

THE IDIOM OF EXAGGERATED CONTRAST.

“I DESIRED mercy and not sacrifice.” These words from the prophecy of Hosea (vi. 6), quoted on two occasions by our Lord (St. Matt. ix. 13 and xii. 7), are explained on the principle of Hebrew parallelism by the succeeding clause, “and the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings.” Indeed, the Septuagint translators have obliterated all structural distinction between the two parts of the sentence, rendering, as they do, the first hemistich, “I desire mercy *rather than* sacrifice.”

We have here the most familiar instance of a Hebrew idiom by which, when two things are contrasted, one of less importance than the other—or for the time being so regarded—the inferior is spoken of as of no account whatsoever.

This divine declaration was not intended to intimate that sacrifice in itself was displeasing to the Almighty. The sacrifices of the Mosaic ritual had been appointed by God Himself, and to desist from offering them would have been an act of open rebellion against Him. It was intended to impress upon the Jewish mind, in the most emphatic way, the immense superiority of mercy; to enforce the lesson that ceremonial acts can never be substituted for moral duties; that ritual is valuable only so far as it is the expression of the true religion of the heart.

Among other instances of this mode of speech, found in the Old Testament, may be mentioned the well-known words of Psalm li. 16, 17: “Thou desirest not sacrifice, else would I give it: Thou delightest not in burnt offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit.” Also the message of Joel (ii. 13) to sinful Israel: “Rend your heart and not your garments.” Perhaps the strongest passage of all

is Jeremiah xxii. 23. "I spake not unto 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 commanded I them, saying, Obey my voice." Here words are used which seem to contradict the account given in Exodus of the institution of the Passover sacrifice, in order to bring into full relief the far greater importance of obedience.

This Hebrew idiom "of exaggerated contrast" as, for want of a better term, I may call it, would be well understood by the writers of the New Testament, and our Lord by His double quotation from Hosea, gave it His express sanction. We need not therefore be surprised if we find it occasionally influencing their language. And in fact there are several passages in the New Testament which cannot be satisfactorily explained except as instances of this idiom.

Take a passage which has sorely perplexed many conscientious Christian women—St. Peter's exhortation to wives (1 St. Peter iii. 3, 4): "Whose adorning let it not be that outward adorning of plaiting the hair, or of wearing of gold, or of putting on of apparel; but let it be the hidden man of the heart, in that which is not corruptible, even the ornament of a meek and quiet spirit, which is in the sight of God of great price." Did St. Peter intend to issue a sumptuary edict, proscribing certain fashions or ornaments? His words go quite too far for this. Taken literally, they plainly forbid ordinary neatness or even decency. And immediately afterwards the Apostle holds up as patterns of the true kind of adornment the holy women of old, mentioning Sara by name. But he had no reason to suppose that she refused to adopt the usual female fashions of her time, that she would have thought it unseemly to put on jewels of silver and jewels of gold and raiment such as those which her daughter-in-law Rebekah

(another holy woman of old) willingly accepted from Abraham's servant! When St. John compared the holy city which he saw in a vision to "a bride adorned for her husband," he said nothing, we may be sure, out of harmony with this exhortation of his brother Apostle. No, what St. Peter evidently meant was, to contrast the two kinds of adornment, the inner and the outward; to indicate that the ornament of a meek and quiet spirit was woman's truest ornament; and in order to emphasize the contrast he made use of the forcible Hebrew idiom which he found ready to his hand.

Let us now turn to 1 Corinthians i. 17. "Christ sent me," says St. Paul, "not to baptize, but to preach the gospel." What! would the Apostle of the Gentiles have us understand, contrary to his own assertions elsewhere, that his commission was less ample than that of the original apostles, yea, that his powers were inferior to those of the humblest minister of Christ? Impossible: nay, in this very passage he guards us against a literal interpretation of his words, for he mentions certain persons who had been baptized by him. Surely we have here another instance of the idiom "of exaggerated contrast," St. Paul not meaning in the least to deny his authority to baptize, but simply wishing to express in the most vigorous way his conviction that, his position and gifts being what they were, preaching the gospel was the duty peculiarly assigned to him, the duty to which all his energies must be devoted; that the work of baptizing, however important in itself—and the apostle had no thought of disparaging it—yet, as being a matter of ritual, and needing no special talents in the officiant, might with more fitness be left to inferior ministers. There was an additional reason, too, which made it desirable that St. Paul should be relieved, as far as possible, from this latter function, namely, lest those who were baptized by his hands might suppose that they belonged to him in a pre-

eminent degree, and thus encouragement should be given to the spirit of faction, so strongly denounced in this epistle. "I thank God," he says, "that I baptized none of you, but Crispus and Gaius; *lest any should say that I had baptized in mine own name.*"

Let us next consider St. John's comment (vii. 39) on our Lord's words at the Feast of Tabernacles: "But this spake He of the Spirit, which they that believe on Him should receive: for the Spirit was not yet *given*; because Jesus was not yet glorified." The word "given" is not in the original; but even supposing that it should be supplied, how astounding is St. John's assertion? When we know that the Spirit strove with men before the Flood (Gen. vi. 3), that He gave Samson his strength (Judg. xiv., xv.), and Bezaleel his wisdom (Exod. xxxi. 2), that He enlightened the seventy elders in the wilderness (Num. xi. 25), that He dwelt among the people in their wanderings, grieved at their rebellion, and finally brought them to the land of rest (Isa. lxiii. 10, 11, 14), that David in his penitence implored God not to take His Holy Spirit from him (Ps. li. 11), that Isaiah was able to say (lxi. 1), "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me," that prophet after prophet in like manner claimed the Divine Afflatus, that, in short, testimonies to the presence and work of the Spirit among men are scattered broadcast through the pages of the Old Testament, and the New Testament bears its witness that "in old time holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost (2 St. Peter i. 21)—when we know all this, how are we to understand St. John's statement that before Christ's glorification the Spirit was not given? Commentators supply the right interpretation when they explain that the Evangelist had in view the vast increase in the measure of the gift of the Spirit which should follow the Ascension, that he meant that the Spirit was never before so given,—so amply, so generally, so efficaciously. But

such an exposition does manifest violence to the Apostle's words. We may feel sure that this is what he must mean. But we can give no intelligible explanation of his strange language, unless we regard it as shaped by this Hebrew idiom.

But not only does our Lord quote with approval "I will have mercy and not sacrifice," this idiom "of exaggerated contrast" finds place also in His own sacred utterances. How else are we to understand the words spoken on one occasion to persons who were more concerned about their temporal than their spiritual wants, "Labour not for the meat which perisheth, but for that meat which endureth unto everlasting life" (St. John vi. 27)? Christ surely did not mean to condemn industry, the toiling for an honest livelihood, and to recommend idleness and sloth. St. Paul's command, "If any will not work, neither shall he eat," (2 Thess. iii. 10), would not have been disapproved by his Master. No, Christ's "Labour not" must mean, make not this your chief aim, the main object upon which you will spend your energies; seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness; see to it that the interests of your immortal soul, its food and sustenance, take precedence of all care for your bodily welfare.

A parallel passage in the Sermon on the Mount requires a similar interpretation: "Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth . . . but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven" (St. Matt. vi. 19, 20). A literal compliance with the negative half of this precept would discourage thrift, destroy commerce, and deprive the world of the manifold benefits of capital. It is plain that our Lord, in contrasting the two kinds of treasures, uses this emphatic idiom in order to point out in the most forcible way the kind which is beyond measure the more important.

"Call no man your father upon the earth: for one is your Father, which is in heaven" (St. Matt. xxiii. 9).

This is a text which has been most unfairly pressed into the service of religious controversy, interpreted as a divine prohibition of the application of the paternal title to Christian pastors, for example, the addressing of bishops as "fathers in God." If thus understood, it condemns by anticipation St. Paul when he claims the name as expressive of the relation in which he stands to his Corinthian converts (1 Cor. iv. 14, 15), "As my beloved sons I warn you. For though ye have ten thousand instructors in Christ, yet have ye not many fathers, for in Christ Jesus I have begotten you through the gospel." But if our Lord's words are to be taken literally, we have no right to place any such artificial restriction on their meaning. "Call no man your father upon earth" forbids that title as much in the family as when used as an expression of religious veneration and respect. "Father" is completely banished from human lips, except as a designation of the Parent of all! It is plain then that the only explanation which fully and adequately accounts for this command is that we have here another verbal parallel to, "I will have mercy and not sacrifice." It is an emphatic proclamation of our heavenly Father's paramount claim on the love and obedience of His children—an emphatic prohibition of any earthly relationship, natural or spiritual, being allowed to come into competition with His authority.

The last instance of this idiom that I shall adduce is perhaps the most remarkable of all—Christ's dictum as to the best kind of hospitality (St. Luke xiv. 12, 13), "Then said He also to him that bade Him, When thou makest a dinner or a supper, call not thy friends, nor thy brethren, neither thy kinsmen, nor thy rich neighbours. . . . But when thou makest a feast, call the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind." This saying seems to cut at the root of social life, to condemn those gatherings of equals, friends and relations, which form so large an element in the brightness

and joy of human existence. But how can this be so, when our Lord by His frequent presence at entertainments of this nature has stamped them with His approval? What were the marriage at Cana, Levi's feast, the feast at the house of Simon the leper, but friendly gatherings precisely of the kind which His words here appear to denounce? His own solemn farewell was spoken at a supper which He shared with His dearest friends. This very command of His was given on an occasion when He had gone into the house of one of the chief Pharisees to eat bread, and when a large company of guests apparently of the same social standing as the host had been invited. The whole tenor of Christ's teaching and example is opposed to the supposition that He designed to proclaim war against the ordinary customs of society so far as they were innocent in themselves. He did not wish to withdraw his disciples from the world, only from the world's evil. As we must therefore put aside the literal and surface meaning of these words of Christ, the question arises, How are they to be explained? And I do not see how any interpretation can be satisfactory that is not grounded on the frank acknowledgment that our Lord's language here takes its form from that mode of speech with which the Hebrew scriptures familiarised Him. "Call not," here must mean, "Call not exclusively," or "in preference to others." What Christ intended was not to forbid all hospitality between friends and equals, but to point out what was, beyond comparison, a better sort of hospitality. He wished, further, to indicate the condition which hallowed and made lawful the former kind of entertainment. His words may be thus paraphrased, "First be generous to those who cannot recompense thee, give of thy substance to bring relief and blessing to thy poor and afflicted brethren, and then, and then alone, mayest thou with a good conscience spread thy board for guests of another class."

These passages present a series of perplexing problems which may not be put aside on the plea that common sense, guided by the general tenor of holy scripture, enables us to guess at the correct solution. The question must be faced, Why did the sacred writers use language which apparently conceals their true meaning and requires their readers, if they would understand them aright, to put a strained, unnatural interpretation on their words?

I have suggested in this paper what I believe to be the only satisfactory answer to this question.

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