

man heart like waves out of the ocean, only to break in ceaseless succession and roll back, sighing, to the heart from which they came; and the heart, strong as the ocean, never ceases to swell with new hopes, always to break again. But beneath the swelling and breaking of human hopes rises, evermore, the ocean-tide of God's love. This is the Divine power, swelling vast in the gospel that you preach. It is the promise of the Eternal: "The earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea." In this assurance labor. Broken hopes, thwarted plans, bitter discoveries of human wickedness, toil without visible results will sober and sadden you. Death will overtake you while you feel that you have accomplished nothing, and you will be able only to look to Jesus to pardon an unprofitable servant; yet, in the assurance of victory, labor; and, in the distant future, looking down on the renovated earth, you will hear and join the voice of the great multitude, as the voice of many waters and the voice of mighty thunders, saying: "Alleluia, for the Lord God Omnipotent reigneth!"

ARTICLE III.

FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE OF THE SCRIPTURES.

By Rev. Edward Robie, Greenland, N. H.

THE number of primitive words in any language is exceedingly small; and each primitive word was, in the first instance, the name of some object or appearance in outward nature. A word is used literally when it is used in its primary sense and original application; a word is used figuratively when, though retaining its primary sense, it is used in an application different from its original one.¹ E. g. when, in

¹ Newman's Rhetoric, p. 103, sixth edition.

a description of some stately edifice, mention is made of the pillars that support the structure, the word *pillars* is used in its ordinary literal sense; but when it is said that virtue and intelligence are the *pillars* of a republic, or when it is said of some distinguished statesmen, that they are the *pillars* of the State, the word is still used in its common signification, as denoting that which, firmly fixed, gives a solid support; but the word is applied to objects different from those to which it was originally applied, and is accordingly figurative in its use. When it is said of old-age that is the *evening* of life, the word *evening* is used in its ordinary sense, but not in its ordinary application; and the word calls up before the mind images of the setting sun and the approaching twilight, which betoken the close of the day; and, in the form of the expression, there is an implied comparison between the life of man and a natural day.

By far the great majority of words in any language are figurative; although many words have been so long and so exclusively applied to spiritual ideas, that their primary and original application has been lost sight of, or forgotten. A slight examination, however, into their history, will show that they are figurative; or if, with regard to some few words, this cannot be done, it is because their early history is lost in obscurity. Very few persons, in speaking of the moral ideas of *right* and of *wrong*, remember that these words are figurative. Yet *right* literally means *straight*; and *wrong* literally means *wrung, twisted, crooked*. *Law* denotes that which is *laid*.¹ All words applied to mental exercises or states are figurative, being originally applied to outward and material things. Thus, to *imagine*, in its literal signification, implies the forming of some visible image; to *impress*, conveys the idea of leaving a stamp or mark, as a seal leaves its stamp on the wax or any other soft substance. To *reflect*

¹ So with the word *Gesetz* in German, which is a participial form from *setzen*. Thus in the very structure of language there is an argument for the being of God. As the Latin word *fatum*, meaning something *spoken*, implies that there must first be some being who *spake* what is fated or spoken, so the English word *law* implies that there must first be some being who *laid* what is laid.

means to turn back ; to *expect* means to look out ; to *attend* means to stretch towards any object. Examples of this kind might be extended indefinitely, so as clearly to show, both from facts and the nature of the case, that all words expressive of spiritual ideas, have an external origin, and were applied to outward and material things before they were applied to the things of a spiritual world.

As no book so abounds in spiritual truth as does the Bible, so, for this very reason, does no book so abound in the use of figurative language. The figures of the Bible are drawn, for the most part, either from nature, from common life, from the political and religious institutions of the Hebrews, or from history.¹ The reader of the Bible will, at once, call to mind figures and symbols drawn from these various departments of the outer world. The mention of a few will suggest to the memory many others. The apostle says : " God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ." The language of this verse is highly figurative. The new creation is described in terms drawn from the account of the creation given in Genesis. The heart of man is represented as being, naturally, in the same dark, chaotic state as was our earth when darkness was upon the face of the deep ; and the change produced in the soul, by the new creation in Christ Jesus, is like the change that took place in the earth when the Spirit of God brooded upon the face of the waters, infusing vital virtue and vital warmth, and God said : " Let there be light." The images of light and darkness are frequently employed, in Scripture, to denote good and evil, joy and sorrow, prosperity and adversity, knowledge and ignorance. Christ is called " the sun of righteousness." The Psalmist says : " God is a sun and shield." The Spirit of God is spoken of under the image of the air and the wind. The blessings of the gospel are spoken of under the images of fountains of water, rivers, copious showers. Christ says of him-

¹ A similar classification is given by Rev. William Jones of Nayland in his excellent Lectures on the Figurative Language of the Scriptures.

self, that he is the vine, and of his people, that they are the branches.

As exemplifying the use of figures drawn from common life, may be mentioned the twenty-third Psalm, "The Lord is my shepherd," in which the language is derived from the pastoral occupations of the Hebrews. In the same Psalm, the figure is changed to that of a banquet, in which favorite guests were anointed with oil. Very frequent, also, are the allusions made, in the Bible, to agricultural operations. The world is compared to a field; the children of God, to the wheat; the children of the wicked one, to tares; the end of the world is the harvest; the angels are reapers; a preacher of the word is a sower; the word of God is the seed; the heart of men is the soil; the cares, riches, and pleasures of life are thorns; the preparation of the heart, by penitence, is ploughing and breaking up the fallow ground.

For examples of figures drawn from the religion of the Hebrews, we may refer to the Epistle to the Hebrews, in which it clearly appears that the entire system of the ceremonial institutions of the Mosaic Law was symbolical of the future dispensation of the Gospel. The services of the Jewish ritual were typical of that spiritual worship which is performed through Jesus Christ.

For examples of the use, in Scripture, of historical facts as figures of spiritual truth, we may refer to the words of Christ (John 3: 14): "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up." Our Saviour here applied the lifting up of the serpent by Moses, in the wilderness, to the lifting up of himself upon the cross, to draw all men to himself for the cure of their souls. Again, the miraculous supply of manna, in the wilderness, was a symbol of that true Bread which cometh down from heaven and giveth life unto the world. Paul tells us that the rock which Moses smote to give drink to the people, was Christ, i. e. a figure of Christ smitten for our sins, and giving to a thirsty world the waters of life. How far all the historical portions of the Old Testament may also be symbolical of spiritual truth, is a question we will not at present discuss;

but certainly the Christian church has not been mistaken in ever regarding the wanderings of the children of Israel through the wilderness as symbolical of the pilgrimage of the people of God to the heavenly Canaan; and doubtless there are other historical portions of the Old Testament, which, while their literal verity is to be held fast, in the strictest sense, may yet be regarded as containing within them perpetual illustrations of spiritual truth.¹ The Bible, like the book of nature, has an inexhaustible manifoldness as well as depth of meaning. Its histories, as well as its precepts, contain principles of universal application, which, like precious gems, radiate from all sides and in all directions. Thus there is not only a double sense in Scripture, but there are more senses than can be numbered.²

And now what are some of the principles that may aid us in the interpretation of the figurative language of the Scriptures?

1. One obvious remark is, that, in order to understand the figures of speech employed by the sacred writers, we should be well acquainted with the sources from which they are drawn. We should study nature as continually presenting

¹ Paul's use of the history of Sarah and Hagar to illustrate the difference between Jewish bondage and Christian liberty, is an evidence that some portion, at least, of Old Testament narrative is illustrative of the facts of Christian experience not literally expressed by it.—*Trench*, in his work on the Miracles, has beautifully shown that the miracles of Christ were not only historical facts for the time then being, but are signs and symbols for all time of higher and more important facts continually taking place in the spiritual world. The changing of the water into wine was a sign and symbol of what Christ is evermore doing in the world, elevating and ennobling the most common conditions and relations of life. The opening the eyes of the blind was a sign and symbol of that spiritual illumination which the Gospel now produces in the hearts of all who receive it. The healing of the sick was a sign and symbol of that recovery from the malady of sin which is effected by the great Physician upon thousands and millions of immortal souls; and the raising of the dead from the grave was a sign and symbol of that resurrection from death in trespasses and sins unto newness of life which Christ now effects in the experience of all believers.

² A frequent difficulty in the interpretation of prophecy may perhaps be removed by the remembrance of this principle. The difficulty has been in supposing that a given prophecy must refer to one event only, whereas, while containing one fundamental principle of the divine administration, it may equally well refer to many different corresponding events in the course of the ages.

us with manifold lessons of spiritual wisdom ; we should observe the common relations of this earthly life as illustrative of still higher spiritual relations ; we should see, in the transitory forms and ceremonies of the Jewish ritual, the signs and symbols of everlasting truth ; and, in the history of God's ancient people, we should see how was shadowed forth the coming and progress of God's heavenly kingdom. The more we form the habit of looking at outward nature and the forms of outward life in a religious point of view, and as symbols of spiritual realities, the better prepared shall we be to apprehend the truth that is conveyed to us in the figurative language of the Scriptures. Nature continually speaks to us the same language with Revelation ; what the one teaches by words, the other teaches by images and signs ; and the words with which Scripture addresses us were originally taken from the living vocabulary of nature, and to this we must resort in order to understand their primary meaning and power.

2. A second principle to be observed in the interpretation of figurative language is, that we must not think it necessary to change it into literal terms. This would be impossible. As all language that is applied to spiritual subjects, from the nature of the case, must be figurative, of course there are no *literal* terms in which to express spiritual truth. If any terms that are applied to spiritual subjects, *seem* to be literal, it is because, from long use, their figure has been worn out. They are like coin of which the stamp is worn off. People will not readily take them. Though they have some intrinsic worth, yet they need to be recoined in order to pass well. So it is with words. If they do not call up some figure in the mind, people will not take them. The preacher who uses them can make no impression.

We have said that no figurative terms applied to spiritual subjects can be changed into literal ones. We may change the figure, but this is only like turning liquid from one vessel into another. One vessel may contain more than another. One figure may express more than another. Every thought makes for itself some embodiment. We often speak

of *conceptions* of spiritual truth. But what is a conception but a taking together the elements of some thought, and forming them into some image in the mind? We speak of *ideas* of truth. But what is an idea but the *form* in which some *thing* presents itself to the thinking mind? Even in religious worship, where, if anywhere, we should divest ourselves of all ideas of form, every man who worships at all, worships some conception of his mind, which is to him the visible embodiment of the divinity. There is in the human mind an earnest craving after some visible form of God. This want of our nature is satisfied in him who is the brightness of the Father's glory, the express image of his person, the one Mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus; and the worship of God as revealed to us in the man Christ Jesus, is a worship of the Father, in spirit and in truth. And they who worship him, must worship him in the Son, for the Father seeketh such to worship him. Our purest, our truest, our most spiritual idea of God, is, when we think of him in whom dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead *bodily*. All our ideas of heaven, and of the spiritual world necessarily assume some form.

Every object in nature is a symbol of some spiritual truth. When the names of outward objects, or of outward appearances are given to spiritual subjects, we say the language is figurative; but, properly speaking, these outward things are the figures designed to embody and represent spiritual truths. Nature is so laid out by its great author, as to represent the spiritual world. God is a sun, therefore is there a sun placed in the centre of the heavens to represent the brightness and glory of God. Earthly relations are so arranged, as to set forth heavenly relations. Material things are copies of spiritual things, and we learn divine things through copies; but the copies are trustworthy and true, being made by the same divine hand that made the archetypes, and made after the pattern of heavenly things.

The language of the Bible respecting the atonement made by Jesus Christ, is taken from the phraseology of the Old

Testament, respecting the sacrifices of the Hebrews, and therefore, say some, must be understood in a figurative or metaphorical sense. But the figure looks a different way from what they suppose, who make this remark. The law was a shadow of good things to come; the sacrifices of the law were figures of the true sacrifice, which is Jesus Christ, slain from the foundation of the world. He was the original, and they of the law were figures of him. Had it not been for his priesthood and his sacrifice foreordained of God, there would have been no priests, and no sacrifices appointed in the Jewish ritual, neither would the ideas of propitiation and atonement be inwoven as they now are, into the very tissue of the Scriptures. So the natural world around us would have been very different from what it now is, had it not been for the spiritual facts that underlie it, and have given shape to its phenomena. Thus in the physical evils that afflict the world, we may see the representations of man's sinful state, and the indications of the divine displeasure at human sinfulness, while also the goodness of God is poured out over all the earth, and even his very judgments are tempered with mercy, in order, during this dispensation of grace, to lead the children of men to repentance.

3. A third remark is, that important aid towards the understanding of the figurative language of the Scriptures may be derived from the cultivation of the imagination. Imagination is that power by which we form images or pictures to be seen by the eye of the mind, as the objects of the outward world are seen by the bodily eye. It was through the imagination that a large part of the revelations recorded in the Bible were made to those holy men who have transmitted them unto us. Divine revelations were addressed to the minds of the prophets by symbols set before them in visions and dreams, and the events of their daily life. Now it is imagination alone, that can reproduce these symbols to the mind of the reader, so that they may be clearly apprehended, and stand out before his mind as they did before the mind of the prophet. Moreover, imagination looks into the soul and living principle of things, discerns those moral ideas, or spiritual

truths which they are fitted and designed to express. The poet and the clown may both look at the same outward object, e. g. the western sky at the time of some brilliant sunset; but the one sees in it only what strikes his bodily eye, while the other may see in it the emblem of the gateway to the celestial city. If the natural world is laid out so as to represent the spiritual world, there is a reason in the nature of things why certain moral ideas should be expressed by certain figures, and not by others. It requires but little imagination to see that there is a reason, in the nature of things, why the moral idea of *right* should be designated by a word meaning *straight*, rather than by a word meaning *crooked*; and why the moral idea of *wrong* should be designated by a word meaning *crooked*, rather than by a word meaning *straight*; or why knowledge should be represented by light, and ignorance by darkness. And since it is one province of the imagination to discern the true correspondency between the phenomena of outward nature and the facts of the spiritual world, the cultivation of this faculty will furnish essential aid to the understanding of the figurative language of the Scriptures.

4. A fourth principle to be observed in the interpretation of figurative language is, that we remember the inadequacy of figures of speech, or of any sensible symbols, fully to express spiritual truth. The inadequacy of a symbol is to be distinguished from its falsity. A symbol may be perfectly true so far as it goes, and yet be utterly inadequate to express the whole truth. Our ideas of God are utterly inadequate to the reality, and yet may be true ideas for all that. So of spiritual truths generally. However formless spiritual realities may appear to us in the spiritual world, yet, so long as we are in the body, they can be conceived or expressed by us only in forms and figures. So far as spiritual truth is in itself formless, so far is human language incapable of giving it adequate expression; for language was originally applied to forms and appearances in the natural world, and still bears the marks of its origin; yet human language is capable of giving a true expression of spiritual things; for

the natural world is an image and picture of the spiritual world. The soul of man is now known to us, in part, by the expression of his face. Yet internal consciousness assures us that in the soul of every man there are depths of thought and feeling which cannot be told by the lineaments of his face. So internal consciousness assures us that the truths of the spiritual world are of a deeper measure than can be contained within the forms of material things. The limitations of form and figure, under which spiritual truths appear to us, are not also the limitations of our knowlege. But to convey our knowledge to others, or clearly to apprehend it ourselves, it must assume some form, more or less definite. And there are many spiritual truths which will require many different figures in order rightly, in some measure, to express their fulness and greatness. E. g. all our language with regard to God is figurative: "God is a spirit," "God is a rock," "God is a high tower," "God is a dwelling-place," "God is a sun and shield." Yet no one of these figures, nor all possible figures put together, can adequately express God to us. All created things fail adequately to do this, though all created things do, in a measure, tell us of him. And as God cannot adequately be expressed in any finite form, so neither can the truths which relate to his government and kingdom. It may be said of figures, what Dr. Bushnell has said of creeds: "No one creed contains the whole truth, and therefore the more creeds the better;" so no one figure contains the whole truth, and therefore the more figures the better; provided, however, that they be true to nature — that there be a true correspondency between the figure and the spiritual reality expressed by it.

We close with one suggestion to our ministerial brethren. They whose business it is to communicate spiritual truth to others, should make much use of figures as vehicles of truth. This is taught us by the example of the inspired writers, and especially by the example of our great Teacher, who hath taught us to look upon nature with a spiritual eye, and from the fowls of the air and the flowers of the field to learn the lessons of wisdom and piety. In our ideas of spiritual

truth, we cannot divest ourselves of images and forms, if we would. What we have to do is, to see that our figures and images are true and according to nature. Nature is an inexhaustible storehouse of hieroglyphics, pregnant with spiritual meanings. What we have to do is, to bring those meanings into the clear light of consciousness, and that not in dead abstractions, but in the living forms which nature herself offers to us. "The more vivid," says Schlegel, "the more striking, and apparently startling, the more boldly figurative and rare, are the terms or forms of expression employed, the more pertinently and clearly do they often convey our meaning, and the more happily chosen and to the point do they appear. In proof and confirmation of this assertion, I would appeal to the language of Holy Writ. Most, if not all, its descriptions of matters belonging to the invisible world, if we could still recall or still experience the first fresh impression, would at once be confessed to be the boldest that language has ever ventured upon. Long familiarity, however, has made them seem ordinary and tame. And it is necessary to contemplate them long and intensely, if we would revive their original fulness and peculiar significancy."¹ It would be well for us, in our use of words, to call up the images which lie at their base, so as to have a clear and distinct view of them in our own minds, and then endeavor to call up the same images in the minds of those to whom we speak. Much that is not literally true, is yet most true, because it makes the truest impression.

¹ *Philosophy of Language*, Morrison's translation, p. 419.