

The Study of the Early Chapters of Genesis.

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IN studying the early chapters of Genesis there are one or two features in the character of the book which ought to be kept steadily in mind.

(1) In the early religious books of other nations, besides the Jews, we find at the outset, as in Genesis, an account of the origin of the world, but combined therewith there is nearly always found an account of the origin of the gods. Even in that Chaldæan legend, which in some of its details comes very near to the Old Testament record, we read: "There were made also the great gods, the gods Lahmu and Lahamu they caused to come" (Smith's *Chaldæan Genesis*, p. 63). In Genesis there is a cosmogony, but there is no theogony. The voice of the Eternal pre-existent Jehovah, whose name is ever "I am," calls into existence heaven and earth, and all things both visible and invisible. "He spake the word, and they were made; He commanded, and they were created."

(2) The way in which the word *Elohim* is used in the Bible as a name of God appears to be partly after the manner of a concession, partly in the way of a protest. It is a plural noun. But a plural pre-supposes the existence of a singular. *El* and *Eloah* must have preceded *Elohim*. The heathen people used this name (compare *Lahmu* and *Lahamu* above), or something akin to it, to designate those various powers of nature to which they paid their devotions. Collectively they were *Elohim*, gods; and the Bible uses the word frequently of the heathen deities. But it also employs it as the earliest name for the true God. As though it were admitted that in those natural powers, which the nations deified, God was revealing Himself in many ways, if men would but feel after Him and find Him. He might, therefore, without error, be called by this comprehensive title. But as a protest against the idea of many gods, Scripture joins with the plural noun a verb in the singular; thus laying stress on the prime article of the Jewish creed, "Hear, O Israel, Jehovah, our *Elohim*, Jehovah is one" (Deut. vi. 4). And it is of deep interest to notice, in this connexion, that when in these early biblical records we come upon one who has preserved somewhat of primitive revelation, we find the name of God in

the singular number. Melchizedek is the priest of *El Elyon* (Gen. xiv. 18).

(3) If we approach these primitive documents, regarding them as anything else but poetry, we run counter to all that history teaches us concerning the first writings of other nations. The early literature of every people, and especially that which relates to the things they hold sacred, has constantly assumed a poetic form. And Genesis is such an early lesson book of the Jewish race, conveying in pictures and figures all that at first they were able to comprehend of Divine truth. To ask for numerical precision or scientific statement in such a record, is to ask for what would be foreign to its character. In allegory, God has constantly made Himself known, specially in the early ages of the world, using such terms for His revelation as the children of men at various times could best grasp and profit by. There is always, no doubt, much behind the allegory. This is the constant idea of the New Testament writers. There is something in all Scripture which needs to be laid bare. *Διανοίγειν* is their frequent word, to lay thoroughly open. A work which could only be perfectly done after Christ had come. This Paul did (Acts xvii. 3) for the Jews at Thessalonica, who had not yet found the full meaning of the Divine Word. This Christ Himself did (Luke xxiv. 32) for His disciples till their hearts became aglow with the new warmth and radiance shed upon the ancient Writings. And in His words to Nathanael (John i. 51), Christ gives us an instance (and there are many more in the Gospels and Epistles) how under the Old Testament story there lay hidden a significance which constituted its grandest teaching. The vision of the angels ascending and descending on Jacob, in whom at the moment was contained the whole future race of Israel, gave encouragement and comfort to the Patriarch; but it is when our Lord applies the words to Himself, in whom the whole human family is to become one man (Gal. iii. 28), that the picture of Genesis receives and gives back its true significance. If we seek for lessons of this nature in the early chapters of Genesis, they will yield us a rich reward, and the criticisms which would turn the poetry of the Divine revelation into arithmetical or geological prose will be estimated at their true value.