be justly given to the mercy revealed in the Old Testament. When a pious Jew thought of God's mercy, his mind naturally turned to the temple, and to its innermost shrine, the mercy-seat. The cherubim there, with their eyes fixed on the mercy-seat, were symbols of devout contemplation, and guides to the thoughtful worshipper. Every part of the furniture of the temple was a sacred object-lesson, a gift to his senses and his imagination. The mercy-seat could be reached only by way of the altar of propitiation. That mercy can forgive sin without a sin-offering is not the doctrine of the Bible, nor, we may add, of conscience. Under the mercy-seat were the two tables of the Law. The pious Jew was thus taught most impressively that the mercy offered to him was in harmony with conscience and God's law. It was no soft and lawless thing that confounded the distinctions of right and wrong. It

was holy mercy. Love and propitiation, mercy and holiness, were there united. Its love of the sinner was steeped in hatred of his sin. The altar at the door and the ark in the centre of the tabernacle or temple, defined the quality of God's mercy. It warned the worshipper that such mercy should never be abused, and that it should not weaken his faith in God's holiness or in retribution. It was a very different idea from that of an imperfect obedience being accepted as perfect by a gracious compromise.

Exegesis proves that the teachings of the Old and New Testaments meet at the mercy-seat. The word for the mercy-seat is כַּפֹּרֶת 'covering' (Ex 25<sup>17</sup>): it was a place of covering sin. 'Blessed is he . . . whose sin is covered' (Ps 32<sup>1</sup>). The Vulgate translates it *propitiatorum* (from *prope*, 'near'), 'place of atonement.' In the LXX it is *ἱλαστήριον*; Luther makes it *Gnadenstuhl*, 'throne of grace.' Now *ἱλαστήριον*, 'propitiation,' is found in Ro 3<sup>25</sup>, Heb 9<sup>5</sup>, 1 Jn 2<sup>2</sup> and 4<sup>10</sup>. All these passages set forth Jesus as our true mercy-seat. 'He is the propitiation or mercy-seat for our sins' (1 Jn 2<sup>1</sup>): He, the whole Christ, not His death only. The prayer of the Publican is very striking—Ὁ Θεός, ἱλάσθητί μοι τῷ ἁμαρτωλῷ. He uses temple phrases, and implores that peculiar sort of mercy that was got at the mercy-seat; he asks for the mercy of reconciliation: 'God be propitiated or propitious as at the mercy-seat, to me the sinner.' Those who must have a complete philosophy of the plan of salvation will find it impossible to solve every problem belonging to this mercy, but an unfettered and fearless exegesis has a plain path before it. And, as some one has said, we can accept this mercy as sinners, though we cannot explain it as scientists.

### IV. Godlike Mercy.

'Oh satisfy us in the morning with Thy mercy!' is the pathetic prayer of the aged Moses. He has had a richer experience than any man of his day, and is an expert in the art of living. He has discovered that God's mercy can satisfy him and his comrades, and that nothing else can. For the past, for the present, and for the future, he needs only God's satisfying mercy. 'Thy mercy'; it is God's mercy for which he prays. It is God-becoming mercy, mercy so great that it is fit for God only, mercy with a Godlike fulness, freeness, generosity, and winsomeness; it is the spirit which

loves to communicate happiness to all, especially to the miserable, which begs from sinners only the pleasure of saving and healing them. Rich men take their titles from their best estates and their greatest achievements. God is the Father of mercies. He has infinite goodwill, which seeks an outlet for itself. Both mercy and judgment belong to God (Ps 101<sup>1</sup>), but not in the same sense. He only exerciseth judgment, but He delighteth in mercy. Anger is the background of His nature. His punishments (says a Church Father) 'are the forced offspring of willing faults.' Mercy rejoiceth over judgment, which is His strange work. 'As to full breasts,' says Leighton, 'it is a pleasure to God to let mercy forth.'

The careful student of the Psalms must be deeply impressed by the many references to God's mercy. This is the theme which gives the Psalms their supreme distinction as poetry. It warms and expands the Psalmist's soul; it gives him what, in other writers, we call genius; he exults and revels in his subject. Among 150 psalms there is only one psalm, the 88th, which is written entirely under a feeling of depression, and which ends without one word of consolation: 'as if it were hard for the Lord's love to give us such a warning,' says Adolphe Monod. The spirit, if not the literal refrain, in many of the psalms is, 'for His mercy endureth for ever,' 'mercy shall be built up for ever.' The Psalmist writes like one whose mind is baffled by the opulence of his theme; he adds image to image, and returns again to his darling task. He has a very rich vocabulary for mercy:

in most pagan tongues, there is not one word for it. One could easily discover many fine touches of exegesis in the Psalmist's doctrine of mercy. The translators of our Bible, in Englishing the synonyms for mercy, have combined the richest words in our mother tongue, such as loving-kindness, tender-mercies. The Psalmist loves the law; for, when most severe, it is love threatening, mercy entreating. 'Thy mercy, Lord, is in the heavens' (Ps 36<sup>5</sup>). It is heaven-high, without measure; like the sunshine, so liberal in its light and warmth, it fills all the space between God's throne and sinful man. He is 'plenteous in mercy' (Ps 86<sup>5</sup>), plenteous as God counts plenteousness; it is sovereign mercy in its abundance and generosity. 'God's tender mercies are above (or over) all His works,' like the canopy of the bright, kind, all-embracing skies—

'I say to thee, do thou repeat  
To the first man thou mayest meet  
In lane, highway, or open street,  
That we and all men move  
Under a canopy of love  
As broad as the blue sky above.'

His mercies are without measure or bounds; greater than all His works and ours, greater than creation, and than sin which is our creation. And God's mercy comes to us in the most merciful way, like rain upon the mown grass, like heaven's dew. 'The Lord taketh pleasure in those that hope in His mercy' (Ps 147<sup>11</sup>). Our faith gives pleasure to God. What wonderful mercy is this! 'His mercy endureth for ever.' It embraces and claims the two eternities.

## The Sefer Ha-Galuy of Saadya.

BY PROFESSOR W. BACHER, PH.D., BUDAPEST.

ABRAHAM IBN DĀUD closes the short statement which, in his historical work, *Sefer Ha-Kabbala*, he devotes to the Gaon Saadya (see *Medieval Jewish Chronicles*, ed. Neubauer, i. 66) with the following words:—'The rest of the history of Saadya and the benefits he wrought for Israel, behold they are told in the Sefer Ha-Galuy.' That this work, cited by the historian of the twelfth century as a source for the biography of the Gaon,

had Saadya himself for its author, we learn from another Spanish author of that period, the writer on astronomy, Abraham b. Chija († 1136). In speaking of the date of the Advent of the Messiah, the last-named author refers to the circumstance that the Gaon Saadya had also attempted to calculate the Messianic era, namely, in his commentary on Daniel, and in other writings of his, the Book of Dogmas (*Emunoth, Amānôt*), and the