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Excerpt

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CHAPTER I.

THE FALL-STORY AND ITS EXEGESIS.

Introductory.

THE starting-point for the historian of the Christian doctrines of the Fall and Original Sin is undoubtedly the narrative contained in the third chapter of the Book of Genesis. S. Paul's teaching as to the connexion of human sin and death with Adam's transgression is but one of the various possible interpretations of this narrative, slowly and tentatively reached after some centuries of Jewish exegesis and reflection. S. Augustine's fuller and more definite doctrine is but a developed form of one of the possible interpretations of the statements of S. Paul, arrived at after the preparation of further centuries of Christian speculation. The record which both the Apostle and the great Father of the West treated as essentially an account of historical fact was for each the ultimate source and foundation of his views with regard to the origin and universality of human sinfulness.

But this Old Testament story implies a previous course of development in theological thought much greater in duration than that by which were subsequently reached, from the biblical narrative as starting-point, the most complex post-Reformation theories of unfallen and fallen human nature. It can no longer be assumed, in the light of knowledge yielded by comparative mythology and the prehistoric sciences, that the third chapter of Genesis supplies us with the record of a revelation of historical fact, divinely given at some definite time, or even with a story whose form and details were wholly the creation of its writer's inspired imagination. It is a

record which presents a complicated past history for our investigation. The theologian, then, who would completely trace the history of the doctrine of the Fall, though using the early chapters of Genesis as the fixed point whence to set out, must work backwards from their narrative itself to its mythological sources, and even, as far as possible, to the psychological conditions for the origin of these sources, as well as forwards to the developments and refinements familiar to students of the doctrine as it was expounded by scholastic theology in the period of its most highly perfected elaboration. And indeed it is only thus that he can estimate, from a purely theological standpoint, the validity of the claim which is still commonly made on behalf of this narrative: the claim that, whatever view be taken of its literary nature, it embodies a revelation of actual historical fact which forms the basis of the Christian doctrines of Sin and Redemption.

It is intended, therefore, in the present study of the development of the theory of the origin of human sinfulness involved in the ecclesiastical doctrines of the Fall and of Original Sin, to discuss somewhat fully the scriptural narrative from which those doctrines have been derived. It will be important to ascertain, in so far as it is possible, the meaning which this narrative had for the age in which it received its present form. This can of course only be done by divesting ourselves of all ideas which familiar later developments of thought cause us, perhaps, habitually to read into it; and by translating ourselves, as completely as may be, to the mental standpoint of its writer. And for guidance towards this end it will be necessary to make use of two lines of research. In the first place, it will be essential to recapitulate some of the results which can be said to have been reached, with any high degree of probability, concerning the date and nature of the writing in which the story of the first transgression is contained. Only thus can we attempt to recover its historical background. In the second place, it will be desirable to sift the material yielded by investigations in the fields of comparative religion and race-psychology for any such facts or general principles as may throw light upon the sources and previous history of the elements of which it is composed. The former

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of these lines of inquiry, together with the exegesis of the narrative as a whole, and its literary criticism, will occupy the present chapter.

The Jahvist Document.

The Paradise-story belongs to that stratum of the hexateuch called the Jahvist or, less happily, the Prophetic document (J). This is believed to draw from more ancient sources than the Elohist document (E), with which it came to be blended. The time at which the Jahvist history was written, and the length of the period occupied by the process of committing its material to writing, have not been ascertained with exactness; they are still matters of speculation. Indeed the data for an accurate determination of its age, as a writing, do not at present exist; there is a complete want of external evidence. Various dates between the limits 900—700 B.C. have been assigned to it, and the mean between these two extremes would perhaps be provisionally adopted by the majority of scholars. More definite statements on the matter, however, in the present condition of knowledge, are unsafe. It is therefore impossible to decide whether the history in which the account of the loss of Paradise is contained was first reduced to writing in the age of the earlier literary prophets or in pre-prophetic times. Inasmuch as it is precarious to ignore the possibility of the coexistence of widely different mental temperaments and theological standpoints at a time of active progress in religious thought; since we are ignorant as to how far the archaic characters of the stories contained in J are due to the fixation of their verbal form in oral transmission, and how far their editor or editors were content to be the servants rather than the masters of their material, which, though merely folk-lore, was doubtless very venerable in their eyes¹, it is not absolutely safe to infer that

¹ Several questions dealt with in this discussion of the Fall-story are complicated by our inability always to feel sure exactly how much of what is written represents the real standpoint of the Jahvist compiler, and how much is tradition of hoary antiquity whose perpetuation he desired or tolerated. There can be little doubt that the two motives, of preserving venerable traditions and of adapting them to be the vehicle for the highest Hebrew religion of his time, both strongly influenced the writer.

the Jahvist history, as a written document, was of necessity chronologically earlier than the period of the prophets. On the other hand there are no proofs of the influence of the writing prophets upon J sufficient to compel us to believe that that document could not have existed before the time of Amos or Hosea. On the contrary, it is not difficult to gauge the difference between the Jahvist source and the earliest prophetic books as to position on the scale of advancement in ethical, religious and theological reflection. Measured by such a standard, the Jahvist writing would seem to be decidedly the more primitive.

We may notice first, in illustration of this assertion, the crude naïveté of J's delineation of Jahveh. Jahveh is represented as possessing many purely human characteristics. He walks in the garden to enjoy the cool of the evening; He makes clothes for Adam and Eve; He smells the savour of Noah's sacrifice. He is wiser than men, but His knowledge is limited: He needs to come down to see the tower of Babel, and to ascertain by His own investigation whether the wickedness of Sodom is as great as He has heard. Jahveh is assigned many ethical attributes; but His character is not as yet very perfectly moralised. He apparently misrepresents to Adam and Eve the consequences that would follow from partaking of the tree of knowledge: He is jealous of man's encroachment on His prerogatives of knowledge and immortality. Jahveh is portrayed, in fact, in somewhat crudely anthropomorphic manner. And this anthropomorphism is altogether different from that, for example, of Amos, which is a necessary expedient for the description of God as a personal Being; that of the Jahvist narrative is the expression rather of a definite stage of theological thought, beyond which the prophets had advanced. Again, we fail to find in the Jahvist source any disapproval of reverence for 'holy places,' for sacred trees and wells, and similar survivals of Israel's earlier Nature-worship, such as would be vehemently denounced, as if heathenish and unspiritual, by the prophets. To them, much that the narratives of J contain must have been somewhat repulsive. These narratives evince a simplicity in the toleration of ancient morality and religion such

as would have been impossible had they been the literary creation of writers thoroughly imbued with the severely ethical and polemically monotheistic ideas which characterise the message of the prophets. Thus the Jahvist history would seem to be approaching, rather than to have attained, the prophetic standpoint. It exhibits, however, much of the moral earnestness of prophecy, as may be seen from its treatment of sin. In the story with which we are especially concerned, for instance, the standpoint of earliest Hebrew moral thought, according to which sin is the breach of human custom, or an involuntary wrong, is left far behind¹. Sin, in the Paradise-story, is a matter of what we should call the will and the conscience in relation to God, a deliberate transgression of a divine command: and this is the view of the prophets. But there is no reason to assume that we have here an instance of prophetic influence; rather must we postulate that the lofty ideas of the prophets had been developing in the minds of individuals who preceded them. It is also to be observed that the borrowed traditions incorporated into this source are very largely purified from mythological elements. Such foreign stories are modified in *ethos* and adapted to the purpose of the writer's theology. This self-purification of Hebrew religion had doubtless been in process, however, long before the period of the prophets.

Thus, if it is impossible to carry back, with safety, the *writing* of the Jahvist document to a time at all distantly pre-prophetic, it is extremely probable, for the reasons which have just been given, that the narratives contained in it are of much greater antiquity than the document itself, and that they are witnesses to the religious thought of Israel long before the times in which the literary prophets lived. We shall probably not be far wrong if we refer the present literary form of J to a writer who lived somewhere near the threshold of the prophetic age; and if, in our exegesis of it, we endeavour to interpret it from the mental standpoint of that

¹ See W. R. Smith, *The Prophets of Israel*, 1895, pp. 102 ff.; Clemen, *Lehre von der Sünde*, 1^{er} Theil, S. 21; Schultz, *O. T. Theology*, E. T.

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time, in so far as that standpoint is capable of being recovered¹.

It may be added that the Jahvist record is in all probability to be regarded, so far as it is a collection of elements of folklore and history, as the product of a school of writers. For there are overwhelmingly strong reasons, from the point of view of literary criticism, for believing it to be ultimately of composite authorship, and for regarding it as capable of differentiation into further elements.

Adopting the suggestion of Wellhausen, Budde was the first to point out the existence of different sources in J; and he has been followed, in so far as his main results are concerned, by most other critics. But in spite of being thus incompletely homogeneous in structure, the Jahvist document, when considered in relation even to the Elohist writing, has generally been held to be a unity distinguished for the most part by a characteristic style and other traits. Its literary style is simple, incisive and vivid; and the artistic merit of some of its stories, which present a highly finished picture by means of a few entirely concrete touches, is of the highest order. The account of the temptation and transgression in Eden is often said, from this point of view, to be a pearl of Hebrew literature.

The conciseness and skilful construction of some of these stories has suggested to several of the ablest scholars that they owe the form in which they appear in our written records to gradual perfection whilst being orally transmitted. In this case, the literary criticism which has emphasised minute differences of style between the various strata of the hexateuch, and has attempted "to get some coherent conception of the authors from their works²," has overreached itself. And indeed the reaction against such criticism has already set in. In Prof. Gunkel's recent commentary on Genesis³, which

¹ J's deep knowledge of human nature and its moral capacities, his extensive ethnological information, and other qualities, point towards a date bordering on that of the earlier prophets. See M^cCurdy, *History, Prophecy and the Monuments*, vol. III. chap. iii.

² *Critical Review*, XII. i. p. 5.

³ A work to which, perhaps, even before this point, indebtedness should have been acknowledged.

represents the tendency of methods of research which will probably be further used in the immediate future, the symbols J, E etc. are indeed retained; but they cease to represent individual writers or composers: they stand rather for collections of *oral* tradition, for the work of guilds rather than of single persons. But reactions proverbially go to extremes; and however large may have been the part played by oral reciters of the *sagas* of Genesis in giving them dramatic form, and however great the reverence of collectors for the venerable material which tradition yielded, there are obvious proofs that those who finally embodied it in the written record which we inherit dealt freely with it in respect of expurgation and adaptation to a moral and religious purpose, and therefore stamped upon it the impress of their respective individualities. Moreover some at least of the stories of J, besides sharing in common the marks of a single purpose and the traits of one and the same literary style, suggest the master hand of uncommon genius; they reveal an art which cannot safely be ascribed to successive casual improvements of a floating popular poem, but which receives a more natural explanation in the view which sober criticism has long scientifically upheld: the view, namely, that the final *literary* form of these stories is due in the main to the artistic genius of a moulder of tradition¹.

The existence in oral tradition of the narratives which are woven, in the Jahvist document, into a continuous history, will call for notice at a later page. Meanwhile, it is hoped that the foregoing account of the writing in which the Fall-story is enshrined, brief as it has of necessity been, may suffice to show that, when the materials of this story were taking their present form, Hebrew religion was of a comparatively primitive kind, and Hebrew theology, as distinguished from the mythology which preceded it, was in a scarcely more than nascent state. These considerations should make us cautious lest we attribute to the narrative, didactic though it was intended to be, a doctrinal significance deeper than its writer knew, and

¹ There are now and again verbal coincidences between the several narratives of J which would seem to be best explained by this theory. Cf. *e.g.* Gen. iii. 16 and iv. 7; iii. 17 and iv. 11; iii. 9 and iv. 9.

ignore the possibility that much of the rich theological suggestiveness which it bears for us was undesigned. To its marvellous artistic merit, and to its having been taken, rightly or wrongly, to treat, with all its characteristic vigour, of a deep problem in which mankind have for ages been profoundly interested, must largely be attributed, no doubt, the influence, exceptional not only for Old Testament lore but for literature in general, which it has exerted upon the thought of so many centuries, and the fact that so many generations, and indeed so many great philosophers, have read in it their own reflections and ideas¹.

Exegesis of the narrative of Gen. III.

Regarding the Paradise-story as a single connected narrative embodying one or several particular didactic purposes, and postponing for the present the questions of its composite nature and of the past history of the materials of which it is composed, we may now proceed to the exegesis of the story as it stands. We have to endeavour, that is, to ascertain what was the meaning which its *literary* author, the individual who gave to it its present written form, intended to convey to contemporaries of the early prophetic or the pre-prophetic period. It is from the standpoint of that age, in so far as we can recover it, that the Jahvist narrative must be read. Consequently it is necessary for the present to ignore the lingering reminiscences of still earlier meaning and association which portions of the passage undoubtedly

¹ e.g. Kant, Herder, Hegel, Schiller.

For a full treatment of the questions discussed above, for authority for the statements made, and for many of the inferences drawn from them, the student is referred to the following works: Carpenter and Harford-Battersby, *The Hexateuch*, vol. 1. 1900; Addis, *Documents of the Hexateuch*; Spurrell, *Notes on the text of Genesis*, 2nd ed.; Holzinger, *Einleitung in den Hexateuch*, and *Genesis*; Montefiore, *Hibbert Lectures*, 1892; Gunkel, *Genesis*; W. R. Smith, *Religion of the Semites and Prophets of Israel*; Budde, *Urgeschichte*; Kittel, *History of the Hebrews*, E. T.; Worcester, *The Book of Genesis in the light of modern knowledge*; Arts, *Genesis, Hexateuch*, etc., in *Hastings' Dictionary of the Bible and Encyclopaedia Biblica*. Opposed views may be found in Green, *Unity of Genesis*. For an attempt to reproduce the idiom and style of Gen. iii. by literal translation, see Duff, *O. Test. Theology*, vol. 11. The translations of Lenormant into French, and of Kautzsch into German, may be found useful.

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contain, and to concentrate attention solely upon the implications which its compiler himself intended to convey; and it is equally essential to avoid the opposite extreme of unhistorical interpretation already mentioned, the natural tendency to find in the story the reflections of far later ages. It will be desirable therefore, at the outset, to lay aside any ready-made views or doctrines which we have been wont to associate with its contents, and which inevitably transmit their colour to its statements; remembering that what New Testament or patristic writers understood from it only enables us to estimate what it meant to them, not what it implied to its compiler or to the generation to which it was addressed.

Of these two errors, the former has frequently been committed by students of folk-lore and comparative mythology, who, disregarding the facts supplied by history and literary criticism, have discussed the Fall-story as if it were on a level with the crudest of heathen mythology or symbolism, and have regarded it as intended to convey a meaning which could only have been associated at all with the much more primitive ideas whence possibly the imagery of the story was at first derived, but which only survive in the existing narrative as lingering echoes; ideas which, in their entirety and their original significance, were incapable of being inculcated in the work of a writer belonging to such a period as we assign to the Jahvist document. It is the opposite anachronism to this, however, which calls for more emphatic notice here; for it is this which vitiates the traditional exegesis of the third chapter of Genesis. This exegesis is less an exposition of the real meaning of the narrative than an imposition upon it of subsequently developed teaching. According to the interpretation which hitherto has generally been adopted, the story is primarily an account of a fall of the human race in its first parents; it is not merely an account of the historical entrance of sin into the world but also an explanation of the origin and universality of sinfulness throughout mankind.

There is no hint, however, in the passage itself, of Adam's moral condition being fundamentally altered by his act of disobedience. The only allusion to the original estate of our first parents, attributing to them absence of shame at the

fact that they were naked, of itself implies no more than that they shared the ignorance of childhood, or that they did not possess even the most elementary characteristics of civilisation. Indeed, in the following chapter the same history describes the beginnings of the rudest arts. The narrative, too, connects the awakening of shame not with sense of guilt, but with acquisition of knowledge due to the magical virtues of the tree. And the changes brought about through the punishment of the transgression are physical: the ills of human life. There is no implication that Adam originally differed from any other man as regards capacity for integrity or for intercourse with God, or that his 'nature' was perverted by his act of disobedience. The idea that his sin was the source of the sinfulness of succeeding generations, or in any way an explanation of it, is altogether absent from the narrative; and, so far as we can gather from the Old Testament, it was foreign to the thought of the prophetic, not to speak of the pre-prophetic, age. For though the Jahvist source undoubtedly emphasises the seriousness and the general diffusion of sin¹, it yet has no adequate sense of the *absolute* universality of sin, such as was attained in later ages². Nor is there room for the inference that it assigns to Adam's fall any deteriorating influence upon the free self-determination of his posterity. Cain's sin is by no means thus explained; but the whole of his guilt and responsibility is thrown upon the sinner himself. Sin is personified and compared to a ravenous beast lurking for its prey; but Cain is told that 'he ought to rule over it'³. If sinfulness

¹ Gen. iv., vi. 5—8, 12, viii. 21, ix. 20—27, xi. 1—9.

² Gen. vi. 5 ff., 12, viii. 21 speak of sin as being universally spread, but only at a particular time. Abel is regarded as well-pleasing to God, and Noah as righteous before Him; therefore the representation of 'all flesh' as having 'corrupted its way,' and of man as such that 'every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually,' cannot, without inconsistency, be interpreted as if it were an absolute statement about all mankind from the beginning onwards.

³ Gen. iv. 7 (R.V. *margin*). This translation makes much better sense than that adopted in the text, and embodies what was apparently the recognised interpretation of the synagogue (*Siphre* 82 b; *Jerus. Targum*). The *Targum of Onkelos* misses the meaning here. See, on this passage, Loisy, *Revue d'histoire et de littérature relig.*, I. 335 ff.; Spurrell, *Notes on the Heb. Text of Genesis*. Sin is