

Throwing a Stone at an Idol.

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'As he that bindeth a stone in a sling, so is he that giveth honour to a fool.'—PROV. xxvi. 8.

ON the right hand side of the road between Jerusalem and Bethlehem, about half-way, there is a small village called Beit Safâfa. It is situated in the old plain of Rephaim. In this plain there are several huge mounds of stone, that look at first sight like the common gatherings of loose stones from the fields for cultivation. But, examined more closely, they are found to be quite unlike such agricultural heaps in other parts of the country in many respects. The quantity of small stones in them is very great, and they have an appearance of grey antiquity. There are seven of them. They are arranged on a regular plan, and have always been regarded as having been accumulated for some special purpose; hence the name they are known by among the natives is Seba' Rujum. By some they are supposed to be burial cairns on some ancient battlefield, possibly marking the site of the glorious victory obtained by David in this valley of Rephaim over the hosts of the Philistines. But, if this were their origin, we are at a loss to account for their number; for, in that case, one huge cairn would have amply sufficed to commemorate the event. We do not find anywhere else, where cairns on a battlefield exist, seven enormous mounds, involving in their construction an immense expenditure of time and labour.

In removing stones for the construction of the Bethlehem road, from a small heap of shapeless ruins near these huge mounds, a curious upright pillar was discovered with a deep hole excavated in each of its three sides, about nine inches deep, smoothed and polished by the frequent insertion into them of the human hand. It was seen from various tokens that this pillar was not *in situ*, but had evidently been removed from some central position in regard to the great mounds. There could hardly be any doubt that it was once part of a primitive altar connected with the old sun-worship of the Rephaim, or some other tribe of Canaanites belonging to this part of the country. It bore a close resemblance, as Herr Schick says, to many

of the so-called Druidical stones which are scattered over our northern moors, and were used, up to comparatively recent times, for the attestation of oaths, and for the curing of diseases. The presence of this remarkable monument at once showed the significance of the seven huge cairns. Such cairns we have in our own country in connexion with some prehistoric site of sun-worship. On the mound overhanging the rock and pool of St. Fillan, in Strathfillan, to give but a single example, there are seven small heaps of stones, to each of which the person who bathed in the sacred waters for healing purposes had to add a stone taken from the bottom of the river, and go round each of the heaps seven times—reminding us vividly of the ceremony that took place in the Jordan in connexion with Naaman's cure; while there are aged individuals living in the locality who remember in their youth baking cakes and offering them on the rock, on the first day of May, to the tutelary deity of the place.

But, interesting as such relics of primitive nature-worship are, on their own account, they are still more interesting as helping to explain and illustrate an obscure portion of Scripture. In the passage from Proverbs prefixed to this paper, our translation seems to convey no definite meaning to the mind. We do not see the force or the aptitude of the expression. The marginal reference is a little clearer: 'As he that putteth a precious stone in an heap of stones, so is he that giveth honour to a fool.' We can see some point in that image. Giving honour to a fool might well be compared to throwing a jewel among common stones. But it falls short of the expressiveness of the words in the original. These words should be translated, as Colonel Conder was the first to point out: 'As he that throweth a stone at an idol, so is he that giveth honour to a fool.' The comparison refers to the universal custom, in ancient times, among pagan nations of throwing a stone at an idolatrous shrine, not in execration of it, like the stones thrown to this day by the Jews at Absalom's pillar at Jerusalem, but in honour of it. At the foot of some sacred tree, or some pillar consecrated to idolatrous worship, a

cairn or heap of stones is generally found; each stone testifying of a visit paid to the spot by some votary; and the larger the heap the greater the veneration shown. In Greece, the worship of Hermes or Mercury consisted in throwing a stone at his image, set up as a mark by the wayside to protect travellers on a journey. In Palestine, amongst the primitive Canaanite inhabitants that still survived, idolatry was widely practised; and in early times it was a common sight, on rising spots among the hills of Judea and Galilee, to come upon a menhir, or dolmen, in which the object of worship was a rude stone image, forming the nucleus of a cairn or heap of stones which had gradually grown around it, in remembrance of the visits paid by worshippers. In Scotland many cairns are made of the stones thrown at a rude stone monument, or cromlech, as an act of worship; and, perhaps, many of the cairns of remembrance raised to the dead may have originated from this act of worship. The old saying, 'I will add a stone to your cairn,' was the highest expression of reverence and regard that could be offered to a friend.

With this explanation, the comparison used in the Scripture proverb becomes plain and forcible. The proverb could only have been used by an iconoclast; and very probably came into existence in the days of Hezekiah, after the wholesale destruction, by this pious and zealous monarch, of the altars and stone monuments of the Canaanite idolaters which had corrupted Israel. Hezekiah was bent on the work of national reformation, and the purification and consecration of the temple by a perfect ceremonial was accompanied by the overthrow of all the 'high places' and the idolatrous images and rites connected with them, as antagonistic to the holiness of the land as God's heritage. And, therefore, the proverb of the text would have a deep force and meaning in his day. Like one who continued the old practice of throwing a stone

at an idolatrous monument, in token of worship, a practice now forbidden and proved to be vain and useless, so was he who gave honour to a fool. A fool was as unworthy of honour as an idol is of worship. In the one case there is no reason for the honour; and in the other case the worship is a mere empty foolish superstition. An idol is nothing, and a fool is a negation.

We are told, at the commencement of the preceding chapter of Proverbs, the 25th, 'These are also proverbs of Hezekiah, which the men of Hezekiah, king of Judah, copied out.' I presume that this introduction would warrant us to conclude that a large number at least of the proverbs that follow in the succeeding chapters of the book were either composed by Hezekiah or else collected by him. Next to Solomon, he was the most cultured of all the kings of Judah or Israel. He was a poet, who has left us a very touching specimen of his literary gift in his song of thanksgiving in connexion with his illness and restoration; and he was a patron of the literature of his day. He imitated the Assyrian and Babylonian kings, and especially Asurbanipal, in forming a library in Jerusalem, and in employing scribes to form copies of ancient works. If we can regard the proverb of the text as his composition, it would derive a new force and meaning from the thoroughgoing religious reformation of his time. It would have a very striking appropriateness in the case of a monarch who regarded honour to a fool and worship to an idol in the same light of folly and vanity; who called the brazen serpent itself, although God had commanded it to be made, and it had once cured the Israelites, 'Nehushtan,' a piece of brass; and who, poet as he was, did not allow its sacred memories and poetical associations to preserve it from destruction, when he saw that it stood in the way of his people's advance towards a purer worship.