

## THE FIGURE OF EXAGGERATED CONTRAST.

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Many interpreters of Scripture, through failure to recognize the figure of exaggerated contrast, have misunderstood important passages in the Word of God. In this figure of speech a speaker or writer states as absolute an antithesis which is only relative. He speaks as if he would set aside altogether one factor in the comparison. Thus Amos says: "You only have I known of all the families of the earth; therefore I will visit upon you all your iniquities" (Amos 3:2). One might naturally infer from this that Jehovah took no interest in nations other than Israel. But the same prophet exclaims: "Are ye not as the children of the Ethiopians unto me, O children of Israel? saith Jehovah. Have not I brought up Israel out of the land of Egypt, and the Philistines from Caph-tor, and the Syrians from Kir?" (Amos 9:7). Evidently Amos regarded Jehovah as God over all the earth. While bestowing special grace and kindness upon Israel, He also presided over the migrations of heathen peoples. The antithesis in 3:2 between Israel and heathen nations was only relative, and not absolute, as a literalist might have wrongly supposed.

Did Isaiah despise all the sacrifices and offerings of the Mosaic system? One might be led to think so from a careless reading of Isaiah 1:11-14: "What unto me is the multitude of your sacrifices? saith Jehovah: I have had enough of the burnt-offerings of rams, and the fat of fed beasts; and I delight not in the blood of bullocks, or of lambs, or of he-goats. When ye come to appear before me, who hath required this at your hand, to trample my courts? Bring no more vain oblations; incense is an abomination unto me; new moon and sabbath, the calling of assemblies—I cannot away with iniquity and the solemn meeting. Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hateth; they are a burden unto me; I am weary of bearing them." This language might be interpreted as a complete rejection of the entire sacrificial system as inherently distasteful to Jehovah. If so, then Jehovah rejects the

prayers of Israel just as completely as her sacrifices and offerings. The prophet continues: "And when ye spread forth your hands, I will hide mine eyes from you; yea, when ye make many prayers, I will not hear; your hands are full of blood" (Isaiah 1:15). We cannot for a moment think that Isaiah meant to teach that prayer is displeasing to Jehovah. What he means to say is that observance of the Mosaic ritual is no substitute for right living. If rulers and people alike remind one of Sodom and Gomorrah in moral degeneracy, neither sacrifice nor prayer, coming from such hypocrites, can be acceptable to the holy God. What Jehovah demands is a complete reformation in morals. Let justice and charity take the place of smoking offerings and long prayers. The antithesis between sacrifice and prayer on the one hand, and a just and a charitable life on the other, seems to be absolute, though really only relative. Both sacrifice and prayer on the part of just and charitable Israelites would be acceptable to Jehovah.

In Isaiah 58:3-7 perfunctory fasting attended by selfishness is contrasted with mercy and charity in everyday life. The prophet seems to have little regard for the ceremonial law, but the contrast between fasting and charity is not as absolute as the antithesis between light and darkness; for it is only fasting attended with selfish exaction and oppression that falls under the censure of the prophet. In the same chapter (58:13, 14), he exalts the ceremonial law by making the observance of the Sabbath a condition of prosperity and blessing.

The first half of Hosea 6:6 is a good example of the figure of exaggerated contrast: "For I desire goodness, and not sacrifice." The unwary reader might conclude that Hosea here teaches the complete rejection of sacrifice. That this would be a mistake appears in the second clause of the verse, in which the antithesis is less sharply put. In the latter half of the verse Jehovah says that he desires "the knowledge of God *more than* burnt-offerings". The form of the second half of the verse leads the reader to a correct interpretation of the first half.

In Hosea 8:11-14 the prophet might seem to teach that all

sacrifices were unacceptable to Jehovah. Examine the context more closely, however, and it becomes clear that the sacrifices are offered upon forbidden altars by a people that has rejected Jehovah's precepts.

In Micah 6:6-8 spiritual religion is put in such sharp contrast with ceremonial worship that the latter seems to be wholly excluded from Jehovah's requirements. Nothing that men can give to Jehovah, whether burnt-offerings by the thousand or rivers of oil by the ten thousand, or even one's first-born son, can atone for sin and make one acceptable to Jehovah. Justice and kindness and fellowship with God are so far superior to ceremonial worship and costly gifts that the latter count practically for nothing. But it would be a mistake to infer from this magnificent description of the essence of genuine religion that Micah was wholly opposed to the temple worship of his day. He complained that the priests taught for hire, the heads of the people judged for reward, and the prophets practiced divination for money. Hence he announced that Zion should be plowed as a field and Jerusalem become heaps of rubbish (Micah 3:11, 12).

The prophet Malachi represents Jehovah as so displeased with blind and lame animals laid upon his altar that he would prefer to have the temple worship altogether abolished: "Oh that there were one among you that would shut the doors, that ye might not kindle fire on mine altar in vain! I have no pleasure in you, saith Jehovah of hosts, neither will I accept an offering at your hand." The rejection of the temple worship would seem to be absolute and final. Malachi might naturally be put with Isaiah, Micah and the other prophets, who are wrongly supposed to have opposed the sacrificial system in Israel. That this is not a true statement of the case, however, is evident from Malachi 2:1-9, in which the high calling of Levi and the covenant with him receive express recognition. Jehovah takes no pleasure in the offerings in the temple, not because he rejects sacrifices altogether, but because the people are insulting him by bringing lame and sick animals and laying them upon his altar.

One of the most interesting and important examples of the

figure of exaggerated contrast occurs in Jeremiah 7:21-23. The prophet speaks in sarcasm: "Add your burnt-offerings unto your sacrifices, and eat flesh." Becoming thoroughly excited in his moral indignation over the abuses around him, the prophet exclaims in Jehovah's name: "For I spoke not to your fathers, nor commanded them in the day that I brought them out of the land of Egypt, concerning burnt-offerings or sacrifices; but this thing I commanded them, saying, Harken to my voice, and I will be your God, and ye shall be my people; and walk ye in all the ways that I command you, that it may be well with you." The antithesis between the sacrificial system on the one hand, and obedience to Jehovah on the other, is put in the most absolute form. A literalist would so understand it without further ado; and some of the most scholarly critics and commentators of recent years have tumbled headlong into the pit of literalism. They contend that Jeremiah here says that the system of sacrifice practiced in the temple, with which the prophet must have been quite familiar, was not delivered to Israel by Jehovah through Moses at the time of the Exodus, but that the requirements of Jehovah through Moses consisted simply in obedience to Jehovah's commands. As Prof. Brown, in his new commentary on Jeremiah says, "Sacrifices did not originate at Sinai, and were not there commanded." Attention to the divine voice and a life in harmony with his will was the substance of the divine requirement when Jehovah brought Israel out of Egypt.

It seems to us quite plain that Jeremiah here uses the figure of exaggerated contrast. Quiet, phlegmatic natures do not find it easy to understand the impassioned imagery of an oriental orator whose soul is on fire with indignation in the presence of aggravating abuses in religion. In order to drive his message home, the prophet overstates it, using the form of absolute antithesis instead of relative. Jeremiah's meaning is, "Jehovah did not lay emphasis on sacrifices and burnt-offerings at Sinai, but on obedience to his holy commands." To love God with all the heart and one's neighbor as oneself is the main thing in the religion of Jehovah. Obey his high and holy requirements, and do not pay so much attention to ani-

mal sacrifices, since they weigh little in comparison with obedience and spiritual fellowship with God. Jehovah did not mean that his people should devote their chief attention to a sacrificial system, but rather that they should walk in loving obedience to his moral and spiritual demands.

With the prophets, as we have seen, the figure of exaggerated contrast is not an unusual method of speech. The poets of Israel also employed it effectively. See Ps. 50:7-15, where the flesh of bulls and goats is contrasted with thanksgiving and the payment of vows. See also Ps. 51:16, 17, where burnt-offering is contrasted with a broken and a contrite heart. The psalmist apparently puts no value at all on sacrifice and burnt-offerings. It seems to us, however, that here again we have a good example of the expression of relative antithesis as if it were absolute. Verses 18 and 19 of Psalm 51 speak of Jehovah's acceptance of the sacrifices of righteousness.

The most striking example of the figure of exaggerated contrast is the language of our Lord, recorded in Luke 14:26: "If any man cometh unto me, and hateth not his own father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple." What can a literalist do with this passage, unless it be to butt his brains out on it?

Of course our Lord means to teach that our love for him ought to be so intense that all other love pales into hatred in comparison therewith. Jesus demands the first place in our hearts. Matthew gives substantially the thought expressed in Luke as having been spoken on an earlier occasion. As he records it, the antithesis is relative: "He that loveth father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and he that loveth son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me" (Matt. 10:37).

As a field preacher addressing thousands of restless hearers, our Lord projected among them many striking sayings which could not be forgotten. Some hearers might not understand at the moment, but all could remember what he said.

The Sermon on the Mount abounds in exaggerated contrast. Jesus attacks current abuses in language that can never be

forgotten. Instead of swearing by the heaven or the earth or Jerusalem or one's own head, "Swear not at all". Shall the follower of Jesus then refuse to take an oath in a court of justice? Not if he imitates the Son of man; for he took an oath before the Sanhedrin that he was the Messiah. The followers of Jesus are required to submit to wrong rather than to seek revenge. The code of Hammurabi and Moses agree in the statute, "An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth". The Jewish teachers encouraged the redress of grievances, insisting that it was right to hate an enemy and take vengeance on a wrongdoer. Jesus says: "Resist not him that is evil; but whoever smiteth thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also." Jesus himself did not follow this rule literally when he was rudely smitten in the presence of the Sanhedrin, but firmly remonstrated (John 18:22, 23). Dr. Broadus, in his Commentary on Matthew, quotes with approval the remark by Dykes: "Of course, when an instance is selected to illustrate a principle, the instance is usually an extreme or next to impossible one; both because a principle is best seen when pushed to its ultimate application, and also because there is less chance of people blindly copying the example when its extravagance drives them to search for some inner meaning in it."

The great Russian novelist Tolstoi reorganizes the teaching of Jesus on the literal interpretation of the precept, "*Resist not evil*". He takes the striking precepts of our Lord in the Sermon on the Mount, and presses them down on the conscience as commands to be obeyed to the letter by those who would follow Jesus. The entrance of common sense is forbidden by the Count as an effort to explain away the Scriptures. A small group of hyperbolic sayings in one discourse are made the norm of Christian teaching and conduct. In his reaction from nihilism, the brave foe of effete ecclesiasticism and autocratic power has fallen into the slough of literalism.