

Dr. Salmond's 'Christian Doctrine of Immortality.'

BY THE REV. J. ROBINSON GREGORY.

THE publication of this series of Cunningham Lectures has been expected long, but the volume was well worth waiting for. It is not too much to say that it is the only work in the English language that covers the whole ground in anything like a satisfactory manner. One is impressed by its thoroughness and its vigorous self-restraint. It omits nothing that properly belongs to its subject; it cannot be tempted into the diffusive and digressive. Another feature is its conspicuous candour. Dr. Salmond has no theory to defend. He investigates and expounds, and reaches his conclusions with severe impartiality. His known views on questions of 'the Higher Criticism' appear again and again. They are those generally associated with elastic notions of inspiration and with the rejection of the verbal authority of the Bible. It is true that these matters usually are referred to only to be dismissed as having little bearing upon the topic then in hand. But the fact that they are mentioned is sufficiently suggestive of a 'stream of tendency.' From this standpoint the conclusions reached are somewhat startling. On every conceivable question of principle the old 'orthodox' doctrine is found to be that of the Scriptures. It is not merely that Dr. Salmond sets himself to examine the teaching of the Bible as he might the opinions of uninspired writers; plainly he accepts that teaching as absolutely decisive. No hypothesis of accommodation, of development, of allegory, of esoteric revelation finds the least favour. Equally inadmissible, according to these Lectures, are considerations drawn from the emotions, from philosophical speculation, or from human ideas of that which begets divine benevolence and love. To throw oneself against the *zeit-geist* requires some courage and assured conviction; and in those days of loose thought, the resolute rejection of the irrelevant is at least refreshing. The volume, however, gives us more than an honest and judicial effort to arrive at truth, logical argument, and clear thought; behind all this lies wide knowledge, sound and minute scholarship, and a competent faculty of careful exposition—the ability to see and show a text in the light of its context.

In a certain sense the Lectures cover the whole ground of biblical eschatology. There is, perhaps, no part of it that they do not touch upon; though here and there, when the subject has less direct relation to the doctrine of Immortality, the treatment is rather meagre, as, for instance, that awarded to the Second Advent. But this seems necessitated by the very excellence of the method. In the end, of course, the doctrine of Immortality concerns itself mainly with future retribution and the destiny of the lost. And this is the inquiry of all others that needs to be settled, the one matter on which the Christian may entertain reasonable doubt. Obviously, from the very first this has loomed large in Dr. Salmond's mind, but it has exercised no undue influence.

The Christian doctrine of Immortality must be sought for mainly in the New Testament. But not only is the New Testament connected organically with the Old, it was also the most important factor in the religious thought of the Jews in the days of our Lord and His apostles. Between the last of the canonical prophets and those days an extra-canonical literature had sprung up. This must be examined in order to estimate its influence upon these current opinions. This literature, and indeed the Old Testament itself, carries traces of ideas and expressions springing from Gentile sources. Greek (and Latin) notions affected those to whom the apostles, especially St. Paul, spoke and wrote, and also their own modes of thought and expression. A survey of Gentile beliefs as to immortality and future retribution therefore becomes essential. For Dr. Salmond is certainly correct in the contention which he proves resistlessly and relentlessly, that the key to the significance of the terms used by our Lord and His apostles must be that which they bore in the minds of those who heard and read them. It is surprising how the mists disperse before this strong light, how much special pleading fails when tested by this principle. In itself it is not new, but it is applied with unusual acumen, and is strengthened by a well-nigh exhaustive research.

The survey is not limited to the aforesaid purpose. The title of Book First, *The Ethnic Pre-*

paration, indicates a much more comprehensive object. Here, again, the method justifies itself. The Christian doctrine could not adequately be displayed without some such demonstration of the universal demand for it, and of its superiority to all that went before it. Possibly the space and effort devoted to it may be deemed disproportionate, but the student of eschatology has desiderated long a concise, trustworthy, and sufficient exposition of the theories as to immortality held by non-Jewish and non-Christian religions. There is room for difference of judgment as to some of Dr. Salmond's findings, but he has studied, reproduced, and arranged all accessible information up to the latest date.

Five chapters deal with *The Old Testament Preparation*. Once more must be emphasised the candid and courageous thoroughness of the discussion. All the determinations are supported by forcible reasons, and maybe the concluding summary does not fall very far short of the highest point to which we fairly can carry the Old Testament faith in a future life. Still, I venture to suggest that less justice is done to the positive than to the negative aspect of the preparation. Whatever difficulty there is in correlating the faith and the despair, the shadowy conceptions and the definite trust, as much weight should be allowed to the one as to the other. The first should not be allowed to darken the second unless the second, in their turn, brighten the first. It is better, however, that each stands on its own merits. 'Thou shalt guide me by Thy counsel, and afterwards receive me to glory;' 'I shall be satisfied, when I awake, with Thy likeness'—surely rise almost to the Christian height of confidence in a future in the presence of God. A partial answer is that generations of Christian usage have read into the Psalms a meaning that they did not bear originally. I cannot now dispute this *seriatim*—indeed, it is, in a one-sided sense, partially true. But to me, at anyrate, it is an utter incredibility that the words which for unbroken centuries have voiced the sublimest hopes, the most glorious and assured aspirations of the Christian Church, can be deprived of all true reference to the things of God, concerning which they have spoken so continuously, so protractedly, so grandly. This may not be a scientific view of the case, though it has its value even from the standpoint of strict science. Nevertheless, as I think, it is the finding of the

religious instinct—nay, of Christian common sense. Moreover, Dr. Salmond himself argues that the Hebrew hope of immortality rested upon faith,—'the substance of things hoped for, and the evidence of things not seen,'¹—in the living and eternal God. *This* faith alone suffices to justify the more spiritual interpretations of the outbursts of hope and trust. Dr. Salmond speaks of *this* faith as 'cleaving to God, and to the certainty of His fellowship in the heavy present and in the dark Beyond, snatching glimpses of a gracious future, negating death, and forecasting life by assuring itself of the communion of the Eternal. Do these phrases quite hang together? the *dark* Beyond; snatching glimpses; certainty of His fellowship; assurance of the communion of the Eternal! One cannot but wish that the lecturer had permitted the truths formulated in the latter phrases to have exercised a stronger influence over some of his expositions—scholarly and scientific though they be. The sections terminate with two highly suggestive and instructive paragraphs as to the comparative advantages and disadvantages of Judaism and Christianity in their relation to the future life.

The first step in the examination of the New Testament doctrine is to ascertain as precisely as possible the teaching of Christ Himself. With his accustomed strength and skill Dr. Salmond sets this forth lucidly, and decides its meaning according to the canon already noticed. For the righteous, a blissful immortality; for the wicked, eternal punishment,—these are the ultimate results. The sentence is pronounced by the Judge at the Great Assize, Jesus Christ, who shall return in person for that express purpose; but the issues of this present life are final; no hope of alteration is held out between death and judgment. And these are the only conclusions that can be come to by a fair and straightforward interpretation of our Lord's own words. How the calm force with which this is shown can be evaded or resisted can hardly be imagined.

The general apostolic doctrine, *i.e.* the doctrine other than Pauline, harmonises with that of the Gospels, as a broad but adequate study evinces. Even the Apocalypse, with a possible exception to be noted later on, takes up the same position. Then it is proved 'that in Paul's doctrine of the Future there is nothing that may not be connected

¹ Dr. Salmond quotes this definition in this connexion.

in principle with Christ's teaching, nothing in its most reasoned statements which may not be read as an exposition of some text furnished by those words of Paul's Master which are reported in the Gospels. This is the case even with the more occasional and peculiar points of his doctrine; for example, his utterances respecting the resurrection-body and the transformation of 'us' that are alive and remain at Christ's coming. For space's sake, I must pass in silence the admirable treatment of Paul's doctrine of the Resurrection.

To the doctrines of the finality of the moral decisions of the present life, and of everlasting, are opposed those of Evangelisation in Hades, Conditional Immortality, and Universal Restoration. The first of these Dr. Salmond discourses in the section on *The General Apostolic Doctrine*; the second and third under the head of *Conclusions*. On both exegetical and grammatical grounds Dr. Salmond holds that the preaching to the spirits in prison was performed by the Holy Spirit whilst the ark was actually a-building. For a similar reason he thinks that the preaching to the dead occurred whilst they were living. But he is unable, in either case, to say more than that the balance of probabilities inclines in favour of the interpretation chosen. 'The conclusion to which we are led by a careful consideration of the terms of these two paragraphs, the connexions in which they stand, and the purposes for which they are introduced in this plain and practical epistle, is that they give no sufficient ground for ascribing to Peter the doctrine of an extension of opportunity into the other world.' Reluctantly, though not on absolutely the same grounds, I am compelled to assent to this. Still these texts do suggest a faint possibility which may bring immense relief to both intellect and heart.

The treatment of Annihilationism leaves little to be desired. The space occupied is small, but the result is decisive. Rather curiously, an admission previously made is overlooked. Commenting on the Apocalypse, Dr. Salmond states as tenable the notion that one part of it teaches the absolute annihilation of the finally impenitent. As this is one of the strongest points in favour of the hypothesis combated, the omission is regrettable. Restorationism is opposed alike to the Scriptures, correct views of human nature, and to the very philosophy on which it chiefly, though not

nominally, relies. The manner in which the most trusted texts of Universalism are manifested to be explained and limited by their context is masterly, though one would fain hope that the limitation is applied somewhat too vigorously. Yet it would not be easy to defend the expansion in terms of strict exegesis or logic. The replies to the *à priori* arguments are keen and forceful, particularly the reference to 'the majesty of Love,' and, if they are not quite convincing, it is because, where the emotions are concerned, an appeal cannot but be made from cold reason to a tribunal of very indefinite authority. But there is that in the arguments advanced that may well 'set' the most assured Universalist 'in a muse.' Apart from Revelation, the most powerful objection to Universalism is that it does violence to the human will, and thereby defeats its own end. Its aim could be accomplished only at the price of the destruction of the most essential of human faculties. The most tempting method of avoiding the moral and intellectual difficulties is by means of the ingenious hypothesis of insoluble antinomies. Rather more might be said for it than the lecturer allows, but he is clearly right in demanding that Restorationism should be proved to possess a biblical basis before the hypothesis should be entertained, save as a mere speculation.

The case of the heathen and of those to whom this life may not have afforded an adequate probation is discussed in connexion with Universalism, and not, as one would have expected, with Evangelisation in Hades. Dr. Salmond simply indicates the lines whereon he would solve the problem—judgment according to what a man hath, and not according to what he hath not; degrees of reward and of punishment; progress according to character beyond the grave. 'The decisive matter is the trend of life unto which we enter that future. The mercy of God extends to the last hour of life. The grace of God may be efficacious with many as it was with the robber on the cross. Death itself may be their purgatory.' All this is true, important, weighty. It is much more satisfactory with regard to those who have heard the gospel than with regard to those who have not. But whether we can forecast His ways or not, the Judge of all the earth will do right. As Dr. Salmond reminds us in the noble paragraph with which this volume concludes, the Christian Revelation is not given 'to utter all the secrets of another world.'

It will be many a long day before this series of Cunningham Lectures ceases to hold a foremost place in eschatology. At present it is *the* book for the professional student. It is a treatise on scientific theology, not a collection of sermons.

Hence there is little room for glow or for the display of feeling. At times the stern logic approaches the appalling. Yet once and again there are sentences and undertones that tell of that which lies too deep for words.

Sermonettes on the Golden Texts.

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The Final Authority.

'This is My beloved Son: hear Him.'—LUKE ix. 35.

WHEN the disciples awakened from their drowsiness, they beheld Moses and Elijah talking with the Saviour. Then suddenly a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice proclaimed, 'This is My beloved Son: hear Him.' And the cloud disappeared, leaving visible 'Jesus only.' Such a voice was heard by Jesus after each step taken in His voluntary humiliation: at His baptism, when He dedicated Himself to a life of sacrifice; here at His transfiguration, following the announcement of His approaching passion; and again when He renewed His vow of self-dedication, as recorded in John xii. Thus each step in His humiliation is also a step in His exaltation. The utterance in our text indicates the high-water mark of exaltation. The absolute supremacy of the Man of Nazareth is here proclaimed.

I. CHRIST THE CULMINATION OF PROPHECY.—There appears to be a reference here to the words of Deut. xviii.: 'The Lord thy God will raise up unto thee a Prophet from the midst of thee; unto Him shall ye hearken.' Criticism will at least allow that this passage 'includes a reference to the ideal prophet, in Whom the line of individual prophets should culminate, and Who should exhibit the characteristics of the prophet in their fullest perfection.' So the representatives of law and prophecy pass away, and Jesus alone remains as the last and highest of the order. The attention which has hitherto been paid to them is henceforth to be transferred to Him. That this is the interpretation which the disciples put upon the incident seems clear from the words of Peter's second epistle. His use of the words 'tabernacle' and 'decease' shows that the memories of the Transfiguration are influencing his thoughts, as also

his reference to the light shining in a dark place. For him the Transfiguration made the word of prophecy more sure. In pointing to Christ it at once fulfilled its mission, exhausted its significance, and confirmed its message.

II. CHRIST THE POSSESSOR OF DIVINE TRUTH.—The prophets always spoke of themselves as being 'servants of God.' They delivered only such messages as they were commissioned to bear. They but dimly comprehend their Lord's will. Christ's relationship to God is that of a much-loved Son. To a servant, however much trusted, some reserve is inevitable, but between Father and beloved Son no secrets exist. Perfect knowledge can only be where there is fulness of love, and that is only found between the Father and the Eternal Son. When the disciples desired to know who should betray Christ, their spokesman, Peter, beckoned to the disciple whom Jesus loved, who leaned upon His bosom, and to whom Christ made it known. But Christ dwells perpetually in the bosom of the Father, and all truth is made known unto Him.

III. CHRIST THE HEIR TO GOD'S LORDSHIP.—Christ is 'God's Son whom He hath appointed heir of all things.' As a Son He has the authority which belongs to sonship. The knowledge which is revealed to Him is for the purpose of enabling Him better to accomplish God's plans. The highest duty, therefore, which men can perform is to believe on God's well-beloved Son, and acknowledge His authority.

IV. THE CONSEQUENT ATTITUDE WHICH BECOMES DISCIPLES.—When Christ speaks, through Him God makes known the Truth, His Will. To hear is not merely to listen, but to receive with obedience. It is to accept the word of Christ as the final authority on all disputed questions, either of belief or conduct. Some things He says