

## CHAPTER XVII.

### *FROM BABEL TO COMPARATIVE PHILOLOGY.*

#### I. THE SACRED THEORY IN ITS FIRST FORM.

AMONG the sciences which have served as entering wedges into the heavy mass of ecclesiastical orthodoxy—to cleave it, disintegrate it, and let the light of Christianity into it—none perhaps has done a more striking work than Comparative Philology. In one very important respect the history of this science differs from that of any other; for it is the only one whose conclusions theologians have at last fully adopted as the result of their own studies. This adoption teaches a great lesson, since, while it has destroyed theological views cherished during many centuries, and obliged the Church to accept theories directly contrary to the plain letter of our sacred books, the result is clearly seen to have helped Christianity rather than to have hurt it. It has certainly done much to clear our religious foundations of the dogmatic rust which was eating into their structure.

How this result was reached, and why the Church has so fully accepted it, I shall endeavour to show in the present chapter.

At a very early period in the evolution of civilization men began to ask questions regarding language; and the answers to these questions were naturally embodied in the myths, legends, and chronicles of their sacred books.

Among the foremost of these questions were three: “Whence came language?” “Which was the first language?” “How came the diversity of language?”

The answer to the first of these was very simple: each people naturally held that language was given it directly or indirectly by some special or national deity of its own; thus,

to the Chaldeans by Oannes, to the Egyptians by Thoth, to the Hebrews by Jahveh.

The Hebrew answer is embodied in the great poem which opens our sacred books. Jahveh talks with Adam and is perfectly understood; the serpent talks with Eve and is perfectly understood; Jahveh brings the animals before Adam, who bestows on each its name. Language, then, was God-given and complete. Of the fact that every language is the result of a growth process there was evidently, among the compilers of our sacred books, no suspicion.

The answer to the second of these questions was no less simple. As, very generally, each nation believed its own chief divinity to be "a god above all gods,"—as each believed itself "a chosen people,"—as each believed its own sacred city the actual centre of the earth, so each believed its own language to be the first—the original of all. This answer was from the first taken for granted by each "chosen people," and especially by the Hebrews: throughout their whole history, whether the Almighty talks with Adam in the Garden or writes the commandments on Mount Sinai, he uses the same language—the Hebrew.

The answer to the third of these questions, that regarding the diversity of languages, was much more difficult. Naturally, explanations of this diversity frequently gave rise to legends somewhat complicated.

The "law of wills and causes," formulated by Comte, was exemplified here as in so many other cases. That law is, that, when men do not know the natural causes of things, they simply attribute them to wills like their own; thus they obtain a theory which provisionally takes the place of science, and this theory forms a basis for theology.

Examples of this recur to any thinking reader of history. Before the simpler laws of astronomy were known, the sun was supposed to be trundled out into the heavens every day and the stars hung up in the firmament every night by the right hand of the Almighty. Before the laws of comets were known, they were thought to be missiles hurled by an angry God at a wicked world. Before the real cause of lightning was known, it was supposed to be the work of a good God in his wrath, or of evil spirits in their malice. Before the

laws of meteorology were known, it was thought that rains were caused by the Almighty or his angels opening "the windows of heaven" to let down upon the earth "the waters that be above the firmament." Before the laws governing physical health were known, diseases were supposed to result from the direct interposition of the Almighty or of Satan. Before the laws governing mental health were known, insanity was generally thought to be diabolic possession. All these early conceptions were naturally embodied in the sacred books of the world, and especially in our own.\*

So, in this case, to account for the diversity of tongues, the direct intervention of the Divine Will was brought in. As this diversity was felt to be an inconvenience, it was attributed to the will of a Divine Being in anger. To explain this anger, it was held that it must have been provoked by human sin.

Out of this conception explanatory myths and legends grew as thickly and naturally as elms along water-courses; of these the earliest form known to us is found in the Chaldean accounts, and nowhere more clearly than in the legend of the Tower of Babel.

The inscriptions recently found among the ruins of Assyria have thrown a bright light into this and other scriptural myths and legends: the deciphering of the characters in these inscriptions by Grotefend, and the reading of the texts by George Smith, Oppert, Sayce, and others, have given us these traditions more nearly in their original form than they appear in our own Scriptures.

The Hebrew story of Babel, like so many other legends in the sacred books of the world, combined various elements. By a play upon words, such as the history of myths and legends frequently shows, it wrought into one fabric the earlier explanations of the diversities of human speech and of the great ruined tower at Babylon. The name Babel (*bab-el*) means "Gate of God" or "Gate of the Gods." All modern scholars of note agree that this was the real significance of

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\* Any one who wishes to realize the mediæval view of the direct personal attention of the Almighty to the universe, can perhaps do so most easily by looking over the engravings in the well-known *Nuremberg Chronicle*, representing him in the work of each of the six days, and resting afterward.

the name; but the Hebrew verb which signifies *to confound* resembles somewhat the word Babel, so that out of this resemblance, by one of the most common processes in myth formation, came to the Hebrew mind an indisputable proof that the tower was connected with the confusion of tongues, and this became part of our theological heritage,

In our sacred books the account runs as follows:

“And the whole earth was of one language, and of one speech.

“And it came to pass, as they journeyed from the east, that they found a plain in the land of Shinar; and they dwelt there.

“And they said one to another, Go to, let us make brick, and burn them thoroughly. And they had brick for stone, and slime had they for mortar.

“And they said, Go to, let us build us a city, and a tower, whose top may reach unto heaven; and let us make us a name, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.

“And the Lord came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of men builded.

“And the Lord said, Behold, the people is one, and they have all one language; and this they begin to do: and now nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do.

“Go to, let us go down, and there confound their language, that they may not understand one another’s speech.

“So the Lord scattered them abroad from thence upon the face of all the earth: and they left off to build the city.

“Therefore is the name of it called Babel; because the Lord did there confound the language of all the earth: and from thence did the Lord scatter them abroad upon the face of all the earth.” (Genesis xi, 1-9.)

Thus far the legend had been but slightly changed from the earlier Chaldean form in which it has been found in the Assyrian inscriptions. Its character is very simple: to use the words of Prof. Sayce, “It takes us back to the age when the gods were believed to dwell in the visible sky, and when man, therefore, did his best to rear his altars as near them as possible.” And this eminent divine might have added

that it takes us back also to a time when it was thought that Jehovah, in order to see the tower fully, was obliged to come down from his seat above the firmament.

As to the real reasons for the building of the towers which formed so striking a feature in Chaldean architecture—any one of which may easily have given rise to the explanatory myth which found its way into our sacred books—there seems a substantial agreement among leading scholars that they were erected primarily as parts of temples, but largely for the purpose of astronomical observations, to which the Chaldeans were so devoted, and to which their country, with its level surface and clear atmosphere, was so well adapted. As to the real cause of the ruin of such structures, one of the inscribed cylinders discovered in recent times, speaking of a tower which most of the archæologists identify with the Tower of Babel, reads as follows:

“The building named the Stages of the Seven Spheres, which was the Tower of Borsippa, had been built by a former king. He had completed forty-two cubits, but he did not finish its head. During the lapse of time, it had become ruined; they had not taken care of the exit of the waters, so that rain and wet had penetrated into the brickwork; the casing of burned brick had swollen out, and the terraces of crude brick are scattered in heaps.”

We can well understand how easily “the gods, assisted by the winds,” as stated in the Chaldean legend, could overthrow a tower thus built.

It may be instructive to compare with the explanatory myth developed first by the Chaldeans, and in a slightly different form by the Hebrews, various other legends to explain the same diversity of tongues. The Hindu legend of the confusion of tongues is as follows:

“There grew in the centre of the earth the wonderful ‘world tree,’ or ‘knowledge tree.’ It was so tall that it reached almost to heaven. It said in its heart, ‘I shall hold my head in heaven and spread my branches over all the earth, and gather all men together under my shadow, and protect them, and prevent them from separating.’ But Brahma, to punish the pride of the tree, cut off its branches and cast them down on the earth, when they sprang up as

wata trees, and made differences of belief and speech and customs to prevail on the earth, to disperse men upon its surface."

Still more striking is a Mexican legend: according to this, the giant Xelhua built the great Pyramid of Cholula, in order to reach heaven, until the gods, angry at his audacity, threw fire upon the building and broke it down, whereupon every separate family received a language of its own.

Such explanatory myths grew or spread widely over the earth. A well-known form of the legend, more like the Chaldean than the Hebrew later form, appeared among the Greeks. According to this, the Aloïdæ piled Mount Ossa upon Olympus and Pelion upon Ossa, in their efforts to reach heaven and dethrone Jupiter.

Still another form of it entered the thoughts of Plato. He held that in the golden age men and beasts all spoke the same language, but that Zeus confounded their speech because men were proud and demanded eternal youth and immortality.\*

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\* For the identification of the Tower of Babel with the "Birs Nimrud" amid the ruins of the city of Borsippa, see Rawlinson; also Schrader, *The Cuneiform Inscriptions and the Old Testament*, London, 1885, pp. 106-112 and following; and especially George Smith, *Assyrian Discoveries*, p. 59. For some of these inscriptions discovered and read by George Smith, see his *Chaldean Account of Genesis*, New York, 1876, pp. 160-162. For the statement regarding the origin of the word Babel, see Ersch and Gruber, article *Babylon*; also the Rev. Prof. A. H. Sayce, in the latest edition of the *Encyclopædia Britannica*; also Colenso, *Pentateuch Examined*, part iv, p. 302; also John Fiske, *Myths and Myth-makers*, p. 72; also Lenormant, *Histoire Ancienne de l'Orient*, Paris, 1881, vol. i, pp. 115 *et seq.* As to the character and purpose of the great tower of the Temple of Belus, see Smith's *Bible Dictionary*, article *Babel*, quoting Diodorus; also Rawlinson, especially in *Journal of the Asiatic Society* for 1861; also Sayce, *Religion of the Ancient Babylonians* (Hibbert Lectures for 1887), London, 1877, chap. ii and elsewhere, especially pp. 96, 397, 407; also Max Duncker, *History of Antiquity*, Abbott's translation, vol. ii, chaps. ii and iii. For similar legends in other parts of the world, see Delitzsch; also Humboldt, *American Researches*; also Brinton, *Myths of the New World*; also Colenso, as above. The Tower of Cholula is well known, having been described by Humboldt and Lord Kingsborough. For superb engravings showing the view of Babel as developed by the theological imagination, see Kircher, *Turris Babel*, Amsterdam, 1679. For the Law of Wills and Causes, with deductions from it well stated, see Beattie Crozier, *Civilization and Progress*, London, 1888, pp. 112, 178, 179, 273. For Plato, see the *Politicus*, p. 272, ed. Stephani, cited in Ersch and Gruber, article *Babylon*. For a good general statement, see *Bible Myths*, New York, 1883, chap. iii. For Aristotle's strange want of interest in

But naturally the version of the legend which most affected Christendom was that modification of the Chaldean form developed among the Jews and embodied in their sacred books. To a thinking man in these days it is very instructive. The coming down of the Almighty from heaven to see the tower and put an end to it by dispersing its builders, points to the time when his dwelling was supposed to be just above the firmament or solid vault above the earth: the time when he exercised his beneficent activity in such acts as opening "the windows of heaven" to give down rain upon the earth; in bringing out the sun every day and hanging up the stars every night to give light to the earth; in hurling comets, to give warning; in placing his bow in the cloud, to give hope; in coming down in the cool of the evening to walk and talk with the man he had made; in making coats of skins for Adam and Eve; in enjoying the odour of flesh which Noah burned for him; in eating with Abraham under the oaks of Mamre; in wrestling with Jacob; and in writing with his own finger on the stone tables for Moses.

So came the answer to the third question regarding language; and all three answers, embodied in our sacred books and implanted in the Jewish mind, supplied to the Christian Church the germs of a theological development of philology. These germs developed rapidly in the warm atmosphere of devotion and ignorance of natural law which pervaded the early Church, and there grew a great orthodox theory of language, which was held throughout Christendom, "always, everywhere, and by all," for nearly two thousand years, and to which, until the present century, all science has been obliged, under pains and penalties, to conform.

There did, indeed, come into human thought at an early period some suggestions of the modern scientific view of philology. Lucretius had proposed a theory, inadequate indeed, but still pointing toward the truth, as follows: "Nature impelled man to try the various sounds of the tongue, and so struck out the names of things, much in the same way as the inability to speak is seen in its turn to drive children

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any classification of the varieties of human speech, see Max Müller, *Lectures on the Science of Language*, London, 1864, series i, chap. iv, pp. 123-125.

to the use of gestures." But, among the early fathers of the Church, the only one who seems to have caught an echo of this utterance was St. Gregory of Nyssa: as a rule, all the other great founders of Christian theology, as far as they expressed themselves on the subject, took the view that the original language spoken by the Almighty and given by him to men was Hebrew, and that from this all other languages were derived at the destruction of the Tower of Babel. This doctrine was especially upheld by Origen, St. Jerome, and St. Augustine. Origen taught that "the language given at the first through Adam, the Hebrew, remained among that portion of mankind which was assigned not to any angel, but continued the portion of God himself." St. Augustine declared that, when the other races were divided by their own peculiar languages, Heber's family preserved that language which is not unreasonably believed to have been the common language of the race, and that on this account it was henceforth called Hebrew. St. Jerome wrote, "The whole of antiquity affirms that Hebrew, in which the Old Testament is written, was the beginning of all human speech."

Amid such great authorities as these even Gregory of Nyssa struggled in vain. He seems to have taken the matter very earnestly, and to have used not only argument but ridicule. He insists that God does not speak Hebrew, and that the tongue used by Moses was not even a pure dialect of one of the languages resulting from "the confusion." He makes man the inventor of speech, and resorts to raillery: speaking against his opponent Eunomius, he says that, "passing in silence his base and abject garrulity," he will "note a few things which are thrown into the midst of his useless or wordy discourse, where he represents God teaching words and names to our first parents, sitting before them like some pedagogue or grammar master." But, naturally, the great authority of Origen, Jerome, and Augustine prevailed; the view suggested by Lucretius, and again by St. Gregory of Nyssa, died out; and "always, everywhere, and by all," in the Church, the doctrine was received that the language spoken by the Almighty was Hebrew,—that it was taught by him to Adam,—and that all other languages on the face

