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ARTICLE IV.

THE THEOLOGY OF "PROMETHEUS BOUND."[1]

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THE "Prometheus Bound" is one of the most famous of all Greek tragedies. One reason of this is its lofty theme; others are its masterly treatment, its boldness of outline, and its advance of prophetic vision. Æschylus treats here, not of the misfortunes or woes of man, not of the scandals of gods and goddesses; but rather of Fate, of Justice, of Judgment, of Duty — the sterner virtues of mind and soul. These all with a colossal intellect he has wrought out, and therewith ventured to entertain and mold the entire populace of the Grecian capital. Here, thousands of Athenians, who worship *an unknown God,* assembled to listen to the serious words, quite as much as to witness the august action of deities, wrought over into the form and thought of men.

Such theme and treatment as draw our modern populace, for the most part, to the playhouse, as it is called, the Greeks of Æschylus' day would not have tolerated for a moment. Their theater was no playhouse for mere amusement's sake. Laughter was not so much in demand, for more serious business than pleasure as an end in itself was occupying the Greek mind. At the theater they presented the philosophies of human and divine problems in soberest outline. Life was no mere sportive play, and its superficialities appeared too trivial for

consideration. The mystery of human motive, the character of deity, and the relationship of one to the other — such thoughts, and plots of like warp and woof, drew as a magnet thousands of Athens' citizens into her vast public theater, not for some commercial profit to a small company of the avaricious, but rather for the gratification of that innate instinct of man for an unfolding of the marvel of marvels, the divine origin and destiny of the human race.

Æschylus drew, and always will draw, sober, thinking people in all generations, to his plays, whether they be staged or not; for he is a painter of the colossal. Eternity, the eternal gods, eternal right and justice, human worth and salvation, — all in an atmosphere of eternal mystery and ministry, — thoughts like these can never fail to challenge attention and awaken the interest of men bound to eternity.

In these days of ours one would appear to be straining the religious sentiment of his age in speaking seriously of the theology of some theatrical piece. Even while there are some plays of a wholesome moral tone in their literary structure and movement, yet would it not be pursuing the science of criticism quite too far if one were to attempt to search out and set forth the theistic element of the very most wholesome play set upon the most select of stages? We to-day are not on the theistic end of life. We concern and amuse ourselves with the trivialities, the sport, the sporadic, in men, to too great a disproportion.

But attenuated as this treatment must appear to this latest generation, the play, if we may so call it, known as "Prometheus Bound," is, and purports unreservedly to be, strictly a theological drama. For illustration, Zeus, the god of the Greek pantheon, towers in lurid light, or again in awful darkness, above all gods and men. He and his pervade the

minds of the people as well as Olympus and the upper air. He is austere, mighty, and autocratic. His will among gods is supreme; while mankind, heartily despised of him, is beneath his care or concern. Well organized is his cabinet of deities. All fear him, willing or unwilling, with or without conscience. Hephaistos (the Latin Vulcan), much against himself, binds Prometheus to the cold, barren, gorge-bound rock of Caucasus. He exclaims, — as if against himself,—

> "I lack the hardihood by might to bind
> In this wild-winter gorge a kindred God.
> Yet must I now that hardihood put on,
> Or brave dread wrath, and scorn the Sire's decree."[1]

By reason of some kindred sympathy with Prometheus Hephaistos finds it hard for him to come to the point of yielding to the worse part of his own nature or to the dictum of Zeus. It goes hard against the grain to chain a fellow god to the rock, — hands, loins, and feet, — and press the adamantine wedge through the breast. But a brother god, Force, attendant with him upon Prometheus, urges hard to heed not his own impulses, but rather give obedience to the Supreme. Although at length yielding to the insistence of Force, yet he calls him,—

> "Pitiless ever, full of daring, thou!"

> "All is foredoomed save Heaven's immortal throne,
> For none are free, excepting Zeus alone,"

replies Force.

All through the dialogue of these two attendants upon Prometheus, Æschylus is artfully weaning the sympathies of his auditors away from Force and his Master, away from the Homeric and common theology, — so unkind and cruel and unreasonable. Touched again with sympathy for the

[1] The translations are Henry William Herbert's.

shackled object of divine wrath and hate, Hephaistos suddenly breaks forth,—

"Ay me! Prometheus, thy woes I bemoan."

"*Force.* See that thyself thou hold from wailing free!"

And so, on to each move of his task, the unwilling servant is driven, like a slave to his toil, while the vast Athenian audience is being artfully seduced from the prevailing theology of divine power and force, to the more really instinctive theology of divine sympathy and pity. The writer fain would show that force is opposed to reason, that might and right are not synonymous; that the deity whose supreme mark and virtue is strength and force cannot be the God of thinking, willing, feeling human kind.

After he had welded a fetter fast to one arm, under goad of Force's tongue, the divine forger slavishly exclaims:—

"Behold this arm inextricably fast!"

"Then link this other firm. So let him know
Himself in argument great Zeus below,"

replies Force, thus presuming to advance an argument to establish the superiority of Zeus to all others, and the inferiority of gods, and men besides. Vain argument! For who so untutored could be that an argument of the might-is-right sort should convince him of essential superiority! How could advantage in argument be made clear to any thinking Greek or Saxon, by reason of the fact that Epicurus' master knocked him down, or that Prometheus is overpowered, chained, and maltreated by Force and his Ironmonger! Reason or unreason may not be measured by such scales; and no further illustration is needed to teach any audience, Athenian or other, the futility of force and sheer strength to deify itself in and

over human reason and such degree of intelligence as mortals have. Thus would the Greek tragedian impress upon his fellow Greeks the lesson of pity as opposed to that of force.

And yet, with much more subtleness of argument, Æschylus advances still deeper into the mysteries of the soul, in order to show a power, which, though obscure, is vastly superior to the force and might of Zeus. In all his agony, the god-persecuted Prometheus is unfalteringly sustained in his purpose, nor thinks for one moment of yielding an iota, neither of avoiding the decree of Almighty God.

> "Well know I that Zeus is relentless as fate,
> That his power is his measure of justice and right;
> Yet well I believe he will lower his state,
> When he finds himself battling with destiny's might,"

says the sufferer to a chorus of Okeanides, that approach him from over the sea in a winged chariot.

The divine prisoner, however, is cautious with them, and when they ask,—

> "What is decreed to Zeus but aye to reign?"

answers,—

> "This though thou learn not, ask it not again."

They persist,—

> "Some solemn secret it is, thou wouldst conceal."
>
> "*Prom.* Some other topic choose. This to reveal
> Time is not yet, but rather close to hide,
> As hide I may; for, an I keep it so,
> These chains I shall escape, and eke this woe."

But to timorous Io, fleeing the amorous might of the Chief of Gods, this lesser deity hints the ignominious fall of All-powered Zeus.

> "But no surcease is destined to my thrall,
> Till from his tyrannous throne this Zeus shall fall."

To which Io asks:—

"Shall Zeus then fall? Can this predestined be?
"*Prom.* Thou wouldst rejoice, I trow, such doom to see.
. . . . . .
"*Io.* Who from his grasp the sceptre shall distrain?
"*Prom.* He from himself, by counsels light and vain!"

Æschylus goes on weaving a shroud for the God of gods. He is, indeed, trespassing upon dangerous, holy ground, and must exercise his keenest wit that he do not violate the reverent spirit of his auditors, lest they rise as one man to accuse him of sacrilege, and administer the hemlock or drive him into exile. Yet so artfully does he play his Prometheus with Strength and Chorus, with Hermes and Io, that he can dare to make the chief actor say at length,—

"Cringe, flatter, worship each new ruler, thou!—
To me your Zeus than veriest nought is less!
. . . . . .
"Better, I trow, the rude rock's slave to be,
Than cringe to Father Zeus with crouching knee."

And why so persistent in this contention with the Supreme?

"All Gods I hate, — and thee among the rest,—
Who kindest deeds have paid with bitterest wrong."

Truth is, Æschylus is setting forth as discreetly as he can the doctrine of Destiny, or, as some put it, of Fate, as supreme over and in the Universe, —gods and all! Yet it is not a raw, soulless fate or absolutism! but rather Fate as the law of Justice and Righteousness, that the Greek poet would fain illustrate and enforce to his hearers.

This brings me to mention, briefly, three or four chief principles which, like stars in a darkened sky, shine out from the somber Æschylean plot.

1. First appears luminous *duty*. For some cause, not

given, Zeus hates mankind, and appears to have doomed them to a helpless, hopeless, and isolated existence, devoid of divine sympathy or aid. Not only will not the Chief of gods come to human help; he will not even permit his lesser deities any part in the amelioration of mortal ills. To his sovereign will all the lesser deities cringe, save one, and perchance throttle some native pulse of pity for the unfortunate. This one will not be downed. To the faint whisperings of his soul he listens, as to the deeper tones of a kingdom wider and mightier than that of the Sire of gods. This deity dares to heed a softer voice of pity; he dares snatch from the altar of heaven that

> "fount of fire divine,
> Source of all arts, all happiness, to men,"

and therewith attempt to mend a broken race.

With unflinching, unrepentant devotion, this Prometheus pursues the purpose of his heart. Neither distraint of bounden hands and feet and loins, nor pierced breast; neither damp and chill of icy Caucasus, nor gibes nor threats of other deities, can move one whit the will, or draw forth one penitent word from man's would-be deliverer. Somehow he believes he shall survive his agony and the doom of Zeus, and live to see the divine Tormentor hurled out of heaven's high and mighty throne. With such a theme as this it becomes easy to believe that Æschylus, with his Prometheus, could touch the finer feeling of the rugged Athenian mind, and wean it to a degree from its stern ideal of iron power to that more noble instinct of mercy-tempered *duty*. We may hardly fail to think that the listeners to this play leaned well to pity's side, and from a God such as Zeus was played to be.

2. The second star that streams its light from this dark tragedy of a soul is *justice*.

It must be true that Æschylus feels keenly the injustice of the theology of his time; else he hardly could have made Prometheus so strong in his revulsion of feeling and thought against the Lord of the Greek pantheon. Strong expression must mean strong conviction, — especially so when wrought out as effectively as in this artful piece of literature. The dominant tone of a theology worthy the Greek mind and the worship of the Athenian should not be a power to autocracy, but rather some nobler and more worthy trait. The Christian Love was hardly known to ancient Greeks, though we suspect it was faintly descried afar off. Here and there Prometheus has such foregleams, — as, for example, his appeal at the very close of the drama,—

> "O Glory, O Love,
> Of my mother prophetic, — O liberal air,
> That revolvest the light and the life of the world,
> Behold how unjustly I bear!"

Yet it must be admitted that, at this stage of life's great play, Justice and Injustice assumed the leading rôle.

The better nature of the chief player in this work of Æschylus seems to have been deeply offended and wounded. Not merely his divine pride as a god, not chiefly his quivering tortured flesh as an incarnation, but his high sense of right, of benevolence, of mercy, or, in less sublimated phrase, of fair treatment, is powerfully and profoundly aroused.

For his good offices in the pantheon, particularly with Zeus himself, what had been the reward? — Unfair treatment! Those debts

> "he doth repay
> The tyrant of the Gods, with wrong for right,
> Since tyranny hath still this rank disease,
> That friends it trusts not."

The attitude of his superior towards men, Prometheus cannot brook,

> **"For that wretched race of men**
> **No word he held, but to abolish all,**
> **For ever, and a different seed to sow."**

At this point Zeus and Prometheus clash! In fact, it seems to me that here is the very crux of the play, the key of action, the nerve of motive, the lodestone of popular interest in this matchless work.

With the one,

> **"power is the measure of justice and right";**

the other resents and rejects the measure. With his life, with his grief and suffering, and even unto death, he resists the injustice of sheer power and absolutism.

When, in view of Prometheus' attitude towards omnipotent Zeus, Okeanos (or Neptune) would placate him with,—

> **"Say, O Prometheus, hast thou never heard**
> **The cure of the sick heart, the gentle word?"**

he replies,—

> **"Ay! If the heart be softly soothed to the right,**
> **Not if it strive, and be subdued by might."**

3. But the brightest star of all the galaxy that shines out of this noblest of Greek dramas is, from our modern way of thinking, that of *human redemption*. For his concern for mankind, for his pleadings in their behalf, for the boldness of his effort to relieve their miserable and pitiful condition, — for these things Prometheus is doomed by Zeus to atone, upon the cold, cheerless cliff of desolate Caucasus. This is his crime, and this deemed worthy by the Immortal Ruler of direst retribution. Hear it set forth, even in his pangs:—

> "I rescued them [wretched men], I say,
> That Hades held them not that very day.
> For this I writhe, for this, in pangs, ay me!
> Fearful to bear, and piteous to behold.
>
> . . . . . .
>
> "But, for me, I knew the whole,
> And knowing sinned, — ay, knowing! nor will now
> Deny it. Saving men, myself I lost."

Here we discern in principle the great, new-clad, glorified teaching of the Nazarene, Jesus. First, the doctrine of human redemption; second, the doctrine that relief of mortals must be accomplished by suffering, life for life; and we find the third, namely, that the salvation of mankind is wrought out by atonement of a deity.

Prometheus steals enlightening, purifying, redeeming fire from the very altar of God. This he does contrary to the will of the All-Ruler; — yet, be it noted, in perfect, irresistible harmony with the promptings of his own soul. To this inward motive he will be true at all hazards, at all cost, and so

> "steal from the great Gods
> Their wealth, to waste on earth-worms."

This wealth of the gods, which Force says is wasted on mere earth-worms, is thus described by Prometheus, the would-be great physician,—

> "I spared mankind the foresight of their fate.
>
> . . . . . .
>
> "Blind hopes I planted in their hearts to bloom.
>
> . . . . . .
>
> "Nay more! I gave them fire's immortal ray.
>
> . . . . . .
>
> that thence full many an art shall flow."

And again:—

> "I made them from being dumb
> And senseless, mindful and instinct with soul.
> For I will tell ye, blaming men in nought,

> But claiming favor for the good I gave,
> Who, though they saw before, yet saw in vain,
> And, hearing, did hear nothing, but, like shapes
> Of empty dreams, all things confused and mixed
> At random, heedlessly; nor knew to build
> Houses of brick, sun-facing, nor of wood,
> But, groping under ground, like wind-borne ants,
> In caverns dwelt unvisited of day."

Then, by way of summary, in a line he says,—

> "All arts that mortals have, they have from me."

According to the anthropology of our poet, man is not so much a sinner as an unfortunate. He appears to be more sinned against than sinning. Whether he fell from some high estate, or was all too slowly emerging from some lower order of being, the Prometheus does not attempt to tell us, — save that great Zeus thought the race unworthy of further patience, and fit only for destruction. However, it was by reason of his willful and persistent disobedience that this confessed sinner-redeemer clashes with the Almighty, and strives to bend the will and break the fetters that chain and restrain him from his self-appointed task of human redemption. The salvation he would bring is well described as an enlightening and purifying fire.

So John the Baptist represents Christ's coming as an occasion when men shall be purified, when the wheat shall be garnered, and the chaff destroyed with a fire unquenchable. So Jesus offers himself to mankind as the "Light of the world," and enforces with luminous simile that his disciples must be not only lightbearers to men, but they must *themselves* be bright and shining lights: "Ye are the light of the world; let your light so shine," etc.

Æschylus is said to have described his tragedies as morsels gathered from the mighty feasts of Homer. In this he

was extremely modest, or else prudent to the fine edge. For none of the Greek poets ventured upon, or wrought out, such a task as did the author of the Prometheus, by way of the reconstruction of Greek thought and philosophy, working in, as he does, the nobler motives of duty, sympathy, and help, and blazing thus the way for the very noblest of all motives of the human heart, — Faith, Hope and Love!

However, as if to complete a galaxy of celestial lights, Æschylus illumes for his hearers the highway to an immortal life. Zeus appears to have determined upon an extermination of mortals; but Prometheus will not have it so. He is quite, and even more, determined that the All-Father shall not compass the elimination of the race; and, in order to thwart the divine decree, steals from the holy of holies light, heat, and life divine for the dire need of groping, perishing men. Or, as he puts it in his dialogue with Chorus,—

"I gave them fire's immortal ray,"

which, we may safely presume, he gave for the permanent illumination and uplift of mankind, whose divine Deliverer he fain would be.

Immortal himself, death and destruction cannot touch Prometheus. Indeed, he is punished for his interference with the divine decrees, but only for a season.

"Then let it be cast,
The double-edged ringlet of sulphurous flame,—
Let ether be shattered by thunder, and rent
By fury of merciless whirlwinds, — let earth
From its deepest foundations be whirled by the blast,
And the foam of the ocean, assailing the sky,
Be white in the paths of the planets on high.
And this body of mine, let him hurl it amain
To the blackest abysses of Tartaros old,
All helplessly bound in necessity's chain,—
Yet he cannot compel me to die."

If the Foe of man's Deliverer is unable to destroy him with the elemental powers of lightning, smoke, whirlwind, ocean, how shall he compass the destruction of those who are shielded by the Suffering Saviour!

Furthermore, the Divine Autocrat is to be "hurled from his tyrannous throne." How, then, shall he be able to pursue his dire purpose to its bitter end? Ah! the Saviour God shall overcome and thwart the Force God! The Deity of Fairplay shall usurp the throne of Willful Fate, and therein establish the rule of light, life, and love immortal.

Thus the bold old dramatist, who apologetically declares that his plays are but crumbs gathered at the feasts of Homer, may be said to have swept clean the tables of the blind old bard of Chios, and thereupon to have spread the fresher viands of truth, life, mercy, and love, hot and nutritious from his own better culinary.

Thus does Æschylus seek to win Athens from the bondage of the old Greek masters, and to hail the advent of a more rational and hopeful theology than theirs.