

## CHAPTER XX.

### *FROM THE DIVINE ORACLES TO THE HIGHER CRITICISM.*

#### I. THE OLDER INTERPRETATION.

THE great sacred books of the world are the most precious of human possessions. They embody the deepest searchings into the most vital problems of humanity in all its stages: the naïve guesses of the world's childhood, the opening conceptions of its youth, the more fully rounded beliefs of its maturity.

These books, no matter how unhistorical in parts and at times, are profoundly true. They mirror the evolution of man's loftiest aspirations, hopes, loves, consolations, and enthusiasms; his hates and fears; his views of his origin and destiny; his theories of his rights and duties; and these not merely in their lights but in their shadows. Therefore it is that they contain the germs of truths most necessary in the evolution of humanity, and give to these germs the environment and sustenance which best insure their growth and strength.

With wide differences in origin and character, this sacred literature has been developed and has exercised its influence in obedience to certain general laws. First of these in time, if not in importance, is that which governs its origin: in all civilizations we find that the Divine Spirit working in the mind of man shapes his sacred books first of all out of the chaos of myth and legend; and of these books, when life is thus breathed into them, the fittest survive.

So broad and dense is this atmosphere of myth and legend enveloping them that it lingers about them after they have been brought forth full-orbed; and, sometimes, from it are

even produced secondary mythical and legendary concretions—satellites about these greater orbs of early thought. Of these secondary growths one may be mentioned as showing how rich in myth-making material was the atmosphere which enveloped our own earlier sacred literature.

In the third century before Christ there began to be elaborated among the Jewish scholars of Alexandria, then the great centre of human thought, a Greek translation of the main books constituting the Old Testament. Nothing could be more natural at that place and time than such a translation; yet the growth of explanatory myth and legend around it was none the less luxuriant. There was indeed a twofold growth. Among the Jews favourable to the new version a legend rose which justified it. This legend in its first stage was to the effect that the Ptolemy then on the Egyptian throne had, at the request of his chief librarian, sent to Jerusalem for translators; that the Jewish high priest Eleazar had sent to the king a most precious copy of the Scriptures from the temple at Jerusalem, and six most venerable, devout, and learned scholars from each of the twelve tribes of Israel; that the number of translators thus corresponded with the mysterious seventy-two appellations of God; and that the combined efforts of these seventy-two men produced a marvellously perfect translation.

But in that atmosphere of myth and marvel the legend continued to grow, and soon we have it blooming forth yet more gorgeously in the statement that King Ptolemy ordered each of the seventy-two to make by himself a full translation of the entire Old Testament, and shut up each translator in a separate cell on the island of Pharos, secluding him there until the work was done; that the work of each was completed in exactly seventy-two days; and that when, at the end of the seventy-two days, the seventy-two translations were compared, each was found exactly like all the others. This showed clearly Jehovah's *approval*.

But out of all this myth and legend there was also evolved an account of a very different sort. The Jews who remained faithful to the traditions of their race regarded this Greek version as a profanation, and therefore there grew up the legend that on the completion of the work there was dark-

ness over the whole earth during three days. This showed clearly Jehovah's *disapproval*.

These well-known legends, which arose within what—as compared with any previous time—was an exceedingly enlightened period, and which were steadfastly believed by a vast multitude of Jews and Christians for ages, are but single examples among scores which show how inevitably such traditions regarding sacred books are developed in the earlier stages of civilization, when men explain everything by miracle and nothing by law.\*

As the second of these laws governing the evolution of sacred literature may be mentioned that which we have constantly seen so effective in the growth of theological ideas—that to which Comte gave the name of the *Law of Wills and Causes*. Obedient to this, man attributes to the Supreme Being a physical, intellectual, and moral structure like his own; hence it is that the votary of each of the great world religions ascribes to its sacred books what he considers absolute perfection: he imagines them to be what he himself would give the world, were he himself infinitely good, wise, and powerful.

A very simple analogy might indeed show him that even a literature emanating from an all-wise, beneficent, and powerful author might not seem perfect when judged by a human standard; for he has only to look about him in the world to find that the work which he attributes to an all-wise, all-beneficent, and all-powerful Creator is by no means free from evil and wrong.

But this analogy long escapes him, and the exponent of each great religion proves to his own satisfaction, and to the edification of his fellows, that their own sacred literature is absolutely accurate in statement, infinitely profound in mean-

---

\* For the legend regarding the Septuagint, especially as developed by the letters of Pseudo-Aristeas, and for quaint citations from the fathers regarding it, see *The History of the Seventy-two Interpreters, from the Greek of Aristeas*, translated by Mr. Lewis, London, 1715; also Clement of Alexandria, in the *Ante-Nicene Christian Library*, Edinburgh, 1867, p. 448. For interesting summaries showing the growth of the story, see Drummond, *Philo Judæus and the Growth of the Alexandrian Philosophy*, London, 1888, vol. i, pp. 231 *et seq.*; also Renan, *Histoire du Peuple Israel*, vol. iv, chap. iv; also, for Philo Judæus's part in developing the legend, see Rev. Dr. Sanday's *Bampton Lectures for 1893, on Inspiration*, pp. 86, 87.

ing, and miraculously perfect in form. From these premises also he arrives at the conclusion that his own sacred literature is unique; that no other sacred book can have emanated from a divine source; and that all others claiming to be sacred are impostures.

Still another law governing the evolution of sacred literature in every great world religion is, that when the books which compose it are once selected and grouped they come to be regarded as a final creation from which nothing can be taken away, and of which even error in form, if sanctioned by tradition, may not be changed.

The working of this law has recently been seen on a large scale.

A few years since, a body of chosen scholars, universally acknowledged to be the most fit for the work, undertook, at the call of English-speaking Christendom, to revise the authorized English version of the Bible.

Beautiful as was that old version, there was abundant reason for a revision. The progress of biblical scholarship had revealed multitudes of imperfections and not a few gross errors in the work of the early translators, and these, if uncorrected, were sure to bring the sacred volume into discredit.

Nothing could be more reverent than the spirit of the revisers, and the nineteenth century has known few historical events of more significant and touching beauty than the participation in the holy communion by all these scholars—prelates, presbyters, ministers, and laymen of churches most widely differing in belief and observance—kneeling side by side at the little altar in Westminster Abbey.

Nor could any work have been more conservative and cautious than theirs; as far as possible they preserved the old matter and form with scrupulous care.

Yet their work was no sooner done than it was bitterly attacked and widely condemned; to this day it is largely regarded with dislike. In Great Britain, in America, in Australia, the old version, with its glaring misconceptions, mistranslations, and interpolations, is still read in preference to the new; the great body of English-speaking Christians clearly preferring the accustomed form of words given by

the seventeenth-century translators, rather than a nearer approach to the exact teaching of the Holy Ghost.

Still another law is, that when once a group of sacred books has been evolved—even though the group really be a great library of most dissimilar works, ranging in matter from the hundredth Psalm to the Song of Songs, and in manner from the sublimity of Isaiah to the offhand story-telling of Jonah—all come to be thought one inseparable mass of interpenetrating parts; every statement in each fitting exactly and miraculously into each statement in every other; and each and every one, and all together, literally true to fact, and at the same time full of hidden meanings.

The working of these and other laws governing the evolution of sacred literature is very clearly seen in the great rabbinical schools which flourished at Jerusalem, Tiberias, and elsewhere, after the return of the Jews from the Babylonian captivity, and especially as we approach the time of Christ. These schools developed a subtlety in the study of the Old Testament which seems almost preternatural. The resultant system was mainly a jugglery with words, phrases, and numbers, which finally became a "sacred science," with various recognised departments, in which interpretation was carried on sometimes by attaching a numerical value to letters; sometimes by interchange of letters from differently arranged alphabets; sometimes by the making of new texts out of the initial letters of the old; and with ever-increasing subtlety.

Such efforts as these culminated fitly in the rabbinical declaration that each passage in the law has seventy distinct meanings, and that God himself gives three hours every day to their study.

After this the Jewish world was prepared for anything, and it does not surprise us to find such discoveries in the domain of ethical culture as the doctrine that, for inflicting the forty stripes save one upon those who broke the law, the lash should be braided of ox-hide and ass-hide; and, as warrant for this construction of the lash, the text, "The ox knoweth his owner, and the ass his master's crib, but Israel doth not know"; and, as the logic connecting text and lash, the statement that Jehovah evidently intended to command

that "the men who know not shall be beaten by those animals whose knowledge shames them."

By such methods also were revealed such historical treasures as that Og, King of Bashan, escaped the deluge by wading after Noah's ark.

There were, indeed, noble exceptions to this kind of teaching. It can not be forgotten that Rabbi Hillel formulated the golden rule, which had before him been given to the extreme Orient by Confucius, and which afterward received a yet more beautiful and positive emphasis from Jesus of Nazareth; but the seven rules of interpretation laid down by Hillel were multiplied and refined by men like Rabbi Ismael and Rabbi Eleazar until they justified every absurd subtlety.\*

An eminent scholar has said that while the letter of Scripture became ossified in Palestine, it became volatilized at Alexandria; and the truth of this remark was proved by the Alexandrian Jewish theologians just before the beginning of our era.

This, too, was in obedience to a law of development, which is, that when literal interpretation clashes with increasing knowledge or with progress in moral feeling, theologians take refuge in mystic meanings—a law which we see working in all great religions, from the Brahmans finding hidden senses in the Vedas, to Plato and the Stoics finding them in the Greek myths; and from the Sofi reading new meanings into the Koran, to eminent Christian divines of the nineteenth century giving a non-natural sense to some of the plainest statements in the Bible.

Nothing is more natural than all this. When naïve statements of sacred writers, in accord with the ethics of early ages, make Brahma perform atrocities which would disgrace a pirate; and Jupiter take part in adventures worthy of Don Juan; and Jahveh practise trickery, cruelty, and high-handed injustice which would bring any civilized mortal into the criminal courts, the invention of allegory is the one

---

\* For a multitude of amusing examples of rabbinical interpretations, see an article in *Blackwood's Magazine* for November, 1882. For a more general discussion, see Archdeacon Farrar's *History of Interpretation*, lect. i and ii, and Rev. Prof. H. P. Smith's *Inspiration and Inerrancy*, Cincinnati, 1893, especially chap. iv; also Reuss, *History of the New Testament*, English translation, pp. 527, 528.

means of saving the divine authority as soon as men reach higher planes of civilization.

The great early master in this evolution of allegory, for the satisfaction of Jews and Christians, was Philo: by him its use came in as never before. The four streams of the garden of Eden thus become the four virtues; Abraham's country and kindred, from which he was commanded to depart, the human body and its members; the five cities of Sodom, the five senses; the Euphrates, correction of manners. By Philo and his compeers even the most insignificant words and phrases, and those especially, were held to conceal the most precious meanings.

A perfectly natural and logical result of this view was reached when Philo, saturated as he was with Greek culture and nourished on pious traditions of the utterances at Delphi and Dodona, spoke reverently of the Jewish Scriptures as "*oracles.*" Oracles they became: as oracles they appeared in the early history of the Christian Church; and oracles they remained for centuries: eternal life or death, infinite happiness or agony, as well as ordinary justice in this world, being made to depend on shifting interpretations of a long series of dark and doubtful utterances—interpretations frequently given by men who might have been prophets and apostles, but who had become simply oracle-mongers.

Pressing these oracles into the service of science, Philo became the forerunner of that long series of theologians who, from Augustine and Cosmas to Mr. Gladstone, have attempted to extract from scriptural myth and legend profound contributions to natural science. Thus he taught that the golden candlesticks in the tabernacle symbolized the planets, the high priest's robe the universe, and the bells upon it the harmony of earth and water—whatever that may mean. So Cosmas taught, a thousand years later, that the table of shewbread in the tabernacle showed forth the form and construction of the world; and Mr. Gladstone hinted, more than a thousand years later still, that Neptune's trident had a mysterious connection with the Christian doctrine of the Trinity.\*

---

\* For Philo Judæus, see Yonge's translation, Bohn's edition; see also Sanday, *Inspiration*, pp. 78-85. For admirable general remarks on this period in the his-

These methods, as applied to the Old Testament, had appeared at times in the New; in spite of the resistance of Tertullian and Irenæus, they were transmitted to the Church; and in the works of the early fathers they bloomed forth luxuriantly.

Justin Martyr and Clement of Alexandria vigorously extended them. Typical of Justin's method is his finding, in a very simple reference by Isaiah to Damascus, Samaria, and Assyria, a clear prophecy of the three wise men of the East who brought gifts to the infant Saviour; and in the bells on the priest's robe a prefiguration of the twelve apostles. Any difficulty arising from the fact that the number of bells is not specified in Scripture, Justin overcame by insisting that David referred to this prefiguration in the nineteenth Psalm: "Their sound is gone out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world."

Working in this vein, Clement of Alexandria found in the form, dimensions, and colour of the Jewish tabernacle a whole wealth of interpretation—the altar of incense representing the earth placed at the centre of the universe; the high priest's robe the visible world; the jewels on the priest's robe the zodiac; and Abraham's three days' journey to Mount Moriah the three stages of the soul in its progress toward the knowledge of God. Interpreting the New Testament, he lessened any difficulties involved in the miracle of the barley loaves and fishes by suggesting that what it really means is that Jesus gave mankind a preparatory training for the gospel by means of the law and philosophy; because, as he says, barley, like the law, ripens sooner than wheat, which

---

tory of exegesis, see Bartlett, *Bampton Lectures*, 1888, p. 29. For efforts in general to save the credit of myths by allegorical interpretation, and for those of Philo in particular, see Drummond, *Philo Judæus*, London, 1888, vol. i, pp. 18, 19, and notes. For interesting samples of Alexandrian exegesis and for Philo's application of the term "oracle" to the Jewish Scriptures, see Farrar, *History of Interpretation*, p. 147 and note. For his discovery of symbols of the universe in the furniture of the tabernacle, see Drummond, as above, vol. i, pp. 269 *et seq.* For the general subject, admirably discussed from a historical point of view, see the Rev. Edwin Hatch, D. D., *The Influence of Greek Ideas and Usages upon the Christian Church*, Hibbert Lectures for 1888, chap. iii. For Cosmas, see my chapters on *Geography* and *Astronomy*. For Mr. Gladstone's view of the connection between Neptune's trident and the doctrine of the Trinity, see his *Juventus Mundi*.



