

The Theological Significance of the Early Chapters of Genesis.

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IN what sense the opening chapters of the Bible, which deal in their naïve way with the Creation of the world and the earliest doings of mankind, may be taken in our age to have been 'written for our learning,' is a question not merely of historical interest but also of living import for religious thought.

The history of the interpretation of these chapters, and of the transition during the past few decades to views which now obtain as to their nature, is largely a history, unfortunately, of warfare between science and common theological opinion; of the vigour of youth in the one coming in conflict with the tradition of antiquity in the other; of false oppositions and false reconciliations. But before this state of things began to come about, it was possible for Christian writers—*e.g.* St. Paul—to assert the world of Nature to be a partial revelation of God. To us Christians, a revelation through the material universe is indeed of but secondary importance. Still, it is one which has become less capable of being ignored as progress has been made in discovering Nature's hidden order, her 'working like a machine while she sleeps like a picture.' God draws men to Himself in many ways; and some enter the temple of His Presence through the Gate Beautiful. The literature of religion testifies not only to the profoundness of the influences wrought on men's minds by the sublime and beautiful, but also to the generality of the belief that Nature is 'the living visible garment of God.'

At the same time, it is true that acquisition of a systematic knowledge of Nature, her processes and her laws, has been looked upon during a long period of the history of the Christian Church with disfavour and alarm by multitudes of her members. If only the scientific spirit of ancient Greece had lived on through the first Christian centuries, instead of languishing from internal and external causes so that observation gave way to fanciful speculation, the bitter controversies of later times might have been spared. For many of the Fathers

who left their mark on the growing system of doctrine held liberal views as to Biblical interpretation and took intelligent interest in the natural knowledge of their day when it was accessible; some indeed possessed a measure of scientific distrust of unverifiable hypotheses. But in want of a foundation in generally known physical facts, they took what they deemed the only source of cosmological knowledge—the first chapter of Genesis—as the basis of their doctrine; and the growing belief in the infallibility of Scripture caused this system, before the Dark Ages closed down upon the Church, to assume the character of a divinely revealed science of Nature, admitting of no advance and calling for no correction.

And so, when modern science was born, it had to fight for its freedom with this prevalent theological opinion. The protests of Bacon and others against reading the Bible as a text-book of science, could not prevail against the deep-rooted conviction that, as one of the great Reformers expressed it, 'if the account of Creation in Genesis were not true, all the life of our religion would be lost.' Each new science that came into being—geography, astronomy, geology, evolutionary biology—had to join battle afresh. The cause of dispute, through two or three centuries of conflict, was always one and the same, though the battleground shifted from science to science. The belief in the inerrancy of Scripture and in its verbal inspiration seemed to most Churchmen to be so essential to the whole Christian position that it was defended by theologians and laymen alike with the tenacity which refuses to recognize defeat. To part with the simple, definite theory of Biblical authority which had been cherished for generations; to lose a Bible equally inspired in all its parts and details, was to our fathers indeed to suffer bereavement. Small wonder that a belief which appealed so strongly to sentiment died hard, or that it resorted to ingenious devices before surrendering.

Those devices, again, belong now to past history, to the period of false reconciliations. The majestic

simplicity of the Creation-poem strikes us as incongruous with the complicated theologizings which well-meaning men have hardly ceased to read into it. Its six natural days, bounded by darkness and dawn, have been imagined to represent ages of time—the periods into which geology divides the history of the earth. The order in which it asserts the different kinds of created things to have appeared on this globe has been tortured into correspondence with the order asserted by evolutionary theory. The science of Darwin and the philosophy of Spencer have been extracted from its hymn-like utterances. But if the losing battle thus stubbornly fought seem to the younger amongst us, on our vantage-ground of superior knowledge, to have its ludicrous aspect, we must not be so lacking in historical sense and human sympathy as to ignore its pathetic and even noble side. There are still many living, perhaps, who look wistfully back to a time when a simpler and more definite theory of Biblical authority than that which is now available sufficed both intellect and conscience, but who nevertheless realize that it is of those things of childhood which riper Christian wisdom requires to be put away. On the other hand, there are those who can only rejoice that the truth brought at last to light through this long struggle has made them free; who are grateful to natural science for playing the thankless rôle of candid friend, and, by its unimpassioned and impersonal devotion to truth, having brought home to Churchmen that they had been piously cherishing a superstition. Indeed, the now discarded view ended in being more than a superstition. As knowledge of the Scriptures was enlarged by the application of more efficient methods of study than had before been conceivable, it was becoming a moral burden, a provocation to obscurantism.

But the mind of man cannot be permanently enlightened merely by teaching him to cast away a superstition. A house emptied, swept, and garnished is yet liable to occupation by spirits akin to those which have been expelled. And of new superstitions there is always a supply at hand. When the literal interpretations of the early chapters of Genesis had become generally abandoned, there accordingly arose a tendency to regard them as allegories or 'revelation-myths,' and so to vindicate them afresh as repositories of divinely revealed truth of fact. The attempt failed to commend itself. It was not in *this* sense, yet again, that the

Hebrew Scriptures were 'written for our learning.' The critical method which to-day is diligently applied to the study of Old and New Testament alike, making use of facts and guiding-hypotheses supplied by various branches of organized knowledge, not only has dealt a death-blow to this type of interpretation, but has removed the possibility of resort to all such forms of over-belief as are inconsistent with ascertained fact. It discovers, *e.g.*, in the Creation-story traces of a cosmogony which existed in polytheistic and mythological form in ancient Babylonia and perhaps amongst other ancient Semitic peoples. It finds such traces in the story as we now have it, purified and refined and expurgated as it had been while being adapted by the Hebrew mind to give external shape to the truth, gradually developed and handed down by a line of prophets and teachers, that one God was the sole Maker and Moral Governor of the Universe, and that man was fashioned after His image. It bids us see in the first chapter of the Bible the condensation of an age-long development of early religious thought; to seek in it not an anticipation, conscious or unconscious, of knowledge of the natural order now attainable by our natural faculties, but rather, light on the primitive thought of mankind expressed inevitably in myth which is the common parent of theology and science. As we listen to this poem, then, we hear at the same time the subdued echo of primeval Nature-myth and also the plain declaration of ethical monotheism—at last found, and never again to be lost: 'In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.'

The story of the Fall of the first parents of the race is even more valuable, perhaps, as a link, or rather as a long connecting chain, between the thought of the age when literary prophecy was about to begin and that remotely ancient time when the Semitic nations were as yet one undifferentiated family. It appears to contain within itself evidence of changes in meaning and *ethos* successively undergone; to be the outcome of natural processes of human thought working upon material of legendary, and, further back, of mythological nature. It may be compared to a cave into which the fossil relics of strata of different degrees of geological antiquity have been swept. While reflecting, as a whole, the thought of a fairly civilized people and a conception of God only a little more anthropomorphic and ethically crude than that of the early prophets, it seems in its

subsidiary imagery (e.g. the trees of the garden) to contain lingering traces of the most primitive ideas of life that we can safely attribute to the mind of prehistoric man; and fortunately these traces escaped the hand of the religious censor.

Thus students of the Old Testament, in the light of the comparative study of religions, have traced a more or less continuous history of the representation of things divine, and of religious experience, from their present forms to their origin in notions very different from those in which religious faith now reposes. The religion of Israel, in which Christianity has its roots, is found to be continuous with the ethnic religions. There is no great gap, no sudden revelation given once and for all, in the period which the Old Testament covers. Are we compelled to conclude from this that theology is even now taking its place as a branch of anthropology? Does knowledge of the past development of an idea, and of its ultimate historical origin in notions that we now perceive to be crude, necessarily deprive such an idea of truth, or correspondence to anything real? Such questions arise out of our newer learning, and deserve to be considered.

Firstly, then, is the validity of a belief such as the belief in God vitiated by having had a gradual development? This, assuredly, we can answer with a negative. The way in which a belief originates or is caused, the way in which it expresses itself and is gradually developed, has nothing to do with its validity, which is purely a matter of correspondence with fact, and therefore of evidence. An idea created by the imagination, such as many of the hypotheses of science, or which have their origin in fiction, *may* be found to correspond with reality. True, genesis in fiction does not prove the idea valid; but neither does it prove the idea invalid. Mode of origin is simply irrelevant. 'Those who dispute the validity of moral or other intuitions,' wrote the late Professor Sidgwick, 'must be required to shew, not merely that they are the effects of certain causes, but that these causes are of a kind that tend to produce invalid beliefs.' If origin or causation were determinative of validity, our science and logic would be rendered suspect by the fact that we were all once infants. So if the religious beliefs of primitive mankind were at first motivated otherwise than by valid reasons, and assumed the form in which we now hold them in consequence of a gradual refine-

ment and purification, rendered possible by advance in moral experience, it does not follow that the outcome of such development is only a venerable and pathetic illusion. Moreover, the key to the understanding of any process of development is not the initial, but the final, stages; we must attribute to any seed, together with its environment, the potentiality of the spreading tree; and it was only by endowing matter with 'the promise and potency of life' that materialistic philosophers were able to explain the evolution of life and mind.

Nor, secondly, are we compelled to forgo the idea of 'revelation' because we can trace the development of Old Testament religion back to a mythological germ, to notions common to all Semitic—perhaps to all human—races, and can describe in outline the various stages of the 'feeling after God' which resulted in some measure of discovery. Discovery and revelation may still be one and the same process, regarded in the one case from the human, in the other from the divine, point of view. Scientific description is one thing, religious interpretation is another; and the same reality may be the common counterpart of both. That science finds the world partially patient of description in terms of mechanical concepts does not prove that the world is a mechanism and no more. God may geometrize, as Plato held. Similarly, that critical theology finds the religious history of man capable of description in terms of psychology, etc., does not necessarily prove that God spake not in divers manners in times past. Whether the human discovery of God *is* God's revelation of Himself to man is indeed a conclusion to be proved, or at least a belief to be shown reasonable. In any case, Israel's religious development stands out gloriously unique, and its uniqueness calls for explanation. Not indeed that the preparation for the gospel was confined to the Hebrew race, but that the nation of which Christ took human flesh, and whose religious thought was the predestined mould into which Christian truth should, in the fullness of time, be poured, was in greater measure enlightened by the light that lighteneth every man. For complete definition of what should be meant by 'inspiration' or 'revelation,' the time, the knowledge of the Church, is perhaps not yet ripe. But in its broader characters the knowledge which we now command would lead us to identify it with an aspect of God's providential guidance of individuals and of races. It has

left free play for the exercise of man's natural faculties. It is both the divine prompting and the divine response to man's seeking after God; the taking of man at each stage—even the earliest stage—of his intellectual and moral progress as he then was, in order to make him what as yet he was not. It is not the dictating of ready-made truth, scientific or theological, such as man, on receiving it, would be unable to assimilate and unfitted to understand. The Old Testament, interpreted in accordance with the view which modern knowledge has enabled us to substitute for this, so far from being denuded of its significance, its interest, its abiding value, becomes a much more living literature than it could have been when inspiration was more mechanically conceived; when too hard-and-fast a line was drawn between natural religion and revealed, or between reason and revelation. It becomes the record of a progressive revelation of God to man as man was able to bear it. In its opening chapters the Bible implies the fact of divine intercourse with the mind and conscience of humanity. At first through illusions, then through faulty conceptions and crude beliefs, necessitated by the very nature of primitive thought and language, God was mediated, we are taught; yet all the time with sufficient clearness and certainty to make some sort of spiritual life possible, to render myths an inspiring and elevating influence, the beginning of a religious bond between God and man. *From the very first* 'He left not himself without witness.' The primitive religion from which Hebrew monotheism is descended was rudimentary but none the less real, a necessary first stage of a progressive development. The subsequent books of the Old Testament

describe the successive stages of national religious aspiration; the gradual emergence of a many-sided Messianic hope, of yearnings after life and light which were afterwards, comprehensively and in particular details, satisfied in Jesus Christ. And thus, to every one who believes in Divine Providence, the Old Testament still supplies a corroborative argument for the Christian Faith; and, what is more important—especially in these days when development is our ruling category of interpretation—a proof of its unbroken continuity with the most primitive ethnic religions of the world. Herein, it would seem, largely consists the abiding and essential value, the theological significance, of the early narratives of the Old Testament, which we can no longer regard as communicating factual knowledge about the origin of the world or the beginnings of human history. And there is surely a grandeur in such a view of the record of the religious history of mankind, the appreciation of which precludes all desire to return to bondage to the weak and beggarly elements of an unhistorical method of interpretation. May we not rejoice that in the opening chapters of our Bible, regarded retrospectively from the point of view which we have now won, we see the sign, not of a beginning late in time of the Father's education of His children, but of His condescension from the first to humanity's earliest groping after an as yet 'unknown God'; that we are pointed, on the one hand, backward to God's response to man's first lisplings of the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen, and, on the other hand, onward to the dayspring from on high, to the seed of Abraham in whom all the families of the earth were to be blessed?

Literature.

PLOTINUS.

'If Plotinus had been studied with half the care that has been bestowed on Plato and Aristotle, the continuity of philosophical and religious thought in the early centuries of the Christian era would be far better understood, and the history of Greek philosophy would not be habitually deprived of its last chapter.'

We quote the words from *The Philosophy of Plotinus*, the Gifford Lectures at St. Andrews, 1917-1918, by William Ralph Inge, C.V.O., D.D., Dean of St. Paul's (Longmans; 2 vols., 28s. net). They express the lecturer's estimate of the value of Neoplatonism as a religion and as a philosophy. They show that the Dean of St. Paul's has the first qualification for estimating a man or a religion—sympathy. Indeed, Dr. Inge does not refuse to