

ARTICLE II.

THE PLAGUES OF EGYPT.

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II.

THE first series of plagues, covering about a year, consisted of (1) a low Nile, with the gloomy prospect of famine and pestilence; (2) a plague of frogs; (3) a plague of lice; (4) a plague of other insects; (5) a murrain of cattle; (6) an epidemic of *pestis minor*. All these calamities fell heavily upon the Egyptians, injuring their property, and causing much bodily discomfort and sickness. But the hearts of the people, and the heart of Pharaoh, notwithstanding his own sickness, remained unchanged. These plagues had only touched them externally, as it were, in body and estate; their inward nature had not been stirred so profoundly as to make them willing to liberate their slaves. The succeeding plagues of hail, locusts, darkness, and the death of the first-born, covering almost another year, were more searching, penetrating to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, for the Egyptians could not otherwise regard them than as the manifestations of the wrath of a powerful and hostile divinity.

THE SEVENTH PLAGUE.

The plague of hail, lightning, and thunder.—It is difficult for us to enter fully and sympathetically into the religious emotions of the peoples of antiquity, in whom there dwelt fresh and strong the dark instincts formed when our primitive an-

cestors first began their intelligent struggle with the forces of nature, regarded as dread and inscrutable, and were often beaten and cowed by them. Perhaps these instincts partially survive in those among ourselves who are filled with unconquerable fear and restlessness during a thunder-storm, in spite of their education and every outward protection. What then must have been the fears of the Egyptians during this rare visitation of a terrible hail- and thunder-storm? "I am he who sendeth forth terror into the powers of rain and thunder. . . . I have made to flourish my knife, along with the knife which is in the hand of Thoth, in the powers of rain and thunder." But this terrible storm was not believed to come from Thoth or any other of their own divinities, for then it might have been more tolerable. The terror of it lay in the conviction that they were in the hands of the God of the Hebrews, who was showing Himself to be far more powerful than their own gods, and was directing his anger against them. They felt, as did their captives, that it was He, and no other, who thundered in the heavens, and uttered his voice; that the earth shook and trembled, because He was wroth; it was He who bowed the heavens, and came down; who shot out lightnings, and discomfited them; who gave over their cattle to the hail, and their flocks to hot thunderbolts; who cast upon them the fierceness of his anger, wrath, indignation, trouble, a band of angels of evil.

Allusion has already been made to a similar storm which occurred in France just before the great Revolution. "On the 13th day of July, 1788, there fell, on the very edge of harvest, the most frightful hail-storm, scattering into wild waste the fruits of the year, which had otherwise suffered grievously by drought. For sixty leagues round Paris especially, the ruin was almost total. To so many other evils then, there is to be

added, that of dearth, perhaps of famine.”¹ So it was with the Egyptians. They were dismayed by the immense damage the storm wrought. The flax and the barley were smitten, the vines, the fig-trees, and the sycamore-trees were destroyed, and much injury done to the herbs and trees of the field. Famine was foreseen with pestilence in its train, and “Death grinned horrible a ghastly smile, to hear his famine should be filled.”

Under this plague the spirit of the Egyptians began to break. The king was penitent. “And Pharaoh sent and called for Moses and Aaron, and said unto them: I have sinned this time: the Lord is righteous, and I and my people are wicked.” Afterward he hardened his heart.

THE EIGHTH PLAGUE.

The plague of locusts.—This plague stirred the religious fears of the people to a greater extent even than did the preceding plague, so awe-inspiring were the innumerable multitudes of locusts coming for weeks in a succession of swarms, and so frightful was the utter desolation left behind them. A modern traveler and biblical commentator, writing of a swarm of locusts he had seen, though it was but small and soon swept away by the wind, states that he felt “some degree of that singular helplessness before a calamity of portent far beyond itself, something of that supernatural edge and accent, which by the confession of so many observers, characterise the locust plague and the earthquake above all other physical disasters.”² To the Egyptians, as to the Israelites later in the time of Joel, the visitation of locusts was a sign of the great and terrible day of Jehovah, a day of darkness and murk, of cloud and heavy mist, when the sun and moon became black, the stars

¹ Carlyle, *French Revolution*, vol. 1. chap. viii.

² G. Adam Smith, *Book of the Twelve Prophets*, p. 398.

withdrew their shining, and Jehovah uttered his voice before his army.

Differing only in degree, plagues of this kind are not uncommon in Egypt. "It often happens that immense swarms of locusts come in from Nubia. Wherever they appear they cover the ground for miles, and sometimes to the depth of two or more feet. It is in vain to attempt to drive them away. Only when the last bit of grain or grass is devoured do they depart, leaving behind those who in the dense mass of insects were hurt and cannot go further. It takes weeks to kill these remnants."

The eighth plague came to an end by an exceeding strong west wind driving the locusts into the Red Sea. It is said not one locust remained in all the border of Egypt, an emphatic way of stating that not one living swarm remained in the land. As the afflicted people always make desperate efforts to destroy the swarms, it is almost certain that numberless dead and injured locusts were left behind.

The visitation was indeed a calamity of portent far beyond itself. It made the horrors of famine inevitable. The land was an utter waste and desolation, for the locusts "did eat every herb of the land, and all the fruit of the trees which the hail had left, and there remained not any green thing in the trees, or in the herbs of the field, throughout all the land of Egypt."

It also prepared the way for the pestilence, for the dead bodies of locusts corrupted the air and soil, rendering the conditions extremely favorable for the development of all kinds of pathogenic germs, and undermining the resisting power of the human body to disease. Writing of the plague in the time of Justinian, the historian Gibbon observes that "Egypt and Ethiopia have been stigmatised in every age as the original home and seminary of the plague. In a damp, hot, stagnating

air, this African fever is generated from the putrefaction of animal substances, and especially from the swarms of locusts, not less destructive in their death than in their lives." Preceding the Black Death of the fourteenth century, vast river districts had been converted into swamps, foul vapors rose everywhere, increased by the odor of putrefying locusts, which had never perhaps darkened the sun in thicker swarms. In some places, "locusts which had been blown into the sea by a hurricane, and afterwards cast dead upon the shore, produced a noxious exhalation." In China during the same period, there was a similar pestilence, which was preceded by drought, and by innumerable swarms of locusts which destroyed the vegetation.¹

This was the first plague of which the mere prediction frightened the Egyptians. The courtiers of Pharaoh besought him to let the Hebrews go: "Knowest thou not yet that Egypt is destroyed?" He was willing to grant a temporary concession to Moses, but contumeliously refused to accede to all his requests. When the plague came, the king for a time was again in a penitential mood. Then, as usual, he hardened his heart.

THE NINTH PLAGUE.

The plague of darkness.—The simoon, the violent sand-storm of deserts, which gives a reddish dun color to the atmosphere, causing a kind of twilight, and affecting strangely both man and beast, is thought by some writers to have been this plague. As the simoon never lasts more than fifteen or twenty minutes, it does not meet the requirements of the narrative.

Others suppose it to have been one of the milder sand-storms which occur during the period of fifty days known as

¹Hecker, *Epidemics of the Middle Ages.*

the *khamzin*. "Wherever the storm passes is heard a crackling sound as of electric sparks. A nervous depression seizes mankind. This is the Egyptian darkness." As these storms usually last for three days and nights, one of them of unusual strength might answer for the plague, if it were not for the objections that at the most it causes not darkness but a yellow fog, and that such a comparatively mild and familiar visitation, after the dreadful plagues which had preceded it, would not have been very terrifying to the Egyptians.

The opinion here advanced is that darkness covered the land, and a mysterious spiritual darkness covered the people, a darkness which was as the shadow of death from the immediate mental depression which it produced, and because it filled the hearts of the people with gloomy expectation of evils to come.

In the past it has happened more than once that, prior to an outbreak of bubonic plague, there have been strange atmospheric disturbances. Historians relate that in Cyprus, at the commencement of the epidemic of 1348, a pestiferous wind spread so poisonous an odor that many people, being overpowered by it, fell down suddenly and expired in dreadful agonies. The wind was followed by an earthquake and hurricane. In the same year a thick, stinking mist advanced from the east and spread itself over Italy, and this was followed by the plague.¹

A fog or darkness of this kind spreading itself along the

¹"A dense and awful fog was seen in the heavens, rising in the east, and descending upon Italy" (Mansfield Chronicle). "Ingens vapor magnitudine horribili boreali movens, region magno adspicentium terrore dilabitur" (Stalind., Chron.). "Coelum ingravescit, aër impurus sentitur; nubes erassæ ac multæ lumina cœli obstruunt, immundus ac ignavus tepor hominum emollit corpora, exortens sol pallescit" (Chalrin, De Peste, p. 50). (Hecker, Epidemics of the Middle Ages.)

valley of the Nile, perhaps due to an awful convulsion of nature, as an earthquake either in Egypt itself or in a neighboring country, was an appalling plague, not only because of the inconvenience, loss, and distress which it caused, but also because the people knew not what it presaged. It aroused their superstitious fears; they could not but feel that hostile, supernatural forces were directed against their king, to whom, as the visible representative of the sun-god, hymns had been composed which praised him as the giver of light, and the dispeller of darkness.

“Give thy attention to me, thou Sun that risest
 To enlighten the earth with thy goodness.
 The solar orb of men chasing the darkness from Egypt.
 Thou art as it were the image of thy father the Sun,
 Who rises in heaven. Thy beams penetrate the cavern.
 No place is without thy goodness.”

As in the myth of the Blind Horus, the Darkness for the time seemed to be gaining the victory over the Light.

In such a state of the public mind, weakened and distressed by a succession of strange disasters, various forms of mental disorder are very apt to appear among an ignorant and superstitious people. In the early months of 1907, the newspapers announced that the rulers of China were seriously alarmed over the famine which prevailed in their country, because they feared that a spread of hysteria might cause a general uprising. A few days later, came the report that the colored people of Jamaica, convinced that the great earthquake which occurred a short time before was a forewarning of the approaching judgment-day, were seized with religious mania, and had abandoned themselves to the excesses of religious excitement. So in earlier times. The terror which pervaded society during the epidemic of the Black Death led to the outburst of fanaticism,

with its outrages against public decency, known as Flagellatism.

“When we consider how ordinary and normal thoughts spread from one man to many and sway multitudes to the same view, it is no longer a mystery that morbid conditions of the mind should become at times no less epidemic than physical diseases. Such at least is the fact. A mental disorder may spread from man to man, and may involve whole nations. History demonstrates that dreams, delusions, superstitions, corruptions of language, all instincts and passions, even movements and cries, may assume the form, and to a certain extent may follow the laws, of epidemic diseases. There are records of a histrionic plague, when crowds conceived themselves players, and traversed the streets, and sank and died, repeating verses and exhibiting extravagant gesticulations; and of whole communities being stricken with night-mare, which was so general as to be supposed contagious. In one age hundreds are found possessed by Satan; in another, larger numbers are converted into wolves. In the constitution of the human mind, and in the education and the habits of life prevailing, there are still elements capable of realising the catastrophe suggested by Bishop Butler’s question: What is to prevent a whole nation becoming mad?”

Is it not possible that the Egyptian people, in biblical language, were smitten with madness, blindness, and astonishment of heart, as the Israelites, just after they left Egypt, were threatened with if they did evil? (Deut. xxviii. 27.)

That the preternatural darkness of the ninth plague, with the dire foreboding it aroused of worse calamities to follow, led to the occurrence among the Egyptians of mental disorders is extremely probable; and as traditions in the East are transmitted from generation to generation with great fullness and accuracy, the account of this plague in “The Wisdom of Solomon” may be very close to the truth. According to this Jewish scripture, the Egyptians were not only in physical darkness, but were also in mental and spiritual darkness, and were the victims of strange hallucinations.

“For when unrighteous men thought to oppress the holy nation; they being shut up in their houses, the prisoners of darkness, and

fettered with the bonds of a long night, lay there exiled from the eternal providence.

“For while they supposed to lie hid in their secret sins, they were scattered under a dark veil of forgetfulness, being horribly astonished, and troubled with strange sights.

“For neither might the corner that held them keep them from fear: but noises as of waters falling down sounded about them, and sad visions appeared unto them with heavy countenances.

“No power of the fire might give them light: neither could the bright flames of the stars endure to lighten that horrible night.

“Only there appeared unto them a fire kindled of itself, very dreadful: for being much terrified, they thought the things which they saw to be worse than the sight they saw not.”

“They that promised to drive away terrors and troubles from a sick soul, were sick themselves of fear, worthy to be laughed at.

“For though no terrible thing did fear them; yet being scared with beasts that passed by, and hissing of serpents,

“They died for fear, refusing to look upon the air, which could of no side be avoided.”

“They were partly vexed with monstrous apparitions, and partly fainted, their heart failing them; for a sudden fear, and not looked for, came upon them.

“So then whosoever there fell down was straitly kept, shut up in a prison without iron bars.

“For whether he were a husbandman, or shepherd, or a laborer in the desert, he was overtaken and endured that necessity, which could not be avoided; for they were all bound with one chain of darkness.

“Whether it were a whistling wind, or a melodious noise of birds among the spreading branches, or a pleasing fall of water running violently,

“Or a terrible sound of stones cast down, or a running that could not be seen of skipping beasts, or a roaring voice of most savage wild beasts, or a rebounding echo from the hollow mountains: these things made them to swoon for fear.”

“Over them was spread a heavy night, an image of that darkness which should afterward receive them; but yet were they unto themselves more grievous than the darkness.”

Such hallucinations are not unknown to medical science. A French traveler has described, under the name of “*Le Ragle*,” a transient hallucinatory disorder of the senses which happens not infrequently to wayfarers and dwellers in desert places,

especially to such as are in a state of general enfeeblement from antecedent sickness, as from extreme fatigue, want of food, and it may be even from depressing emotions such as anxiety, terror, and the like. This was almost exactly the condition of the Egyptians. The succession of plagues had brought them to a state of enfeeblement: scarcity of food, and sickness, had undermined the strength of the body; property losses had brought anxieties; regarded as portents, the plagues had shaken their fortitude and filled them with fears; mind and body were still further depressed by the *khamzin*, with its hot desert winds and violent sand-storms; then came the mysterious darkness of the ninth plague. It is not to be wondered at if they were thrown into mental disorder. Their hallucinations as depicted in the "Wisdom of Solomon" resembled very closely indeed the "hallucinations of the desert" of the French traveler, as may be seen from the following description:—

"These hallucinations are mostly of the sense of sight, more rarely of hearing, occasionally of smell and taste, and sometimes even, it would seem, of common sensation; and they vary much in type, not only in different persons, but also in their successive occurrences in the same person.

"Whoever becomes the subject of these hallucinations sees in the stones lying in his path either great rocks or buildings, or the footprints of animals; the wheel-track changes before his eyes into cultivated fields or meadows; a piece of level ground in the shadow, especially under moonlight, is taken for an abyss, or a ravine, or a spring of water; long trains of camels or wagons rise up before him, or files of soldiers whose very uniforms he thinks he can recognize. At another time he seems to be surrounded by extremely slim trees of immense height, whose foliage shuts out the sky overhead, while it does not screen the stars. Sometimes these objects seem to the victim of illusion to be so near that he thinks to put his hand on them; at other times he sees them far in the distance, and changing their forms according as he looks with open or half closed eyes.

"Less frequent than these hallucinations of sight are illusions of hearing; and the latter are particularly common with those whose

ears have been stupefied by the roaring of violent desert winds, or irritated by the sand, or who may be subject to noises in the ears. As in the case of illusions of sight, sensory impressions are confused and falsified, so that all kinds of phantasmagorias arise; the rustling of herbage, the noise of a stone striking the ground, the sighing of the wind, turn to a favorite air of music, the report of a gun, and so on."¹

If the Egyptians were afflicted with hallucinations of this nature during the darkness of a dense and awful fog, it rationally explains the terrors of the ninth plague.

THE TENTH PLAGUE.

The death of the first-born.—"Meanwhile on a sudden, a severe plague fell upon that corrupt generation which soon destroyed such numbers of them, that the living scarce sufficed to bury the dead. Yet those that survived could not be withdrawn from the spiritual death which their sins had incurred, either by the death of their friends, or the fear of their own." In these few words the Venerable Bede, in his ecclesiastical history, describes a pestilence which devastated England. It is not an inapt description of the moral state of the Egyptians, and of the judgment which fell upon them in the tenth plague.

According to the views here propounded, the sixth plague was an epidemic of *pestis minor*, or plague in its mildest form, which had prevailed during the winter months and then had rapidly declined with the setting in of hot weather. Many had been affected by it, including the king; but, as the mortality was low, and the true character of the disease not perceived, the plague made no deep impression. But in Egypt, as in other countries, the mild epidemic of one year is often

¹D'Escayrac de Lauture, Memoire sur "le ragle," ou hallucination du desert. Also Hirsch, Geographical and Historical Pathology, vol. III. p. 530.

followed by an epidemic the next year of plague in its most malignant forms. This was the course of events now.

Weakened in body and cowed in mind, the Egyptians were not so well able to resist the second epidemic as they were the first, for not only had the disease increased in virulency, but during the interval there had been the plagues of hail, locusts, and darkness, bringing in their train the evils of dearth, the defiling of the soil with the dead bodies of innumerable locusts, obscuration and depression of mind, in short, general suffering in mind, body, and estate, so that in their debilitated state they readily fell victims to the contagion. In the words of the Psalmist, God had made a path for his anger, and then spared not their soul from death, but gave their life over to the pestilence.

The ordinary form of bubonic plague (*pestis major*) is characterized by fever, headache, delirium, or stupor; (in the Justinian epidemic the mind was first attacked, anxious fears and saddening visions seeming to overpower the reasoning faculties;) large and painful buboes appear on different parts of the body; the face is flushed; the eyes red and turbid; the tongue black, dry, and fissured, and sometimes paralyzed; the teeth and gums covered with sordes.¹ In the worst cases, dark

¹ Evagrius, in his "Ecclesiastical History" (lib. iv. c. xxviii.) describes a diphtheritic or tonsillar form: "It took some men first in the head, made their eyes as red as blood, and puffed up their cheeks; afterwards it fell at their throats, and whomsoever it took, it despatched him out of the way." Attacking a famine-stricken population, perhaps this is the fearful plague mentioned by the prophet Zechariah: "Their flesh shall consume away while they stand on their tongue shall consume away in their mouth. . . . And so shall their feet, and their eyes shall consume away in their sockets, and be the plague of the horse, of the mule, of the camel, and of the ass, and of all the beasts. . . . And if the family of Egypt go not up, and come not, upon them shall be the plague. . . . This shall be the punishment of Egypt."

petechia spots, pustules, and carbuncles appear, the "tokens" mentioned by historians. This form is only indirectly infectious, and while very fatal, is not so bad as the septicæmic and pneumonic varieties.

In the septicæmic or fulminant form, the system of the patient is overwhelmed, as it were, by the infection; he is struck down suddenly, and dies before the characteristic signs of the disease have time to appear.

In the very fatal pneumonic variety, directly infectious from man to man, the lungs bear the brunt of the infection, and buboes usually are absent. (As "boils" are not mentioned in connection with the tenth plague as they are with the sixth, this pneumonic form was possibly the most common in the second epidemic.) It begins with a chill followed by nausea, dizziness, pains in the head and body, and fever; in a few days the pulmonary symptoms appear,—pain in the chest, rapid and difficult breathing, incessant cough, dark and bloody expectoration, all combined with a sickening odor from both body and breath; later there are hemorrhages, the heart and respiration fail, the patient dies. This was the "Black Death" which swept over Europe and other parts of the world in the fourteenth century, and caused the death of 25,000,000 people. In confirmation of this conjecture as to the specific nature of the tenth plague, is the fact that Egypt was one of the countries visited by the Black Death. "Here also inflammation of the lungs was predominant, and destroyed quickly and infallibly with burning heat and expectoration of blood. Here too the breath of the sick spread a deadly contagion, and human aid was in vain as it was fatal to those who approached the infected."¹

¹ Degulnes, *Histoire générale des Huns*, etc., tom. iv. p. 226; Hecker, *op. cit.*

This was the last, and surely the most dreadful, in the series of heavy judgments which smote the Egyptians before they were willing to liberate the Hebrews. Commencing in the winter, it lasted until the following spring and summer, reaching its height in March and April, just about the time when the exodus occurred. As the weeks passed, and it increased in virulency and contagious power, the number of its victims correspondingly increased. The mortality may be estimated by that of subsequent epidemics, In the city of Cairo alone, when the Black Death was raging, from ten to fifteen thousand people died each day. In 1603 there was an epidemic of plague in Egypt which destroyed at least one million of the inhabitants. Who can picture the horrors of the plague, intensified as these were by the famine which followed the plagues of hail and locusts? "Encompassed by the wilderness, the unfortunate natives were unable to escape; they died in heaps; the Nile valley resembled a field of battle; each village became a charnel house; skeletons sat grinning at street corners, and the winds clattered among dead men's bones. A few survivors lingered miserably through the year, browsing on the thorny shrubs of the desert, or sharing with the vultures their horrible repast." This is a description of plague in the most remote period of Egyptian history, but it may give some idea of its ravages at the time of the exodus.

During the course of the epidemic, there came a week when the mortality was appallingly great, perhaps one particular night¹ when it seemed as if the angel of the pestilence had in-

¹"The plague was so violent that it not only took away all mean of preparing a good end, but *in a few hours* in Surat, Daman, and Thana, carried off whole cityfuls of people, and at Ta'tha in Sind killed 80,000 souls" (Gemelli Careri in Churchill's *Voyages*, vol. iv. p. 191; Simpson, *Treatise on Plague*, p. 45).

Referring to the destruction of Sennacherib's army, a modern

deed passed through the land, and smitten every Egyptian household. "Suddenly, visions of horrible dreams troubled them sore, and terrors came upon them unlooked for. And one thrown here, and another there half-dead, shewed the cause of his death. And a lamentable noise was carried abroad for children that were bewailed. The master and the servant were punished after one manner; and like as the king, so suffered the common person. So they altogether had innumerable dead with one kind of death; neither were the living sufficient to bury them; for in one moment, the noblest offspring of them was destroyed." The whole nation was in a state of panic and woe. Pharaoh rose up in the night, he and all his servants, and all the Egyptians; and there was a great cry in Egypt; for there was not a house where there was not one dead. And the Egyptians were urgent upon the Hebrews

writer makes this statement: "Those who have watched the swift march of pestilence through the plains of India, when in one night thousands are sometimes carried off by cholera—who have seen individuals drop dead within an hour of the first attack,—will not be disposed to cavil at the truth of the Scripture narrative, either in respect of the multitude or the rapidity of the slaughter of a single night. At a time when profane history is perfectly trustworthy, we learn that a pestilence carried off in Rome in a single day not less than ten thousand people. And in our own land [England] within two years of the time at which we write, a pest, scarcely less to be dreaded than any of ancient times—scarlet fever—has stricken down thousands of its feeble victims in a few hours, assuming a magnitude and an extent which, could all the victims of one day be collected together in a mass, would appall the mind of the sternest" (Cornhill Magazine, May, 1865).

Defoe, in his *Journal of the Plague Year*, has the following: "Nay, one of the most eminent Physicians, who has since published in Latin an Account of those Times, and of his Observations, says that in one Week there died Twelve Thousand People, and that particularly there died Four Thousand in one Night; tho' I do not remember that there ever was any such particular Night so remarkably fatal, as that such a Number died in it."

to send them out of the land in haste; for they said, We be all dead men (Ex. xii. 33). Like the god in the Assyrian legend of Kutha, Pharaoh no doubt uttered the despairing cry: "Verily now, and I, what have I left to reign over? I am a king who brings not peace to his land, a prince who brings not peace to his hosts. Why have I established only corpses, and left a desert? Terror of men: with night, death, and plague I have cursed it."

"O eloquent, just and mightie Death! whom none could advise, thou hast perswaded; what none hath dared, thou hast done; and whom all the world hath flattered, thou only hast cast out of the world and despised."

Nothing could have restrained the Egyptians more effectively from venting their anger and hatred upon the Hebrews, and allowing them to depart in peace, than this terrible epidemic which plunged them into the depths of misery, and benumbed all their faculties and activities, misery which the prayers and incantations of their priests were unable to alleviate, so that all felt themselves in the grasp of a mighty Power, whom it were folly to resist. When the Hebrews had gone, there was a reaction. "What is this we have done, that we have let Israel go from serving us?" This is in accord with human nature. Following the deep despair felt when an epidemic is at its worst, there is often a total revulsion of feeling, with a display of the worst passions of the human heart. The historic verisimilitude of the narrative is very striking.

There are certain points of this tenth plague which require separate consideration. First, as to the meaning of "first-born." If the first-born only of men and animals were singled out and destroyed, then the plague is inexplicable on natural grounds. But is the term to be taken quite literally? In the

Bible it is often used figuratively. Thus Christ is said to be "the first-born of every creature," and "the first-born of the dead." Isaiah speaks of "the first-born of the poor," i.e., the most miserable of the poor (Isa. xiv. 30). In the book of Job, one of the characters, referring to the doom of the wicked, states that "calamity shall be at his side; it shall devour the members of his body, yea, the first-born of death shall devour his members" (xviii. 13). Here "first-born of death" refers to death's chief instrument, some fatal malady. The writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews mentions the "church of the first-born," meaning thereby those who possessed the privilege of heavenly citizenship. The whole Israelitish nation is elsewhere spoken of as "the first-born of God," i.e., objects of his special favor. In Psalm lxxxix. 27 it is said, "I will make him my first-born," meaning that David would be put in the position of the first-born. In Egyptian literature, we come across such sentences as: "Hail, Ra, thou who art content, thy heart is glad by reason of thy beautiful law of the day; thou comest forth at the east, and the divine first-born beings who are in thy presence, cry out with gladness unto thee." In another place, the Chancellor-in-chief, Nu, the triumphant, saith, "I have taken my seat among the first-born gods of Nut." In a passage already quoted from the Apocrypha, those who died from the tenth plague were said to be "the noblest offspring" of the Egyptians.

In the light of this usage, the term "first-born" need not be taken too literally. The Psalmist (lxxviii. 50-51), referring to the plagues of the exodus, says that God

"made a path for his anger;
He spared not their soul from death,
But gave their life over to the pestilence;
And smote all the first-born in Egypt,
The chief of their strength in the tents of Ham."

And in another Psalm (cv. 36) it is said:—

“ He smote all the first-born in their land,
The chief of all their strength.”

In the first passage the words “their soul” do not refer to the Egyptians in general, nor to godless Israelites, but to the first-born of the Egyptians, who are described in the (doubtless) true text as “the sons that they delighted in,”¹ an explanation confirmed by the parallelism of the second passage. If this is the meaning of first-born, the chief of all their strength, it harmonizes very well with the age statistics of plague epidemics.² The same explanation is applicable to the death of the first-born of animals: the best and strongest succumbed.

¹ Encyclopædia Biblica, article “Plague.”

² When the plague was at Constantinople in A.D. 558, “people of all ages perished indiscriminately, but especially the young and vigorous and in the flower of youth, and of them the males and the females were not affected so much” (Agathlæ Scholastici Historiarum). (Simpson, Treatise on Plague, p. 12.)

In the English epidemic of 1348, “it was the young and strong that the plague chiefly attacked. The old and feeble it commonly spared” (Le Baker de Swynebroke). (Quoted in Simpson’s Treatise, p. 24.)

In an epidemic of plague in 1878 at Hillah, on the banks of the Euphrates, 1,826 patients died. Of these, 277 belonged to the first decade of life; 617 to the second; 432 to the third; 292 to the fourth. Altogether 1,618, out of a total of 1,826, were under forty years of age, and of these nearly 900 (to be exact 894) were under twenty.

It has been recently suggested that the visitation of plague to the town of Hamelin in 1284 is the historic fact which underlies the legend of “The Pied Piper of Hamelin.” After destroying the rats which swarmed in the town, the plague broke out among the people. Most of those who died were children. On their way to burial, the corpses of the little ones were borne along the Bungen-strasse,—

“ Where anyone playing on pipe or tabor
Was sure for the future to lose his labor,
Nor suffered they hostelry or tavern
To shock with mirth a street so solemn,—

to the plague pit dug in the mountain side without the city. (Mackintosh, *The Lancet*, April 2, 1904, p. 970.)

Another moot point is the exemption of the Israelites from the plague. This is remarkable, but not incredible. As already observed, epidemics of plague differ immensely and curiously in their diffusive power. Of places apparently under the same conditions, and in free communication with one another, one is repeatedly infected, the other never. In India there are two villages on the same mountain, with the same aspect, scarcely five hundred yards apart, of which at every visitation of plague, one always escaped, the other always suffered.¹

During the first outbreak of plague in Canton in 1894, in which 80,000 out of the 1,600,000 inhabitants died, the disease never crossed the narrow creek, some twenty yards wide, which separated plague-infected houses in the Chinese town from the European settlement of Shamien; neither Europeans, nor the Chinese servants on the premises, nor the rats, in the foreign settlements, were affected.

At Poona, in India, over six months elapsed before the disease established itself at Kirkee, which was in daily communication with Poona and only separated by a river spanned by a bridge.²

Again, long ago it was observed in Egypt, that Alexandria might have a terrible epidemic, while Cairo entirely escaped; in another epidemic the converse relation might obtain; and this in spite of unchecked communication. "Almost all the authorities agree concerning the diffusion of the plague in Egypt, that lower Egypt has always been the headquarters of the disease; that it has not infrequently extended to upper Egypt, but has always reached its limit in Assouan, never going higher than the first cataract, and never entering Nubia."³

¹ Allbutt, *System of Medicine*, vol. i. p. 924.

² *The Lancet*, June 29, 1907.

³ Hirsch, *Geogr. and Hist. Pathol.*, vol. i. p. 506.

At the time of the Black Death, certain cities in an unaccountable manner remained quite free.¹

To the Hebrews, who referred all natural and historical phenomena immediately to God as first and universal cause, this exemption was proof of his loving protection, and perhaps led the Psalmist (xci. 5-7) to say:—

“Thou shalt not be afraid for the terror by night,
Nor for the arrow [plague] that flieth by day;
For the pestilence that walketh in darkness,
Nor for the destruction that wasteth at noonday.
A thousand shall fall at thy side,
And ten thousand at thy right hand;
But it shall not come nigh thee.”

Lastly, reference may be made here to an Egyptian tradition, recorded by Josephus, in his controversy with Apion. The latter alleged that after the exodus, “when the Jews had travelled a six days’ journey, they had buboes in their groins; and that on this account it was that they rested on the seventh day, as having got safely to that country which is now called Judæa; that then they preserved the language of the Egyptians and called that day the Sabbath, for that malady of buboes in their groin was named Sabbatosis by the Egyptians.” Josephus in his reply, after pointing out that the words *sabbo* and “Sabbath” differ widely in their meaning, admits that the word *sabbo* denoted among the Egyptians the malady of a bubo in the groin. Considering the wonderful perpetuity of tradition in the East, this is strong evidence that bubonic plague was epidemic at the time of the exodus. In the transmission of the story from one generation to another through centuries, national pride and prejudice made the Egyptians shift the disease from their own ancestors, and impute it to the Hebrews. Such perversions of history are not uncommon.

¹Hecker, *Epidemics of the Middle Ages*; Simpson, *Treatise on Plague*, pp. 36, 43.

It may be objected that if the view of the plagues here presented be the true one, then they were nothing more than the operations of nature, indifferent alike to the evil and the good, so that the Egyptians were astray in regarding them as indications of God's displeasure, and the Israelites were astray in thinking they were signs of his guardianship. To this it may be replied, that in the Bible,

"nature with its ordered sequence of cause and effect, laws without which natural science is impossible, the uniformity, the coherence, the intelligibility of nature as an organised whole.—everything is subordinated to the one dominant thought of the omnipresence of God, and his care for the creatures he has made in his likeness. . . . Those observed uniformities, which we, in our realistic way, have come to think of as somehow controlling nature, are elastic and pliant under his hand. The moral purpose is everywhere supreme over physical order, not merely as if it were a higher power to which the physical is compelled to yield unwilling submission, but as that in which the physical order finds its own *raison d'être*."

Is not this teaching true?

Suppose we take the lowest view, that Moses was an extremely clever man who arrived in Egypt with the intention of delivering his people just when a series of terrible calamities was about to fall on the country, and that as each calamity fell, he announced at once that it was a judgment of the God of the Hebrews; to say the least, the concatenation of events was wonderful, and if all were due to chance, it is difficult not to believe that Providence the chance did guide. This was the impression made upon those most immediately concerned. The Hebrews regarded their scatheless deliverance as a marvelous exhibition of God's protecting care. Was it possible for them to think otherwise? Their oppressors abominated them, had made their lives bitter with hard service, had tried to exterminate them as a nation by destroying all the male children; and the hatred of the Egyptians was intensified by the plagues

which came upon them, aggravated as these were by the announcement that each plague was sent by the God of their captives. The dominant race when greatly exasperated by those in its power, is seldom restrained by just or merciful considerations, as the subsequent history of the Jews abundantly testifies; for it has been their sad destiny to be hated and oppressed in every age and by every nation. To mention but a few familiar instances. The Assyrians and Babylonians exiled or slaughtered them. A Persian king readily assents to measures for the extermination of those in his kingdom, simply because "their laws are diverse from those of every people; neither keep they the king's laws; therefore it is not for the king's profit to suffer them" (Esther iii. 8). At the destruction of Jerusalem, hundreds of thousands were exiled or slain.

These things were done under the shade of the dry tree of heathenism, but under the green tree of Christendom the Jews have fared little better. In 1253, those who were in England, no longer able to withstand the constant hardships to which they were subjected in person and property, begged of their own accord to be allowed to leave the country; in 1290 they were driven from their shores, pursued by the execrations of an infuriated people. In France, from the eleventh to the fourteenth century, their history is a series of successive massacres and banishments. So in Germany, in Italy, and in Spain. Of special interest, in connection with this subject of the Plagues, is the fact that at the time of the Black Death, they were everywhere accused of the most hideous crimes, and were murdered and burned by thousands. "In short, whatever deeds fanaticism, revenge and desperation, in fearful combination could instigate mankind to perform,—and where in such cases is the limit? were executed in the year 1349 through-

out Germany, Italy, and France, with impunity, and in the eyes of all the world.”

Is it any wonder then that the Jews of every generation have regarded the deliverance of their ancestors at the time of the exodus as an unique event, wrought by the mighty hand and outstretched arm of their God, and that it has sustained them in the course of their long and troubled history, and kept them true to their vocation of being God's witnesses and messengers in the vast work of redeeming the world? In the wake of their prophets and psalmists, they never weary of dwelling on what God did for them when they were a child-people. “When Israel was a child I, the Lord, loved him, and out of Egypt called him to be my son.” If the Jews had not been sustained by such memories, if in their despair when calamities fell upon them, they had forsaken the faith of their forefathers instead of recognizing that in such events they were being trained for their high calling, the world's loss would have been great and lasting, perhaps irreparable. The salvation of the world has been of the Jews.

The Egyptians suffered greatly, but their sufferings were neither meaningless nor fruitless. The plagues actually were manifestations of the displeasure of God, inasmuch as his displeasure is always revealed through the laws of nature against whatever is evil either in the physical or in the moral world, and the Egyptians were offenders in both. The worst of the plagues—the fifth, the sixth, the tenth, perhaps also the third and the fourth—sprang from insalubrious conditions of the soil, the filth of houses and streets, and from the neglect of the laws of personal health. The misery of the other plagues was deepened by superstitious fears. Therefore, by means of the plagues the Egyptians were being taught, and through them mankind, the laws of physiological and sanitary righteousness,

and that such laws are bound up with the moral law. For superstition and bigotry hinder the perception of the laws of health, and obstruct their enforcement. In India at the present time the efforts of the British government to extirpate the plague are thwarted in every direction by the religious beliefs and customs of the natives, so that the disease is pursuing its course almost unchecked, its victims in the first six months of 1907 numbering over one million. So with the Egyptians. Their mummification of the bodies of those who died of the plague did much to spread the disease.¹ On the other hand, in this and other epidemics, when the plague was at its worst, thousands died whose bodies it was not possible to embalm, and for whom no funeral rites were performed. This helped to break the strength of low or immature religious customs, and prepared men's minds for the introduction of new and better ideas. The stern teachings of nature made the Egyptians the pioneers of medicine and sanitation. The Papyrus Ebers proves that, centuries before Hippocrates, there were learned men in Egypt who could make intelligent observations of disease, combine complicated prescriptions, and use them with judgment. If they made no great discoveries in medical science, at least their errors were warnings to men, and their experiences the raw material of knowledge.

Famine and pestilence, the great scourges of olden time, are now felt only, or principally, in the countries of the East, where they still destroy myriads of men, women, and children. In this country of abundant harvests, with constant and rapid

¹ Undertakers and those who lay out the dead are apt to contract the disease. In Hongkong many of the undertakers perished, and there is a general impression among the Chinese that the corpse is more dangerous than the living patient. Attendance at funerals, especially when connected with feasting or ceremonial rites, is often dangerous, plague afterwards affecting those who have been present (Simpson's Treatise on Plague, p. 213).

means of communication with other countries, there is no fear of famine. With the strict enforcement of sanitary and quarantine laws, now that yellow fever has been conquered, there is little danger of any terrible epidemic sweeping over the country. In the midst of all this plenty and security, perhaps there is a tendency to forget the pit whence we were digged, and to forget or doubt the heavy penalties which those who lived before us had to pay for their ignorance and violation of the laws of health. The records and traditions of past calamities ought not to be rejected unless clearly proved to have no basis of historic fact. In any event, it is much easier to believe that an annual festival or other celebration by a whole nation, is held in memory of some episode that really took place, than to believe the celebration came first and a story was afterwards concocted to account for it. A learned canon writes: "Even Old Testament critics have thought it worth while to conjecture that some calamities which may have fallen upon Egypt may have been transformed into the so-called plagues. A needless suggestion." Why needless, as if the matter were no longer open to consideration? As bearing on the credibility of narratives of epidemics in ancient times, we quote from the letter of a former canon of the church, the poet Petrarch, canon of the cathedral of Parma, who was an actual eye-witness of the scenes to which he alludes. At the time of the Black Death, he wrote to his brother, in words which might fittingly have been used by a contemporary of Moses: "Will posterity ever believe these things when we, who see, can scarcely credit them? We should think we were dreaming if we did not with our eyes, when we walk abroad, see the city in mourning with funerals, and returning to our home find it empty, and thus know that what we lament is real. Oh! happy people of the future, who have not known these miseries, and perchance will class our testimony with the fables."