

AGUR.

ONE may follow most critics (except Frankenberg, who edits the Proverbs in Nowack's *Handkommentar*), in separating Proverbs xxx. 5, 6 from the outspoken poem which goes before. A reader who saw how the poem might mislead the unwary, points, by way both of comfort and warning, to the all-sufficiency of revealed truth. It may still be a question whether vv. 7-9 belong to this devout scribe (or some kindred spirit), or whether they may after all be left to Agur. The latter is only half ironical when he bemoans his inferiority to the wise men of his day, who are so sure of their orthodoxy; and by contemplating His works in nature have attained such a satisfactory knowledge of God and possibly (as Canon Cheyne suggests) of the sons of God, who maketh His angels spirits and His ministers a flame of fire. There is no irony at all in 18. "There be three things which are too wonderful for me; yea, four which I know not." An agnostic is not necessarily an infidel. Agur did not profess to know God like the wise, or hope to delight in Him like the Psalmists; but he might have prayed quite consistently for an honest, wholesome human life, for truthfulness, reverence, and contentment, and deliverance from the temptations of riches and poverty.

Be this as it may, there is a close parallel between vv. 11-14 (which give, as Canon Cheyne observes, four marks of an evil generation) and v. 19. In both we have four nominatives following each other without a predicate. The predicate is duly supplied in v. 18. It was once to be found in v. 10 in some such form as this: "There are three generations which . . . yea, four which . . ." The missing words were so bitter that they reminded an ancient reader of the proverb (which he did not invent) which we read in v. 10 now. This proverb has no affinity

whatever with the context except as a protest against the dictum which it has suppressed. In this way it differs from *v. 17*, a sympathetic parallel added to illustrate *v. 11*, though now separated from it by accidents of transcription, and *v. 20*, appended in the right place by a reader who was reminded of a secret sin by the last of the secrets of nature enumerated in *v. 19*.

What, then, is the evil generation described in *vv. 11-14*? They are the false saints of orthodoxy, whom Agur judges far more severely than he judges the false wise, whom he would envy if he could believe in them. Here we find the earliest anticipation of the long strife between the Sons of the Wise and the 'Am Haretz, "the people of the land." At first it seems as if in *v. 14* we had a description of the ungodly rich, who are heathens and infidels at heart; but then we should be forced to suppose that Agur is speaking not of one class viewed under four aspects, but of four distinct classes. Now, in *vv. 12, 13* it is clear that we have two aspects of false self-righteousness. We have not far to look to find the same note in *v. 11*. Agur speaks of a generation who despise the first commandment with promise and think to inherit the blessing of Levi, "who said unto his father and to his mother, I have not seen him." While Ezra's reformation was being enforced (which must have taken a long time upon the whole, even if the crisis came as soon and passed as quickly as the Chronicler tells us), there must have been repeated cases in which the children conformed while the parents held back. Long before that Ezekiel had put the case of the righteous son of the sinful father, and sons of the stranger who were joined to the Lord would have a special temptation to despise parents who served the gods of their fathers; and converts who are often as offensive as renegades are sometimes, like renegades, influential. More generally those who grew up in the congregation sanctified by Ezra's covenant would be

tempted to despise those who lived and died outside—to say of them as the Psalmist said of sinners, “They are brought down and fallen. We are risen and stand upright.”

To return to *v.* 14, it was no easier in the days of Ezra than in the days of Hillel for a boor to be a sinfearer. A simple peasant could hardly manage, even before the scribes had made “a hedge for the law,” to observe all the many precepts literally. The fathers of those who devoured widows’ houses, and for a pretence made long prayers, gloated on the prospect, which, when they sat in judgment, they could do something to realize, that careless peasants who resented the burdens laid upon them should be rooted out of Israel. Agur had before his eyes a sanctimonious, Pharisaical *bourgeoisie*, who perverted the ideal of Isaiah lx.-lxii., which is an ever-expanding league of holy cities grouped round the Holy City, which is at once a sanctuary enriched by gifts and a great staple town enriched by trade, where the citizens rejoice to worship, while strangers stand and feed their flocks, and aliens are their ploughmen and their vine-dressers, the willing servants of a nation of priests. The ideal is certainly older than Nehemiah, for the promise that the walls of Zion shall be built by strangers (Isa. lx. 10) implies that they have not been rebuilt by native energy.

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