

CHAPTER I

SOME EARLY ELEMENTS: ESSENISM



THE Old Testament is the fountain-head of Judaism. Hence if it is true, as is contended in a previous page, that the Old Testament contains mystical elements, then the starting-point in any treatment of Jewish mysticism on historical, or even semi-historical, lines must be the Old Testament. But this course will not be adopted here. The Old Testament will be omitted, and for a reason which has already been hinted. The mysticism of the Old Testament is of an elementary, naïve, and unconscious kind, whereas what this book is intended to show is the consciously-elaborated, professional mysticism of the Jews. What we get in the Old Testament are the ground-work and the scaffolding, the indispensable beginnings of the edifice; but not the edifice itself.

Thus it has much to say about the Fatherhood of God. Here we have a basic conception of all mysticism; for the latter in all its phases and stages assumes the possibility of communion with some one who, while greater and more powerful than ourselves, is at the same time loving, and benevolent, and personally interested in us. You can only pray to one who hears; you can only feel love towards one who, you know, has loved you first. The Old Testament scintillates with sublime examples of men whose communion with God was a thing of the most intense reality to them, and whose conviction of the 'nearness' of the

Divine was beyond the slightest cavil. The sudden and unexpected inrushes of Divine inspiration which seized the Old Testament prophets; Isaiah's vision of a God 'whose train filled the Temple'--an emblem of the All-inclusiveness of Deity, of the presence and the working of an all-embracing Spirit of Life; the ecstasy of an Ezekiel lifted from off his feet by the Spirit and removed from one place to another; the fact of prophecy itself--the possession of a spiritual endowment not vouchsafed to ordinary men, the endowment of a higher insight into the will of God;--all these represent a stage of first-hand, living religion to which the name of mysticism is rightly and properly applied. But they are no more than the preamble to the explicit, conscious, and pronouncedly personal type of Jewish mysticism which is the subject of the present book.

The earliest beginnings of this mysticism are usually accredited, by modern Jewish scholars, to the Essenes. To say this, is to put back Jewish mysticism to a very early date, for according to the theory of Wellhausen (*Israëlitische and jüdische Geschichte*, 1894, p. 261), the Essenes as well as the Pharisees were offshoots of the Ḥasidim (חסידים = 'pious ones') of the pre-Maccabean age. But it is only a theory, and not an established historical fact, seeing that the religious tenets of the Jews during the three centuries immediately preceding the birth of Christianity are veiled in considerable obscurity, and seeing also that the real meaning of the name 'Essenes' as well as their exact relations with the Pharisees are points upon which there is anything but certainty. 'What is certain, however, is that three out-standing literary sources belonging to the first two or three Christian centuries--*viz.* (a) Philo, (b) Josephus, (c) some older portions of the

Babylonian and Palestinian Talmuds--all have stray allusions, couched in varying phraseology, to certain sects or parties who differed in their mode of life from the general body of the Jews, and who were in possession of certain esoteric teachings of which those outside their ranks were un-informed.

Thus Philo (*Quod omnis probes liber*, 12) writes of them that they were “eminently worshippers of God (ἱερωτάτοις καὶ ἁγιωτάτοις ἱεροῦ), not in the sense that they sacrifice living animals (like the priests in the Temple), but that they are anxious to keep their minds in a priestly state of holiness. They prefer to live in villages, and avoid cities on account of the habitual wickedness of those who inhabit them, knowing, as they do, that just as foul air breeds disease, so there is danger of contracting an incurable disease of the soul from such bad associations.”

Again, in another of his works (*De Vita contemplativa*, ed. Conybeare, pp. 53, 206), Philo says: “Of natural philosophy... they study only that which pertains to the existence of God and the beginning of all things, otherwise they devote all their attention to ethics, using as instructors the laws of their fathers, which, without the outpouring of the Divine Spirit, the human mind could not have devised . . . for, following their ancient traditions, they obtain their philosophy by means of allegorical interpretations. . . Of the love of God they exhibit myriads of examples, inasmuch as they strive for a continued uninterrupted life of purity and holiness; they avoid swearing and falsehood, and they declare that God causes only good and no evil whatsoever. . . No one possesses a house absolutely as his own, one which does not at the same time belong to all; for, in

addition to living together in companies, their houses are open also to their adherents coming from other quarters. They have one storehouse for all, and the same diet; their garments belong to all in common, and their meals are taken in common.”

Josephus speaks of the Essenes in similar terms (see *Antiquities*, XVIII. i. 2-6; also *De Bello Judaico*, II. viii. 2-13).

The points to be noted in both the fore-mentioned authors are: (a) the great stress laid on fellowship, amounting to a kind of communism; (b) their removal from the general people by reason of their higher sanctity; (c) their devotion to the knowledge of the existence of God and the beginning of all things; (d) their love of allegorical interpretation.

Although it is exceedingly difficult to know what the Rabbinic term equivalent to ‘Essene’ is, it is not hard to deduce, from names and phrases scattered throughout the Rabbinic records, a theory that there existed as early as the first Christian centuries either a distinct sect of Jews, or individual Jews here and there, who combined mystical speculation with an ascetic mode of life.

A similar phenomenon is observable in the history of the early Christian Church. There was a life of primitive and austere fellowship. A group here, a group there, gathered together with no other motive than that of gaining a greater hold on the spiritual life than was prevalent in the ordinary circles of the people: “And the multitude of them that believed were of one heart and soul; and not one of them said that aught of the things which he possessed was his own; but they had all things common. . . For neither were there among them any that lacked:

for as many as were possessors of lands or houses sold them . . . and distribution was made unto each according as any one had need” (*Acts*, iv. 32--35).

They seem to have lived on the borderland of an unusual ecstasy, experiencing extraordinary invasions of the Divine, hearing mystic sounds and seeing mystic visions which, to them, were the direct and immediate revelations of the deepest and most sacred truths.

Illustrations of similar experiences in the bosom of the early synagogue, as presented in the Rabbinic records, are the following:

There are several heterogeneous passages which speak of the existence within the ancient Temple at Jerusalem of a special apartment, called the *lishkât ḥashbāḥ m* (‘chamber of the silent [or secret] ones’). According to the statement of *Tosefta Shekalim*, ii. 16, there were to be found in some cities of Palestine and Babylon men known as *Ḥashbāḥ m*, who reserved a special room in their house for depositing in it a charity-box into which money for the poor could be put and withdrawn with the utmost silence. It was collected and distributed by men appointed for the purpose by the *Ḥashbāḥ m*, and, as it was all done with the strictest secrecy, it looks as though there was a kind of communism among the members of the order. The special chamber in the Temple, as mentioned above, was also a place where gifts for the poor were deposited in secret and withdrawn for distribution in secret.

Two facts seem to demonstrate that these *Hashkavim* were a small mystical sect.

Firstly, they are given the special appellation of *yir'at* - *h'at*, *i.e.* 'fearers of sin.' They were thus marked off by an extra sanctity from the body of the people--and the student of the Rabbinic literature knows that whenever a special title is accorded to a group or sect on the grounds of special holiness, this holiness is always of an exceptionally high order. It is the holiness of men in touch with the Divine. And, as has just been remarked, their enthusiasm for doing good seems to have been grounded on a kind of austere fellowship that reigned among them, impelling them to do their work unseen by the madding crowd.

Secondly, the idea of silence or secrecy was frequently employed by the early Rabbis in their mystical exegesis of Scripture. A typical illustration is the following passage from the *Midrash Rabba* on *Genesis*iii.: "R. Simeon son of Jehozedek asked R. Samuel son of Nahman (two Palestinian teachers of the beginning of the 3rd century A.D.) and said unto him, Seeing that I have heard concerning thee that thou art an adept in the Haggadah¹, tell me whence the light was created. He replied, It [*i.e.* the Haggadah] tells us that the Holy One (blessed be He) enwrapped Himself in a garment, and the brightness of His splendour lit up the universe from end to end. He [*i.e.* the sage who just replied] said this in a whisper, upon which the other sage retorted, Why dost thou tell this in a whisper, seeing that it

¹ Haggadah is the general name for the narrative or fabular or philosophical sections of the Rabbinic literature.

is taught clearly in a scriptural verse--'who coverest thyself with light as with a garment?' (*Psalms*, civ. 2). Just as I have myself had it whispered unto me, replied he, even so have I whispered it unto thee."

Another instance of what looks like a sect of esoteric teachers among the Jews of the first centuries is the *Vatikin*, i.e. 'men of firm principles.' Their mysticism seems to have clustered mostly round the sentiments and outward conduct governing prayer. Indeed, throughout Rabbinical literature the true suppliant before God is in many cases a mystic. Only the mystic mood is the true prayerful mood. There is a discussion in the Mishna of *Berachoth*, i. 2, as to what is the earliest moment in the dawn at which the Shema' (the technical name for *Deuteronomy*, vi. 4-9) may be read. Upon this the comment is made, in *T.B. Berachoth*, 9b, that "the *Vatikin* arranged the time for prayer in such a way as to enable them to finish the reading of the Shema' at the exact moment of sunrise." According to the great Rabbinic commentator R. Solomon b. Isaac (11th century), the *Vatikin* were "men who were meek and carried out the commandment from pure love." It must be borne in mind that throughout Jewish theology, 'meekness' (*anavah*) stands for something immensely higher than the moral connotation which we customarily attribute to the virtue. It signifies a level of religious devoutness which it is not given to every one to reach. To carry out a commandment from pure love, means, in Jewish theology of all ages, to attain a high stage of mystic elation which can only be arrived at as the result of a long preliminary series of arduous efforts in the upward path. To recite the Shema' is, as the Rabbis frequently say, "to take upon one's self

the yoke of the Kingdom of Heaven,” and the phrase ‘Kingdom of Heaven’ has decidedly mystical associations, as we shall see later. Hence one may plausibly conclude that the *Vatikan* were a brotherhood whose dominant feature was a simplicity of living combined with a degree of earnest scrupulousness in prayer amounting to an adoration, a love, of the Divine such as is experienced by the mystics of all nations and all times.