Note on a Hebrew Conception of the Universe

WILLIAM H. COBB

CONGREGATIONAL LIBRARY, BOSTON

QUESTIONS as to the antiquity, or the source, of cosmological ideas among the Hebrews are full of interest, never more so than now, but are outside the scope of this paper, which simply aims to show that the Hebrews did grasp, and express repeatedly in their Bible by a single word, the thought of the vast order of creation as a whole.

The contrary view is the prevalent one; it is often said that such a unitary conception is a late and difficult fruit of philosophy; the Hebrews, it is admitted, rose to the classification of all the works of God under a two-fold term, "the heavens and the earth"; further than this, however, it is claimed, they did not go. Two or three very brief citations should suffice to present this common belief. First, from DB, the Hastings (five-volume) Dictionary of the Bible, article "World," by V. H. Stanton. "There is no single word in OT which describes the material universe, even as it was conceived by the Hebrews. The phrase 'heaven and earth' is used to convey that notion (Gen. 1 1, Ps. 89 11, Jer. 10 12, 51 15, etc.)"

In the later one-volume Hastings, S. W. Green writes the article "World," and remarks: "In general, it may be said that the normal expression for such conception of the world as the Hebrews had reached is 'the heavens and the earth.'"

Prof. H. G. Mitchell comments on the first verse of Genesis, in The World before Abraham, as follows: "Heaven and earth; the visible universe in its original perfection. This is the natural interpretation of the verse. It is therefore the briefest possible statement to the effect that the
present frame of things owes its existence to the divinity worshipped by the Hebrews." I hold, however, and I am not alone in holding, that a much briefer statement to the same purport, a statement which comprehends these two divisions of creation under a single word, is not only possible but actual.

One of the commonest words in the Hebrew language, the word לם, translated almost always as an adjective, is yet properly, as the grammars and lexicons are careful to tell us, a noun, meaning the whole. "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with the whole of thy heart." "We ככ ככ the whole of us wandered like sheep." In a few dozen cases, among its many thousands of occurrences, the word stands absolutely, preceded by the article, לם, the whole. Here it commonly follows a list of particulars, gathering them up into one, according to the axiom that the whole is equal to the sum of all its parts. The children of the porters in Ezra 2:42 are assigned to six different families, "the whole 189." The three standard English versions, A. V., R. V., and A. R., read in all, which is an equivalent but not a strict translation. In the previous chapter, Sheshbazzar receives 80 platters of gold, 1000 platters of silver, and many other kinds of vessels, amounting to 5400; the account adds, "the whole Sheshbazzar brought up." The three versions say "all these," as though it were ככ ככ. The Hebrew idiom in these cases is precisely like the English, and the usage is not confined to late Hebrew. The king of Egypt took from Rehoboam (1 K. 14:26) the treasures of the house of Jahve and the treasures of the king's house; "yea, he took the whole." In 1 Sam. 30:18-20 we read that David recovered from the Amalekites his wives, sons and daughters, flocks and herds, all manner of spoil; David brought back ככ ככ the whole.

It goes without saying that the extent covered by ככ depends in any case on the object in view. That object may be as small as a single animal. Lev. 1:9, the law of the burnt offering, enumerates the various parts of the bullock, and continues: "the priest shall burn the whole on the
altar." This, by the way, is one of five or six occurrences of יִּם which R. V. and A. R. render accurately; everywhere else they give all things, or all, or all this, or some such expression.

On the other hand, יִּם may refer to something as large as all nature or all humanity; thus at its first occurrence, Gen. 16 12, Ishmael's hand is against the whole, i.e. the whole race; parallel, the hand of all against him. Koheleth gives us the result of a wide induction. He made great works, builded houses, planted vineyards, and so on, through a long list. Then he looked on all his works, and behold יִם, the whole—vapor. In Ps. 14 3 Jahve looked down from heaven upon all humanity; his verdict is registered in the next verse, יִּם הָאָרֶץ, the whole strayed.

The point we are now to consider is whether this word יִּם may refer to an object even wider than nature or humanity. About fifteen years ago, when preparing for this Journal an article on the "Servant of Jahve," I was struck with the elasticity of the term "Servant (or servants) of Jahve," which is applied now to Abraham and again to Nebuchadnezzar; now to a certain class and again to a whole people. Finally, I came upon a still larger application, in Ps. 119 89-91. Vs. 89 mentions a relation of Jahve to heaven, vs. 90 to earth, vs. 91 to both: "they abide this day according to thine ordinances, יִּם לְךָ נִמֵּסְרוֹבֶּל." The collective here as often takes a plural predicate; "for the whole are thy servants," LXX ῥα σύμπαντα δοῦλα σα. Some render otherwise the first member of vs. 91; "as for thine ordinances, they abide this day"; but even these translators agree that יִּם means "heaven and earth," which was the point to be proved. The whole is equal to the sum of all its parts; all parts of the world combine in the concept יִּם. In this little word of three letters, we reach a distinct view of the universe as one. Important religious and philosophical inferences suggest themselves, but I leave these to others.

The passage just examined is by no means an isolated one. We read in Ps. 108 19 that Jahve has established his throne in the heavens; forth from that centre his kingdom
rules נֵבֶל over the whole. The lexicon of Gesenius (Buhl’s ed.) renders נֵבֶל in that place das Universum, and gives the same equivalent in Jer. 10 18 = 51 19, אֶפְרָה יִבְלֶל, “Fash-
ioner of the whole is He,” LXX ἀ πλάσει τα πάντα. Cf. Eccl. 11 5, “Thou knowest not the works of God, who
maketh נֵבֶל,” LXX τα σύμπαντα. BDB, the Brown-Driver-
Briggs lexicon, gives the same account of these and similar passages: “all, whether of all mankind, or of all living
things, the universe (τό πᾶν).” The first definition of נֵבֶל in
Siegfried and Stade is “die Gesamtheit, das Ganze, Alles.”

Before leaving the subject I wish to ask, very tentatively,
whether this conception may not clear up a puzzling passage
in Isaiah. We moderns bandy about very glibly the ab-
stract terms which the Hebrews used but sparingly. If you
do anything that attracts public notice, the reporters are
likely to beset you with requests to give the newspapers
your philosophy of life, or your outlook on things in general.
The Hebrew prophets did not deal in philosophy, but they
had an outlook on the world; they called it vision. It was
the gift of God. It was often claimed unwarrantably.
These false leaders, says Isaiah, are as helpless to interpret
the will of God as a man with a book that is sealed. And
what is it that he compares to a sealed book? It is נֵבֶל ה
the vision of the whole, Isa. 29 11.

King James’s translators render this, “the vision of all,”
which is ambiguous if not unintelligible. The English and
American revisers, determined to be clear at all costs, produced
the outrageous mistranslation, “all vision,” for נֵבֶל in the
construct and נֵבֶל with the article. Where was their scien-
tific conscience? I remark in passing that נֵבֶל is in the
construct state, though it has not the usual construct form;

1 Since this paper was read before the Society, in December, 1909, Pro-
fessor Torrey has published his “ Ezra Studies,” in which he proposes (p. 45,
n. 10) to emend Dan. 11 2 so as to read יִבְלֶל שִׁי לֵבָלָה מַלְכַּת, “the
Lord of all will raise up the kingdom of Yawān.” Professor Torrey refers
to his previous discussion of the point in JAOS [1904], vol. xxx, pp. 310 ff.,
where this view is ingenuously defended. Another instance is Ben Sira, 48 23,
“Jahve hath made the All,” וָזִיר חָזֵק נֵבֶל. See, too, vs. 7, though
the rendering of נֵבֶל by “the All” is disputed by Kautzsch and others.
see the grammars of Böttcher and Olshausen, both of whom give several parallels, including בֶּן הַנָּחַת Isa. 28 18. BDB translates 29 11 correctly, "the vision of the whole," but instead of putting the phrase under subclass (8), where בֶּן הַנָּחַת is used in its widest sense, brings it under subclass (a), "where the sense is limited by the context to things or persons just mentioned." No wonder it adds in parenthesis ("peculiarly"). Cheyne in the Polychrome Bible gives "the vision of all these things," making it equivalent to בֶּן הַנָּחַת. He regards the whole paragraph as a later addition, a view which might naturally affect the exegesis. Duhm shares this view, and expresses it quite characteristically. He translates, "das Gesicht von dem allem," and interprets as follows: "'the revelation concerning all the future occurrences'—a clumsy and lifeless manner of expression." And yet it is probable that Isaiah wrote the phrase, and Isaiah is far from clumsy or lifeless. Marti follows Duhm; vss. 11 and 12 he calls a prosaic appendix, and בֶּן הַנָּחַת is "the foretelling all these things." Delitzsch, Skinner, and Box translate "the revelation of all this" as though it were בֶּן הַנָּחַת. Whitehouse, in the Century Bible, comes nearer the mark. Keeping R. V. in his text as usual, he comments thus: "all vision is a wrong rendering. Render 'vision (or revelation) of the whole.'" "The simile" (of the sealed book) "is used to describe the general incapacity of the ruling classes to understand God's revelations through his prophet." That is to say (as appears more plainly in the context of the citation), the vision of the whole means the vision of God's future plan as a whole. Dillmann and Kittel present an interpretation closely akin to this. I think the evidence is pretty evenly balanced between that view and the one I have suggested, the vision of the universe.