



LV. On the Cosmogony of Moses

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LV. *On the Cosmogony of Moses.* By Dr. PRICHARD; in
Reply to F. E——s.

To Mr. Tilloch.

SIR, — IN the last number of the Philosophical Magazine I observe a second attack upon my paper on the Mosaic Cosmogony. I had declined entering into any further controversy on this subject; but on mature consideration it appears to me a matter of so much importance to prove that the exordium of the Hebrew Scriptures is capable of a rational and philosophical interpretation, instead of one which gives it very much the air of a piece of mythology, that I have resolved to reply to the strictures of your correspondent.

He has detected me in one error, to which I must certainly plead guilty; viz. that of citing Laplace's *Système du Monde* by a designation not quite accurate. I wrote in great haste, and had not leisure for correcting my composition; and I could even point out to my keen-sighted adversary some other verbal inaccuracies equally important, which I discovered in looking over my paper since I received the number of the Philosophical Magazine which contains it; but as these matters have little relation to the argument before us, I shall proceed to consider on what grounds I am accused by Mr. F. E——s of contradicting my own statements.

I observed in my first paper, that the speculations of heathen philosophers on the Cosmogony were founded on some fanciful analogy with natural processes that are daily observed; and in my last communication I have said that the historical documents contained in the early part of Genesis may be traced among many remote nations; and that not only the Asiatics but the Scandinavians and Mexicans "were equally in possession of the primitive traditions." But I beg to have it observed, that in this latter instance I made no allusion to the Cosmogony. Neither the Scandinavians nor the Mexicans had, as far as I remember, any notions on this subject which bore the slightest analogy to the account which we have in the Pentateuch. The former on the contrary held that the earth was in the beginning the dead body of a huge giant, while the latter imputed the origin of the human species to the fall of an aërolite. Yet in the mythological fables of both these nations there are many circumstances referring to the history of mankind, which were evidently derived from the same source with some relations contained in the early Scriptures of the Hebrews; and it was only for the sake of proving this connexion, and the consequence which I deduced from it, that they were alluded to. I may add
that

that those nations who preserved the tradition of the Cosmogony, the Hindoos for example, added so many fictitious circumstances to it, that in the character which it assumes in their hands it may well be contrasted with that simple narrative of events which we find in the beginning of Genesis.

Neither is the hypothesis, that the early parts of this book are a compilation—incompatible with the opinion that Moses was an inspired writer ; unless it be proved that all inspired persons have possessed the attribute of omniscience, which I am not disposed to concede as a self-evident truth. If, as Mr. F. E——s maintains, the supposition that Moses had recourse to previously existing documents implies the want of inspiration, I would beg to ask whether St. Matthew and St. Luke were in want of inspiration when they had recourse to previously existing documents in compiling their genealogies ? Or, if they wrote from immediate revelation, how happened it that one of them followed the Hebrew text, and the other the Septuagint translation ? It is absurd to hold any argument on the extent of endowments concerning the nature and limitations of which we are wholly ignorant ; but the example above cited is sufficient to prove that it is not beneath the dignity of an inspired writer to avail himself of historical documents where any such exist. Michaelis has fully proved that Moses framed his code of laws by combining the ancient usages of the nomadic Hebrews with the institutions of the agricultural Egyptians. Surely then we may venture to conjecture that he adopted into his annals the most authentic documents that existed concerning the history of the world. But the account of the Cosmogony must have been at first derived from a particular revelation, and therefore it is just as easy to suppose that it was revealed to Moses as to Enoch or Noah. I allow the force of this argument, and should acquiesce in the conclusion drawn from it, if there were not facts which appear to prove that the document in question is really more ancient than the age of Moses.

Notwithstanding Mr. F. E——s's objections, it is still manifest that the Cosmogony of Menu bears a remarkable analogy to that of Moses. In the former it is said that at the close or termination of each night a reiterated act of creation took place. How does this differ essentially from the force of the phrases "The evening had come and the morning had come—one day—when God said, Let there be a firmament," &c. ? This is not a day included by its natural limits, otherwise it would have been said *the morning and evening*. The expressions are equivalent to these: After the *close* of one day, and when the *dawning* of another had appeared, the act of creation was renewed. *Twilight* is the word that occurs in the translation of Menu. We

are presently told by Menu that each day comprehended a long succession of ages. In the Etruscan Cosmogony, which bears a still more striking analogy to the Hebrew, and on which your correspondent has forgotten to make any remark, the duration of each period is expressly mentioned to have been a chiliad, or a thousand years. If the Hindoos and Etruscans derived these records from the same source whence Moses obtained his account, which I think almost certain, the conclusion I have drawn seems to be scarcely avoidable.

I now proceed to "*the other and more weighty objection—that it does not appear that the Hebrew people ever understood the six days of the creation*" in any other sense than the literal one. And here I would beg leave to ask Mr. F. E——s how we are to interpret the passage in which it is said that God created man after his own image. Are we to understand by a metaphor, that man was created an intellectual and moral being; or must we receive the expressions literally, as we have reason to believe the Hebrew people did, who are supposed on good grounds to have been anthropomorphites? If so, I presume we must also give a literal interpretation to such phrases as "*It repented God,*" "*God rested on the seventh day,*" &c. &c. And if we succeed in establishing all these points, we shall at length bring the theology of Moses much more nearly on a level with that of Hesiod than it has been supposed to be. If, however, as I suppose it will be conceded, these expressions demand a figurative explanation, though the Hebrew people, at least the vulgar, understood them literally; I am at liberty to assume the same latitude with respect to the *days* of the creation. While adverting to the prevalent notions of the Hebrews on this subject, it is somewhat surprising that Mr. F. E——s did not think it worth while to take notice of the opinions of the two most learned antiquaries of that nation, viz. Josephus and Philo, whom I cited in my last paper, and who expressly affirm that the account of the six days' work is metaphorical. Philo particularly says, "*It is a piece of rustic simplicity to understand it literally.*"

Lastly; Mr. F. E——s says that I have effected the coincidences which I call upon him to admire between the Cosmogony and the Epochs of Nature, by transferring the creation of zoöphytes and testacea from the fifth day to the third; whereas, according to the sense in which the twentieth and two following verses in the first chapter of Genesis "*have hitherto been generally understood, all the inhabitants of the waters were called into existence on the fifth day.*" It is of little importance in what sense these passages have been generally understood by careless readers, if the expressions they contain will not bear the construction

struction imputed to them. The LXX certainly did not understand the words which describe the fifth day's creation as including corals and bivalves, otherwise they surely would not have rendered them τὰ κήτη τὰ μέγιστα, καὶ πᾶσαν ψυχὴν ζώων ἐρπετῶν. The Hebrew word which the LXX have rendered ἐρπετῶν gives the idea of progressive motion; and it occurs in a similar sense in many other places, but particularly in Psalm civ. 20, where it is applied to the roving of wild beasts in the night. It is therefore very certain, as your correspondent has hinted, that Moses has assigned no place for zoöphytes and testacea; neither has he mentioned forest-trees, or shrubs, or lichens, for he did not write the Cosmogony with the *Systema Naturæ* before him. The Hebrew language being very poor in terms of classification, a few leading objects in each class are mentioned; and we are left to understand that the analogous kinds were conjoined with those which are named. Thus in the third day's creation we are told that "*grass and seed-bearing herbs and fruit-bearing trees*" began to exist; and we are left to supply all the remainder of the vegetable world, including marine plants to which no allusion is made. It is not going much further out of the way to add corals and madrepores, and even testacea, considering that no other place is allotted to them, and that on the next day whales and progressive aquatic animals only are mentioned. At any rate, it is evident that Moses had it not in contemplation to make a complete census of the whole number of created beings: and when we find zoöphytes and testacea associated in the earth with the earliest remains of vegetable productions, and evidently belonging to the same epoch in the creation, the presence of the former constitutes no exception to the coincidence which would otherwise be complete.

Mr. F. E——s seems to have given up his hypothesis for explaining the revolution of night and day before the creation of the sun, and even avows that he was aware of the physical circumstances which render it untenable, before he advanced it. There is one interpretation, however, of the fourteenth and following verses which will assist him out of this difficulty, and will even remove one great objection to the sense he attaches to the six days. The explanation I allude to, is that which was proposed by Dr. Geddes, a learned but bold commentator, whose method of criticism merits in many instances the severest reprehension. In this particular passage I believe he has discovered the true sense; and I shall therefore cite his translation of it, though it deprives me of one argument in favour of my own hypothesis which has not been answered. Dr. G. considers the words "*Let there be lights in the firmament of heaven to illuminate the earth,*" as equivalent to "*Let lights appear,*" &c.

and he proves that the words here used do not necessarily imply a new creation of the sun, and cites the authority of Origen who was of the same opinion. Accordingly the sun may have existed before this period, though it only now became visible on the earth in consequence of the changes which had taken place in the terrestrial atmosphere. On this hypothesis all the motions of the solar system may be supposed to have subsisted for ages before the epoch to which the Mosaic Cosmogony (except perhaps the first verse of it) refers.

If this interpretation be allowed, the whole Cosmogony will present a scheme perfectly rational and consistent with itself, as well as coinciding admirably with the information which natural philosophers have gained concerning the system of the world. It is well known that certain stars have at various times disappeared from the heavens or have ceased to be luminous, while others have been observed which were not before visible; as the star observed by Hipparchus, which induced that celebrated astronomer to make a catalogue of the heavenly bodies, and that which shone for a time with so much splendor in Cassiopœia. Others have been for a time either partially or wholly obscured, and have again become luminous. Hence it is probable that those which have been observed for the first time, really existed in the heavens before they were seen, and remained for many ages in a dark unilluminated state. Such may have been the condition of our sun and solar system before the period when light is said by Moses to have appeared in the world; and during the preceding ages the state of the earth revolving round a dark sun is well described by the expressions "*The earth was desolate and void, and darkness upon the face of the deep.*" If these speculations are allowed, in which no cause is assumed that is not known really to exist, I would venture to propose the following paraphrase of the Cosmogony:

Ver. 1. At some very remote epoch God created the material universe.

[Through the remainder of the chapter Moses confines his attention to the changes that were effected in this terraqueous globe, and only "mentions such other parts of the universe as became eventually correlative to it."]

Ver. 2. The world remained long desolate and void, and a dark mist* environed the surface of our globe.

At length the Divine Energy (the Spirit of God) began to exert itself, and to set in action that train of physical changes which was destined to develop the organized creation.

* This is the sense of the Hebrew word *שָׁמַיִם*.—See Parkhurst's and Buxtorf's Lexicons.

Ver. 3—4. The solar system became illuminated by the sun, which had hitherto been a dark body. “The light here mentioned,” says Dr. Geddes, “may even from the context itself be readily supposed to be but an imperfect and partial light, such as we often see in a foggy day; which light would gradually increase in proportion as the air was expanded and rarefied, until on the fourth day it received the utmost degree of brightness from the unclouded appearance of the sun.” This indeed seems to be the only sense in which it is possible to understand the existence of light before the appearance of the sun. The common interpretation of the “days” of the creation is thus rendered more tenable than it can otherwise become.

Ver. 5. Termination of the first period.

Ver. 6—7. The atmosphere becoming less dense, is called an *expanse*, in which the aerial waters or clouds now float in separate masses.

Ver. 8. Termination of the second period.

Ver. 9. ‘The higher regions of the earth emerge from the universal ocean, never again to be covered by it until the era of the deluge.

Ver. 11—12. “*Grass and seed-bearing herbs and fruit-bearing trees created.*” Moses only alludes here to the vegetable creation on dry land. He makes no mention of marine plants, corals, madrepores, &c. or testacea.

Ver. 13. Termination of the third period.

Ver. 14, &c. The heavenly bodies now first shine clearly on the surface of the earth.

Ver. 19. Termination of the fourth period.

Ver. 20—21. Whales and fishes produced in the sea, and birds on the land.

Ver. 23. Termination of the fifth period.

Ver. 24, &c. Creation of land quadrupeds.

Ver. 25, &c. Creation of man.

Your correspondent will of course treat this interpretation with contempt, unless he should happen to think it favourable to his own hypothesis: but I have little doubt of its appearing to unprejudiced persons the most probable mode of explaining the cosmogony,

I have the honour to be,

Sir,

Your obedient servant,

Bristol, April 11, 1816.

J. C. PRICHARD.