

The Great Text Commentary.

THE GREAT TEXTS OF GENESIS.

GENESIS xxv. 34.

'And Jacob gave Esau bread and pottage of lentils; and he did eat and drink, and rose up, and went his way: so Esau despised his birthright' (R.V.).

EXPOSITION.

'Pottage of lentils.'—The people of the East are exceedingly fond of pottage, which they call *kool*. It is something like gruel, and is made of various kinds of grain, which are first beaten in a mortar. The red pottage is made of *kurakan* and other grains, but it is not superior to the other. For such a contemptible mess, then, did Esau sell his birthright. When a man has sold his fields for an insignificant sum, the people say, 'The fellow has sold his land for pottage.' Does a father give his daughter in marriage to a low-caste man, it is observed, 'He has given her for pottage.' Does a person by some base means seek for some paltry employment, it is said, 'For one leaf' (namely, leaf-full) 'of pottage he will do nine days' work.' Has a learned man who has given instruction or advice to others, stooped to anything which was not expected from him, it is said, 'The learned one has fallen into the pottage pot.' Of a man in great poverty it is remarked, 'Alas! he cannot get pottage.' A beggar asks, 'Sir, will you give me a little pottage?'—ROBERTS.

THE lentil does not grow more than six or eight inches high, and is pulled like flax, not cut with the sickle. When green it resembles an incipient pea-vine, only the leaves are differently arranged, smaller and more delicate—somewhat like those of the mimosa or sensitive plant.—THOMSON.

'He did eat and drink, and rose up, and went his way.'—These words graphically describe Esau's complete indifference to the spiritual privileges of which he had denuded himself. There is no regret, no sad feeling that he had prolonged his life at too high a cost. And if Jacob is cunning and mean in the advantage he took of his brother, still he valued these privileges, and in the sequel he had his reward and his punishment.—PAYNE SMITH.

'Esau despised his birthright.'—The privileges which the birthright legally confers: the double portion of the father's property; the higher authority in the family; the greater social influence; all these advantages, in this instance enhanced by spiritual blessings as their most precious accompaniment, could have no value for one who regarded his existence merely as the transitory play of an hour; and who was indifferent to the esteem of others, because he had not risen to understand the dignity of mankind. If we were to expect a historical allusion in this fact also, the probable supposition offers itself that indeed the Edomites, who were masters of the wide tracts from the Red Sea along the whole mountain of Seir, up to the very

frontiers of Palestine, might, with a little exertion, have extended their dominion over the land of Canaan, that with a limited degree of ambition and self-control, they might have become a respected and mighty nation; but their thoughtless and ferocious habits kept them in the dreary solitudes, far from the chief scenes of history and civilization.

—KALISCH.

THE birthright generally consists in the right to the larger portion of the inheritance, 48¹⁹ 49³, Dt 21¹⁷, but we do not see Jacob afterwards lay claim to anything of the kind. In this instance it is the claim to the blessing of Abraham in the sense of 28⁴, and the princely and priestly prerogative involved in it, for which Jacob is concerned. 'Before the tabernacle was erected'—says the Mishna Sebachim 14⁴—'the Bamoth (local sanctuaries) were permitted, and the Abodah (the priestly office) was with the firstborn; but after the erection of the tabernacle (the central sanctuary), the Bamoth were forbidden, and the Abodah was with the Cohanim.' In a word, the firstborn is the head of the patriarchal family, and the right of the firstborn includes the representative privileges derived from this exalted position. Esau's forfeiture of these privileges is, according to Ro 9, a work of free Divine election, but not without being at the same time, as this narrative shows, the result of Esau's voluntary self-degradation. As Ishmael had no claim to the blessing of the firstborn, because begotten *κατὰ σάρκα*, so does Esau, though not begotten *κατὰ σάρκα*, forfeit the blessing of the first-born, because minded *κατὰ σάρκα*.—DELITZSCH.

METHODS OF TREATMENT.

I.

Selling our Birthright.

By the Rev. G. Hay Morgan, B.Sc.

The birthright meant a double share of his father's wealth, lordship over the rest of the family at his father's death, and the inheritance for his posterity of God's promise to Abraham that in his seed all the nations of the earth should be blessed. All these things Esau despised. It may be urged that he was dying of hunger, and that a man may do a wrong deed under compulsion and not be guilty. But if he shows no sorrow afterwards, and makes no attempt to rectify the evil, he becomes as guilty of the crime as though he had performed it of his own free will. Esau showed no repentance or regret. He did eat and drink, and rose up and went his way.

We have each a birthright.—It may be external property, mental powers, gifts of disposition, or religious training.

A man may despise his birthright.—A young man with a good home chafes under its restrictions and learns to value it too late. A man with one talent despises it because it is but a small one. Yet the steward in the parable was condemned, not because he had but one talent, but because he did not use it. We will use our birthright according to our estimation of it. If we despise it we may neglect or sell it. Men constantly sell their fair name and good conscience for money, their mental capacity for ease.

The neglected birthright degenerates.—Refuse to cultivate any power, and it will soon be beyond the possibility of cultivation. The man in the parable simply left his talent alone, and it was taken from him. Esau repented after thirty-seven years, but it was too late.

The greatest birthright of our race is the image of God within us. It may be hidden under the débris of sin, but it still lies there. What we want is something that will recall that image and make it live in us. Though buried beneath innumerable sordid desires, it sometimes troubles us by prompting a vague yearning after something higher. But when Christ stands before us, we recognize in Him the One we have sought, who corresponds to the divine image within us. If that image has been brought to the forefront of your consciousness by the sight of Christ, do not relegate it again to the lumber-room of your heart, lest you, like Esau, despise and sell your birthright.

II.

By the Rev. George Jackson, B.A.

There is much good in Esau's character. His frankness, generosity, and impetuosity would make him popular. He was 'a jolly good fellow,' and this side of his character is often favourably contrasted with that of his sleek, double-dealing brother. But he is the plaything of his passions, gratifying the present desire at all costs. He cannot understand self-control for the sake of future good. He must have his food when hungry though it costs him his birthright. We think him a fool, yet some of us do the same thing daily. Whenever a man lets go his hold on a higher good

to snatch a lower, he repeats Esau's blunder. Young men are doing it in many ways. *In amusements.*—Pastime is good, and it is our duty to maintain our bodily health, but we have other and higher duties, and to make amusements the chief concern of our lives is to sell our birthright for a paltry mess of pottage. *In reading.*—If instead of cultivating the intellectual life we weaken our powers of thought on trifling literature, and, as Ruskin says, instead of holding converse with the kings and queens of literature, are content to gossip with the housemaid or stableboy. So also in choosing a profession without duly considering its dangers, or in business,—in stifling conscience in order to make money, men daily repeat Esau's folly. How shall we save ourselves from it?

(1) *Think.*—'Wherewithal shall a young man cleanse his way? By taking heed thereto according to Thy word.' Carlyle summed up the teaching of Goethe in this one pregnant word '*Gedenke, zu leben,*' 'think, to live,' 'think about living.'

(2) *Look at life whole.*—Estimate things at their true worth. The present seems large, the future small. A mountain a mile off does not shut out so much sky as an eight foot wall by your side. We are all tempted to forget higher spiritual good and snatch at the trifles which dangle before our eyes.

(3) *Consider the end.*—When tendency has hardened into fact, when causes have worked their way to effects, when seedtime has issued in harvest—then what? All may seem well to-day, for sin is an arch-deceiver, but '*at the last*' it biteth like a serpent, it stingeth like an adder.' Make it your daily prayer, like Bishop Andrewes, that you may be wise and consider your latter end.

ILLUSTRATIONS.

Surprised into Sin.—Surprise would be utterly powerless unless the character were previously undermined. And so it is no excuse for a sinful act; it is scarcely in any degree a palliation. It is rather a revelation of secret depravity in a man, hidden successfully from his neighbours, ignored by, but not unknown to himself. After the flagrant deed is committed, others may be at a loss to account for it. It is unexplained to them by anything in his previous career. But to himself it is clear enough. To him it is not an isolated act, but one link in a long chain of evil. He has been aware all along that he was sinking into sin. He has thrust away the troublesome thought, but he has been aware of it. He has taken no measure, it may be, of the growth of his guilt. It has ripened into grievous sin unnoticed. In no other sense can it have been a surprise to him. For all

the while the seed was there, and had taken root, and the noxious plant was growing; and he knew it, and he hid it from others, and he would not confess it perhaps even to himself.—J. B. LIGHTFOOT.

Despising the Birthright.—We smile at the mediæval legends of men selling their souls to the devil, but morally they are true. There are thousands on the pavement of this wicked city, thousands in the offices and behind the counters, some even in the pulpit, who for one morsel of meat have sold their birthright. They have sold their best aspirations, their spiritual honesty, their intellectual freedom; they have pawned the heavenly raiment of the spirit, and cast away the wealth of noble feelings and divine desires, and have hardened themselves into a routine of avarice or empty pleasure, or cowardly time-serving. And for what?—W. J. DAWSON.

THE small Crustacean Peltogaster has a birthright equal to the finest of its class. It is born from the egg just as the crab or lobster are. It has all the organs of its body in full activity, but in an evil moment it settles on a crab, and from that moment every power of its body is doomed. It will no longer provide its living, hence its eyes are no longer needed. It will no longer swim, so its appendages can go. It has no further use for mouth or digestive organs, so these atrophy. The limbs degenerate into root-like processes, which it sends down into the body of the host to suck up nutriment. Every other part of the body not being utilized vanishes, and the animal becomes a 'simple sac.'—G. HAY MORGAN.

HE won; and yet I cannot see
That what he won was loss to me.
I am a Prince, an army mine;
A kingdom grows around my sword:
The Hivites flee before my face;
I have my pleasure in the chase,
Now hunting men, now hunting beasts.
Be Jacob numbered 'mong the priests
And prophets who receive divine
Communications from the Lord.
Let him and other dreamers be;
I live for what these eyes can see:
This happy Earth's enough for me.—

G. T. COSTER.

LUTHER was told of a nobleman who, above all things, occupied himself with amassing money, and was so buried in darkness that he gave no heed to the word of God, and even said to one who pleaded with him, 'The gospel pays no interest.' 'Have you no grains?' interposed Luther; then he told this fable: A lion making a great feast invited all the beasts, and with them some swine. When all manner of dainties were set before the guests, the swine asked, 'Have you no grains?' 'Even so,' continued Luther, 'even so it is in these days with carnal men; we preachers set before them the most dainty and costly dishes, such as everlasting salvation, the remission of sins, and God's

grace; but they, like swine, turn up their snouts and ask for money. Offer a cow a nutmeg, and she will reject it for old hay.'—C. H. SPURGEON.

YES, I who now, with angry tears,
Am exiled back to brutish clod,
Have borne unquenched for fourscore years
A spark of the eternal God;
And to what end? How yield I bac's
The trust for such high uses given?
Heaven's light hath but revealed a track
Whereby to crawl away from heaven.

Men think it is an awful sight
To see a soul just set adrift
On that drear voyage, from whose night
The ominous shadows never lift;
But 'tis more awful to behold
A helpless infant newly born,
Whose little hands unconscious hold
The keys of darkness and of morn.

Mine held them once; I flung away
Those keys that might have open set
The golden sluices of the day,
But clutch the key of darkness yet.
I hear the reapers singing go
Into God's harvest; I that might
With them have chosen, here below
Grope shuddering at the gates of night.

O glorious Youth that once wast mine!
O high Ideal! all in vain
Ye enter at this ruined shrine,
Whence worship ne'er shall rise again;
The bat and owl inhabit here,
The snake nests in the altar-stone,
The sacred vessels moulder near,
The image of the God is gone.—LOWELL.

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