

THE NEW TESTAMENT VIEW OF LIFE.

ST. JOHN i. 4.

IN the spiritual world there are two great conflicting powers—life and death. The victory of the one necessarily means the destruction of the other. But it would be a most serious error to suppose that the one force has the same reality as the other. They are indeed opposed, not simply through the manifest antagonism of the several kingdoms which they set up, but also in this respect, that the one is a personal power, whereas the other continues in itself impersonal, and only attains the possibility of action by establishing itself as a principle more or less completely in some personal being. Christ has the power of life, Satan has the power of death. It is, however, further said of Christ that He is life (St. John xiv. 6, &c.); it is never said of Satan that he is death.

St. John has been often styled the Gnostic of the New Testament. In contrasting, then, the true Gnosis, as it appears in St. John, with the false Gnosis as it appears in the heresies of the early Church, it would be well always to start with the assertion of this distinction. According to the doctrine of the heretical Gnostics there was an essential antagonism of spiritual forces, through which, in some way or other, the entire universe has been evolved. Life and Death are recognized as powers which may contend on something like equal terms,—equal not only in duration, but also in existence. This was inevitably the ultimate determination of Oriental dualism, often plainly avowed,

always at least necessarily involved. According to the doctrine of the New Testament Gnostic, however, the antagonism of spiritual forces, which we behold in daily life, and to some extent experience, is not an essential antagonism: the being of the universe depends upon one power, and not upon the collision of two. Life alone is a real force, and Death can engage in the contest only as long as it simulates the form of Life. In the beginning with God is life, but not death. Hence we find that St. John, who looks with keen insight into the verities of eternity, has much to say of life, but of death little, and that only in strictest subordination to the power of life. In a truly religious doctrine of God, St. John develops fully the idea of Life; in a truly religious doctrine of man, Paul fully develops the idea of Death. If further we inquire for the *locus classicus* of the New Testament doctrine of Life, we shall find it in the passage referred to above (St. John i. 4), where life is at once described according to its origin and according to its issues—"In him was life, and the life was the light of men."

It is absolutely necessary, before proceeding further, that we carefully inquire as to the meaning of the term ζωή (life) in this passage and throughout the New Testament. If we consider the connection in which it is first introduced by St. John, we shall see that it is immediately related to creative power. All things were made by Him; in Him was life. Luther, indeed, has called attention to the fact that there is here rather a reference to the activity of Divine Providence as a sustaining power; but from the nature of the context we must understand that the

principal idea is that of creative life, carrying with it, however, the further truth that this life continues in Him who has made all things, and is not by any means exhausted in the creation work. The "all things" made by Him, not only at first received their existence, but even now in Him they live, and move, and have their being. We may further gain a valuable hint as to the nature and extent of this life, if we remember that the term "all things" is generic as well as numerical. All *kinds* of things owe their life to Him. He is, therefore, the source of all kinds of life—psychical and spiritual. He is Himself the very principle of life in all its forms. Many commentators have uselessly argued as to whether this ζωή is to be regarded as properly the principle of psychical or of spiritual life. Lange, in opposition to others who find in ζωή a reference only to the lower psychical life, would refer it purely to the higher and spiritual. The consequence of this one-sidedness is that throughout his commentary there runs a current of false spiritualism, the natural being everywhere spiritualized, rather than co-ordinated with the spiritual. According to our passage, when considered in relation to its context, the term ζωή is properly applied to both the psychical and the spiritual. Hence it depends upon the particular context and the general drift of the argument, and not upon the mere word itself, whether it is to be applied simply to psychical life, or simply to pneumatical life, or to the comprehensive combination of the two. Considerable confusion, too, has resulted from the attempt of commentators to appropriate ζωή and βίος as applicable to different kinds of life. A fair

consideration, however, of New Testament passages, as well as classical usage, will shew that, while *ζωή* is rightly applied to all kinds of life, *βίος* does not signify the power of life, nor any special kind of life, but simply a particular state or condition of life. Interpreters of Scripture have also very frequently committed another error in their attempts to define this term. Among the exegetes of the earlier part of the present century it was almost universal to render *ζωή*, whenever absolutely applied, by *εὐδαιμόνια*, or *felicitas*, whereas it is clearly to be regarded rather as the condition and ground of all blessedness. This interpretation was given to the Old Testament term *חַיִּים* by Gesenius and other scholars; and in the New Testament exegesis the same style of rendering was adopted by the lexicographers and by Lücke in his commentary on St. John. It has been ably controverted by Olshausen in his Latin treatise on the notion of *ζωή* in the New Testament. In a valuable note appended to another dissertation by Olshausen, on the Logos, bound up in his *Opuscula*, we have an ingenious attempt to connect etymologically the terms *ζωή* (life) and *πνεῦμα* (spirit). After having explained the relation between *πνεῦμα* and *ἀνεμος* (Latin, *anima*), he proceeds to compare their roots. "Accedit, quod prætereundum non est, idem esse, quod etymologia docet, *πνεῦμα* et *ζωή*. Est enim *ζωή* ex græci sermonis indole, aura vitalis, *πνεῦμα*, quæ corpori vitam inspirat; deinde vita in universum. Derivatur autem *ζωή*, a *ζάω*, *ζαέω*, *ζαήμι* = *ἄω*, *ἄέω* *ἀήμι* (quod idem esse ac *πνέω* supra jam demonstravimus,) cum particula inseparabili *ζα*, quæ notionem verborum, quibus præfigitur, et acuit et

auget." ¹ This etymological argument then may be regarded as satisfactorily proving that the idea of blessedness, though its attainment is possible only on condition of continued life, is yet not essentially found in the term ζωή itself, which, according to the analogy of other terms derived from the same root, indicates simply the essential energy of being.

So far, then, we have spoken of the absolute meaning of the term ζωή. The passage, however, which we are specially considering introduces the idea of life in immediate connection with the personality of the Logos in whom it is found: in Him was life. This union of life with the Word was also fully recognized in the religious system of the ancient Persians. In the Zend-Avesta we find Ormuzd explaining to Zoroaster the doctrine of the Divine Word. He defines the Word as the ground and source of all being; and when asked by Zoroaster what this Word is, he declares that it is himself who is the Word. Ormuzd as the Divine Word, then, is the principle of life. In one important respect, however, the purity of Scripture doctrine appears in striking contrast to all forms of Oriental Gnosticism. The active and immediate dispensation of life, according to the cosmogonic theories of these enthusiastic specu-

¹ And further, what is not to be overlooked, etymology teaches that πνεῦμα (spirit) and ζωή (life) are the same. For, according to the usage of the Greek language, ζωή is the vital air, the breath of man's life—πνεῦμα that which breathes life into the body, then also life generally. And ζωή is derived from ζάω, ζάεω, ζάημι, which are respectively equivalent to the forms ἄω, ἀέω, ἀήμι (which we have before shewn to be the same as πνέω), together with the inseparable particle ζα, which increases and intensifies the meaning of the words to which it is prefixed.

lators, was not the great primitive and independent source of life. According to the Scripture doctrine, however, the Logos being absolutely one with God—who “was God”—alone has life in Himself, and so alone can originate it in others. Because the one Divine Word is life, therefore He has life and He can give life. Hence it is well worthy of notice that in the New Testament every function in any way connected with the originating or sustaining of life is immediately associated with Christ. Not only is He called the Life, but He is also called Bread, which is the staff of life, and Water, which is the indispensable presupposition of all manner of life in this world. Even when the designation, the Light, is given him, which might seem co-ordinate with that of the Life, this nevertheless is found on closer examination to be quite a subordinate conception. Light is viewed as one of the necessary elementary conditions of life. He is the Light of life, just as He is the Bread and the Water of life.

Now, as we have seen, this personal property of the Word is manifestly a Divine attribute. It may be interesting, however, to consider that even when taken absolutely this term ζωή is found to apply directly to the Absolute God. In the Old Testament Scriptures the peculiar name of God associated Him immediately with being the “I am,” Jehovah. So in the ancient philosophy of Greece, which was mainly occupied with the inquiry into the ultimate source and ground of being, the *ὁ ὄν* (the Existent) was employed in designating the absolute Deity in so far as a living and personal God was realized, and τὸ εἶναι (existence) was found to represent the

very essence of his divinity. Now, it is very clear that we have here in the $\acute{\omicron} \acute{\omega}\nu$ (He who has being) the $\acute{\omicron} \acute{\zeta}\acute{\omega}\nu$ (He who has life). If we desire a direct Scripture authority for assimilating or rather identifying these two ideas, we have it in Revelation iv. 8, 9, where God is first described as He who was, and is ($\acute{\omicron} \acute{\omega}\nu$), and is to come, and afterwards as He who liveth ($\acute{\omicron} \acute{\zeta}\acute{\omega}\nu$) for ever and ever. He who *is* alone is He who *lives*. Here then we have the affirmation of our Lord's divinity. He who lives, He who is the Life, must be the self-existent, whose being is necessary and eternal.

According to the doctrine of St. John and of the New Testament writers generally, not only has Christ this life in Himself, but He alone has it. Life is indeed the distinctive attribute of God; but in reference to this world there is no life except that which is in Christ. In his "Christian Dogmatics," Martensen has given beautiful expression to this truth regarding the Logos. "As the heart of God the Father, He is at the same time the eternal heart of the world, through which the Divine life streams into creation. As the Logos of the Father, He is at the same time the eternal Logos of the world, through whom the Divine light shines into creation."¹ The Logos is not only the life-possessor, but He is also the life-dispenser. Where life exists in this world it must be derived from Him, and whatever in the world is not derived from Him, though it may have the appearance of life, yet in reality has no life in it. This seems to be the idea of St. John in the final clause of the passage now before us, which is so immediately

¹ Martensen, "Christian Dogmatics." Edinburgh, 1866, p. 237.

connected with that other which we have just been considering. "In him was life, and the life was the light of men." As we have said before, the idea of light is not to be co-ordinated with that of life, but is rather to be regarded as a subordinate property. To illustrate what we mean, we may by a slight alteration of the arrangement render the doctrinal statement of our text in a more compact form. "The life which was in Him was the light of life to men." We may now see plainly how the statement "in him was life" is the real middle point—the centre of energy and significance in the Christian doctrine of creation. From the previous verse it appears that by the Word all things were made, but from this statement we learn that these things owe their life, not only to Him, but to his life. This utterance, however, has also a special reference to the higher points in creation. And so it is said He is not only the original fount of that life which is in men, but He is actually that vital element in which men live; and just as in the light alone can the functions of natural life be exercised, so also only in the light of the Word, who is life, can man live. Have we not here, in the declaration that man's true life is only found in the Word of God, a beautiful parallel to the memorable saying of our Lord, "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God"?

There is thus much practical result attainable by our firmly maintaining the Scripture doctrine that in this world there is but one source and spring of life. Only union with Him who is the life can secure life to us. The absolutely Divine life

Christ could have and maintain apart from the world. The world, however, would then have had no being, and his life, from the absence of all surrounding relativity, would have wanted the richness and fulness of freedom. That "in him was life," therefore, is not of any significance to the world, is not of perfect significance even to Himself, until we have added this further declaration, "and the life was the light of men." That the Divine Word lives is not enough, but men must live in Him. "This is the record, that God hath given to us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. He that hath the Son hath life; and he that hath not the Son of God hath not life" (1 John v. 11, 12). "When Christ who is our life shall appear, then shall we also appear with him in glory" (Col. iii. 4).

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