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A FAMINE ELEMENT IN THE FLOOD STORY

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IN the foreword to his "A Hebrew Deluge Story in Cuneiform," Professor Albert T. Clay, adopting the current critical findings of Hebrew tradition, makes a statement which may be accepted as an opportunity to offer a suggestion drawn from conclusions arrived at before the publication of Professor Clay's little book. The statement is: "We learn from this tradition"—the tradition which is the main subject of Professor Clay's monograph—"and also from its redaction written centuries later, that a long famine preceded the deluge, which is not referred to in the Old Testament." The suggestion here ventured is that there is just such a famine, preceding the deluge, referred to in the Old Testament and that it is to be found woven into the Hebrew deluge story in Genesis. The suggestion here offered is based upon the contents and character of the following passages from the Yahwist document:—

1. Genesis 5 29—The naming of Noah
2. Genesis 6 5, 6, 7, 8—Apparent reasons for the deluge
3. Genesis 8 20, 21, 22—The sacrifice upon leaving the ark.

The curse upon the ground mentioned in the naming of Noah can hardly look back to the curse in The Story of the Fall, for that curse, if it rightfully belongs there, marks the difference between man's lost age of ease and his whole future age during which he must earn his bread in the sweat of his brow. That curse is irrevocable. Nor can the curse mentioned in the naming of Noah look forward to Noah's

wine-making. Vine culture could no more lift the primal curse than could the culture of cereal or other crops. Besides, if Lamech's anticipations when he named his son were to be met by vine culture, we should reasonably expect to find something in the vine-culture narrative that would connect it with an issue so important as the minimizing of the toil of humanity in common. Nothing of the sort is found in that narrative. Its whole import is of an entirely different order. So, then, the curse mentioned at the naming of Noah would appear to look neither backward nor forward to anything in these narratives but stands alone, as it is literally left to stand, isolated in the Priestly genealogy. In this connection, one cannot very well resist the suspicion that the Priestly redactor was well pleased to place it where we find it so that it would not be a distracting quantity to the better unity of the deluge narrative, and one cannot help wondering what of its context the same redactor suppressed, if any.

The question now is, shall we leave the curse mentioned at the naming of Noah isolated and meaningless, or are there sufficient reasons for setting apart other portions of the narratives as probably having something to do with it? In the second and third passages, or groups of passages, on which the suggestion here offered is based, there are qualities and points of view which seem to separate them quite sharply from their present context. Such language as the following arrests attention: "Every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually;" "it repented Yahweh;" "it grieved Him at His heart;" "Yahweh said in His heart;" "the imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth." There is a penetrating subjective quality in almost every word of these passages. That must mean that they could hardly have been written by the author of the rest of the Yahwist deluge story. The rest of that story is crisply and directly objective. But, in addition to the striking mental difference indicated, we have the more striking fact of a direct mention in these passages of a curse on the ground. After Noah had offered the burnt offerings and Yahweh had smelled the sweet savour we read:—"And Yahweh said

in His heart I will not again curse the ground any more for man's sake, for that the imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth." Now, it may be asked, what part could be played in a universal deluge by a curse on the ground? Besides, in the passage just quoted, the picture in the mind of the Deity, so to speak, does not seem to be that of a depopulated world. Nor can we infer from what the Deity said in His heart that He believed he had regenerated mankind by killing off all the wicked by a flood and saving only a righteous family as seed. There are yet these quite remarkable words: "While the earth remaineth, seedtime and harvest, and cold and heat, and summer and winter, and day and night shall not cease." If it is difficult to see what part a curse on the ground could play in a universal deluge, it is even more difficult to see how a forty-day's rain could have so disarranged the order of nature as to require this promise of its restoration. But behind the promise of seedtime and harvest, etc., it may be allowable for us to imagine the machinery necessary to work out a curse on the ground, that is, deprive it of its usual fertility. We may imagine summers so cold that they were as winter, rains fairly hammering the ground and days so dark as to be as night, and, on the contrary, heat and drouth so intense and prolonged as to completely defeat man's toil. Indeed similar machinery is employed in the famine portion of Professor Clay's cuneiform deluge story. But only rain was necessary for the flood. It came at the appointed time, was restrained at the appointed time, and there is no intimation that the sun and moon were not following their appointed courses. In fact the duration of the flood is counted in days and nights, by the Deity himself.

When somewhat closely examined, these passages, it would appear, contain material that cannot be integral to the flood narrative. Furthermore, there does not now appear anything to which it could be related except a curse on the ground, or famine element, which curse is found explicitly mentioned within it. It might be hazardous to go further than this, and inquire whether there originally was a curse on the

ground, or famine story that stood alone in Hebrew tradition, or whether such a famine story always broadened into a deluge story as in Professor Clay's cuneiform narrative. Still if Lamech's words are to be taken at their literal value they mean that the patriarch expected ease or comfort through his son and not death by drowning. Hence we are entitled to infer that there once was a curse on the ground that was ultimately revoked. The same thing seems to be implied in the resolution of the Deity not again to curse the ground for man's sake. If all this is not too conjectural, we have, probably, the important facts of a separate tradition, viz: that there was a curse and that Noah's piety won its revocation.

It will be observed that this suggestion and this brief examination of these passages hold the Genesis material to a reasonably logical accountability. This, in turn, is based on a view of the origin of the Yahwist document different from that generally accepted. It is, that the Yahwist document, at least so far as the early traditions are concerned, is not Yahwist at all in the usually accepted sense, but is a compilation from written sources of varying age and scheme, only portions of these written sources being used. This view permits the application of logical accountability to the material itself, but does not expect the document as a whole to meet the demands of such accountability. Of prime importance in the search for the origin and significance of these traditions, this view does not limit us to time or place, as the prevailing opinion as to their origin seems to do. We are free, free even to take the road indicated in Professor Clay's researches if inquiry leads us there.

That we need wide room in both time and place in our search for the origin and significance of these traditions is a plain implication of the suggestion of a curse on the ground, or famine element in Hebrew tradition as here advanced. A reading of the non-Hebrew (*i. e.*, old Babylonian) treatment of this motif shows a progressive advance from the simpler to the more complex or expanded form, the older being the simpler. What looks like a root conception of ground non-fertility becomes in time a luxuriant growth of non-fertility in the whole

vegetable and animal kingdoms, including man. Tracing backward along this growth in search of the root, we find the Hebrew form (if it be admitted that there is a Hebrew form) by far the simpler, and, therefore, probably nearer to the origin. Naturally one would think that post-Abrahamic people in Abraham's land would not be likely to perform such a work of simplification as that involved in pruning and transforming a highly manipulated non-Hebrew form of this motif into a simple curse on the ground. Rather, one would expect, that, if we could reach far enough back, we should find the source of all the forms.