

The Early Narratives of Genesis.

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IV.

THE STORY OF PARADISE—*continued.*

WE dwelt, in our last article, upon the narrative of the Fall, and upon its religious significance. There remained, however, two or three points of great importance, which we had not space to notice then, and which we have reserved for the present occasion.

In the account of the Fall, we have the picture of man's disobedience, and the penalty in which not only he is involved, but also all his descendants. Sin is represented as the cause of separation from God's presence; suffering, pain, death, as its penalty.

The great problem presented by the universality of suffering is thus presented to us in its simplest light. It is the consequence of sin, it is the chastisement for disobedience. In the third chapter of Genesis, suffering and death are very naturally regarded, according to the first and most obvious explanation of the passage, in the light of a punishment alone. But it is only a superficial view of the Israelite narrative that can regard the penalty of physical death (Gen. iii. 19), and all the woes attendant upon our earthly frame, in the light of the curse. The only "curse" actually uttered in the narrative is pronounced upon the serpent and upon the soil (Gen. iii. 14-17). The curse under which humanity lies, is the sentence pronounced upon the sinner, that of the expulsion from the presence of God. Physical death is but its type, the memorial of the power of sin, the emblem of its influence. In a colloquial sense, "death" may be "the curse" of the human race; but it is not truly so, and certainly not according to the teaching of our Genesis narrative. We know now that even the penalty of death was not without its mercies. That could be no curse alone which, not only in the Hebrew race, but in every nation under the sun, has been the supreme witness of love, and the highest possible offering of self-sacrifice. That could be no unmixed curse which leads us in thought to the foot of the Cross, where the Saviour died.

No; physical pain, suffering, and death, these

are the witnesses in our flesh to disobedience—a physical penalty, indeed, but a penalty incommensurable with moral guilt. The curse rests upon the sin of our nature, upon all that prompts to it (iii. 14), and all that shares in it (iii. 17). But man is not without hope. Even in death the penalty is a pledge of victory (iii. 15). And even the sorrow and pain, the outward memorials of the curse, are limited to "the days of life" (iii. 17).

Such seems to be the teaching of our chapter, when viewed in the light of later revelation. The theology of the Old Testament follows a line of gradual development, which only recent studies have fully convinced us of. Nowhere, perhaps, is the advance in religious thought so noticeable as in the treatment of the problem of suffering and pain. In the early stages of Israelitish religion, every calamity that overtook individual or nation was apt to be interpreted as a punitive visitation, as a retribution, equivalent, or, at least, corresponding in degree of misery, to the gravity of the offence. But, in process of time, obvious objections were raised. The cases in which the innocent suffered with the guilty, or in which the innocent suffered and the guilty escaped scot-free, were too numerous to be explained away, either as rare exceptions or as instances of depravity, where the hypocrisy which deluded human detection was overtaken by the just punishment of God's anger. The sorrows of the innocent are the theme of a large portion of Hebrew poetry; sometimes it is the case of individual, sometimes of national suffering. The book of Job, many of the Psalms, the Books of Lamentations and Ecclesiastes, and numerous passages among the Prophets, exemplify in different ways the mental disquiet which accompanied the conflict of the earlier traditional teaching with the fresh facts and new thoughts of a later time. The sorrows of the Exile, and the sufferings of the innocent "servant of the Lord" (Isaiah), shed a new light upon the dark mystery, and gave a fresh significance to physical pain and earthly troubles.

The story of the Fall seems at first sight to

belong to the earlier stage of thought, as if the proposition were laid down that an offence was to be paid for in suffering. It may be so. But the language is certainly so chosen, that it is capable of conveying the teaching of the later and nobler development of religious conceptions. The Paradise narrative stands midway between the old and ignorant beliefs which roughly credited calamity to be the Divine retribution of some known or hidden crime, and the Revelation of the Cross of Christ. The Paradise narrative brings a message pregnant with evangelic truth. The punishment which is inflicted as the penalty and as the inevitable consequence of the transgression, is seen to be not vindictive but disciplinary. The infliction of earthly suffering is declared to be the constant witness of Divine displeasure towards sin; but, no less, death is God's appointed way for all flesh; it may be one of sorrow and sadness, it cannot be evil in itself. Death may be welcome—welcome as the grateful end to the presence of the ravages of sin, which encompass the earthly life of man: so much at least the story of Genesis taught. That death might even be the gate leading to eternal life, was the final step of the Revelation made known in the Resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead: towards that teaching the Genesis narrative looks. It points us in the direction; it cannot show us the glory that should follow.

How deep and spiritual, then, is the beginning of that consoling lesson in our narrative! death, not the curse itself, but the penalty of it, reminding us of God's "curse" upon sin; death, not evil in itself, but the last page in the book of earthly discipline; death, if the symbol of wrath against sin, yet the pledge of the conquest over sin itself. Instinctively we turn in thought to One who poured out His soul unto death, who became "sin" for us, who was "perfected through sufferings," who "was dead and lived again."

In that bright vision we realise that the third chapter of Genesis tells no tale of an arbitrary Judge's severity against unoffending generations to come: we see the discipline and the chastisement of man, the result of sin and the warning against it; we hear in the curse upon the tempter the wrath that goes eternally forth upon all sin and disobedience; but we see too the crown of thorns, the cross of shame, the death of agony. Physical, mental, spiritual woes are the pledge of perfect love, and tell forth the overthrow of the enemy, the blotting

out of the curse, the forgiveness of sins. The way through the valley of the shadow of death is the way to the Holiest, and has been sanctified for ever by the feet of Him who was made unto us wisdom from God and righteousness and sanctification and redemption (1 Cor. i. 30).

The careful reader will hardly fail to notice the difference between the words of the prohibition, "in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die" (Gen. ii. 17), and the words of the sentence, "in toil shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life . . . for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return" (Gen. iii. 17-19). Some have fancied that they can discern in the difference the manifestation of the Divine mercy, more long-suffering in the execution than in the utterance of a warning. Whether this explanation be in accordance with true reverence, we need not stop to inquire. But another explanation suggests itself. The Hebrew writer, who clothed this narrative in language agreeing with the teaching of the Spirit of Jehovah, has preserved in the earlier passage (ii. 17) the more peremptory words of the early version in which the narrative was current, reproducing the ancient belief that the sentence of physical death was pronounced as the immediate retribution for moral disobedience. This note, as it were, of an earlier theology survives; but the words in which the Hebrew writer reproduces the actual judgment reflects a later phase of teaching. Death is merciful when it releases man from conditions inseparably bound up with the sin that is the object of Divine displeasure: God has spared man the penalty of living for ever on earth under the conditions of the curse (iii. 22). Death is the climax of the penalty of suffering and pain, the last discipline of physical existence. The sting of death is not suffering, but sin: and the infliction of the disciplinary penalty is accompanied with the promise of victory over that which had separated man from his Maker (iii. 15).

Our remarks upon this section would be incomplete, if we did not, briefly at least, call attention to the mention of—(1) the serpent, and (2) the promise made to the woman.

(1) The serpent appears in the narrative as the agent of the temptation, the medium through which is presented to man the consciousness of a choice to be made between good and evil, between obedience and disobedience, between the will of God and the desire of the flesh.

It can hardly be doubted that, in the primitive Hebrew legend, the mention of the serpent would have been much more detailed and explicit. The introduction of the serpent in Gen. iii. 1 is strangely abrupt, while it is no less strange that after ver. 14 no further allusion is made to it. The language used suggests that the serpent was supposed to have appeared in the garden of Eden in a different form from that which it was condemned to take (Gen. iii. 14); and yet there is no reference to a spirit of evil, no direct identification of the serpent with any unseen malignant influence, any hostile spiritual power.

An explanation of this is probably forthcoming from the general character of the narrative. The serpent constantly appears in the early legends of primitive races. It is regarded with feelings either of especial alarm or of especial veneration. In Persia, for instance, it was the emblem of the god of evil; while among the Greeks it was associated with the gift of prophecy and with the power of healing. Among the ancient Babylonians, Tiamat or Chaos was represented under the figure of a gigantic serpent or dragon, whose overthrow by Merodach brought deliverance to the universe. We can hardly question that the mention of the serpent, in the original form of the Hebrew legend, occupied a more prominent position than it does in Genesis, and that it was enveloped in much that had a close family resemblance to the somewhat grotesque and childish pictures of the legends that have come down to us in the cuneiform inscriptions. But whatsoever was associated with the taint of idolatry, of degrading superstition, of unedifying expansion, the Hebrew writers, who were imbued with the pure faith of Jehovah, have rigorously excluded. In consequence, the serpent is first suddenly brought before us in the narrative, and then as suddenly disappears, without explanation and without identification.

It has no place, such as it would have had in a polytheistic version, of powerful antagonism to the God that made and loved man. The enmity of the serpent is implied, not stated.

The serpent in our narrative supplies the external motive to sin. The suggestion to disobedience and the doubt of God's goodness and justice neither emanate from the man himself, nor constitute a form of temptation by which God Himself tried man's heart. God tempted not to sin; nor was man created sinful. Over the origin

of the external motive supplied by the serpent, the narrative in Genesis maintains a silence that stands in marked contrast to the emblematic scenes, in other early religions, accounting for the origin of evil. We here learn only that sin is not of God, and that it is not of man; that it comes from without man, that it is permitted of God, and that its purpose is to test man's power of choice and his willingness to prefer God's will to his own desires.

It cannot, therefore, be asserted that the Personality of the Spirit of Evil is here directly taught. Our own conception of the scene is inevitably coloured by the recollection of Milton's powerful imaginative description, and it is difficult for us to dissociate our thoughts from the influence of *Paradise Lost*. But, when we do, we see that the narrative emphasises the subtle character, not what we should call the satanic origin, of the Temptation. The suggestion made by the serpent is obviously evil, but how the serpent comes to impersonate it is not explained.

In the early days of Israelite theology, the idea of a Personal Spirit of evil was only dimly, if at all, apprehended. The very name of "Satan" or "opposer" is found, in the Hebrew of Num. xxii. 32, applied to an angel of Jehovah, which is sufficient to show that it had not yet become associated with a spiritual enemy of mankind. The heathen gods, it is true, were wont to be identified with demons (Deut. xxxii. 17). But the temptation, which put to the test the faith of a righteous man, is described in the history of Abraham and in the earlier narrative of David's reign as emanating from Jehovah Himself (cf. Gen. xxii. 1; 2 Sam. xxiv. 1). The latter conception is found first, perhaps, in the Book of Job, which was composed probably in the period of the Exile. "The Adversary" is there represented as attending the court of Jehovah, and as testifying evil of man (Job i.-ii.); the same Personal Spirit seems to occupy a similar malignant office in Zechariah (iii. 1); while in the Books of Chronicles the very temptation of David, which in the Books of Samuel was said to have come from Jehovah, is assigned to the suggestion of Satan (cf. 1 Chron. xxi. 1). In later literature the Personality of the Evil One is yet more definitely recognised, and it became generally accepted that the serpent which was the medium of the Temptation in the story of the Fall could have been no other than Satan, by which name the Evil Spirit was designated. Proof of

this appears in such a passage as Wisdom ii. 24, and in the use of the appellation "the old serpent," Rev. xii. 9, xx. 2.

It is noticeable, therefore, that when St. Paul refers to the narrative of the Fall, he uses language which is based upon the simplest and most direct interpretation of the passage (1 Cor. xi. 3, "As the serpent beguiled Eve in his craftiness"). He lays emphasis there on the subtle character of the temptation; he does not draw attention to the Personal Spirit of Evil, nor does he directly say it was personified in the serpent. Whether the serpent was the Evil One or only his agent, he does not attempt to discriminate (cf. 1 Tim. ii. 14). The curse pronounced upon the serpent implies, without asserting the fact in so many words, that an evil and hostile Personality was represented by it. To the Israelite the serpent was the witness of God's displeasure against the rebellion of human selfishness; but it was also the symbol of the Principle of Evil through which man by transgression fell. But though the serpent thus evidently represents in some way the source of temptation, the narrative itself makes no attempt to penetrate further into the mystery of the origin of evil. In the light of the New Testament, in which we are privileged to see things now, we may discern the shadow of "the Prince of this world" as he stands behind the instrument of his evil suggestion. But his presence is not directly affirmed in the letter of our chapter.

(2) In the words of the curse pronounced upon the serpent there occurs the passage which merits especial attention, Gen. iii. 15: "And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed: it shall bruise (marg. Or, *lie in wait for*) thy head, and thou shalt bruise (marg. Or, *lie in wait for*) his heel." According to the translation of the A. V. and R. V., the metaphor is drawn from a man crushing a serpent with his foot, and a serpent fastening its teeth in a man's heel. The other rendering, which introduces the idea of a carefully planned ambush (cf. Gen. xlix. 17), is supported by the Septuagint version *αὐτός σου κεφαλὴν τηρήσει καὶ σὺ τηρήσεις αὐτοῦ πτέρναν*. The Vulgate combines the alternative renderings, "ipsa conteret caput tuum, et tu insidiaberis calcaneo tuo."

The merely literal explanation of the verse clearly does not exhaust its meaning. There is something more in the words than a declaration that the human race will always view with feelings

of instinctive aversion the serpent race. There is something more in the words than a prediction that mankind will be able to assert superiority over this reptile foe among the beasts of the field. We need not doubt that, whichever of the alternative renderings of the verb be preferred, the underlying thought is that of a spiritual conflict between the race of man and the influences of temptation, between humanity with its gift of choice and the Principle of Evil which ever suggests the satisfaction of the lower desires. But, in addition to this main thought, a twofold encouragement is given to nerve him for the fray. He is endowed with capacities enabling him, if he will use them, to inflict a deadly blow upon the adversary. He stands erect, he is made in the image of God. Furthermore, the promise of ultimate victory is assured to him. How it is to be effected is not explained in the context. Both Jewish and Christian interpretation have given to the promise the significance of a Messianic prediction. From the time of Irenæus (170 A.D.) "the seed of the woman" has been understood in the Christian Church as an allusion to a personal Messiah. Calvin, followed by the majority of the Reformers, explained the words in a more general sense, regarding "the seed of the woman" as the descendants of the first woman, but yet as those from among whom, according to the flesh, the Messiah should come.

The words of the verse, it must be admitted, are quite general. Interpreting them in the light of their immediate context, we cannot say that the Hebrew writer foresaw their fulfilment in any one individual; while the old Roman explanation, referring the promise of victory to the woman herself, and assuming that the "ipsa conteret" of the Vulgate contained an allusion to the Virgin Mary, needs now no refutation. And yet, quite general as the words seem to be in their application to those who should be descended from the woman, we cannot fail to see, in the light of the New Testament, the appropriateness of the language used to their ultimate verification. "The seed of the woman" has triumphed through Him who is the representative of all mankind (cf. Rom. v. 12-21), through Him who, being born of a pure Virgin, was in a special sense "the seed of the woman." That victory was potential for the whole race. Its full consummation shall be hereafter. "And the God of peace shall bruise Satan under your feet shortly" (Rom. xvi. 20).