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THE FIRST THREE CHAPTERS OF GENESIS.

By Chancellor P. V. Smith, LL.D.

THE Tennessee trial will have brought home to the minds of all the reading public throughout the world, whether Christian, Mohammedan, or heathen, the fact that at the present time there exists among Christians a profound difference of opinion as to the meaning and interpretation of the first three chapters of Genesis—a difference which was not apparent in the last or preceding centuries. It is, of course, due to the increased knowledge which we believe that God has given to us of His past dealings with the universe in general, and this earth of ours in particular, through the researches and discoveries of astronomers, geologists, archæologists, and biologists. The modern allegorical or pictorial view of these chapters has been adopted by theologians and thinkers who would not be classified as Modernists. No one would think of labelling the late Bishop Handley Moule as a Modernist. Yet some years before his death he wrote:

"Genesis is really the foundation book about man's sin and God's first steps both of judgment and redemption, and the preparations for the Christ in the story of His human forefathers, the heirs of the promise. The first few chapters are figurative and symbolical (just like the last chapters in Revelation), giving us great facts and truths in enigmatical language. We need not worry about the literalism of them. We are to take their clear messages to our spirits, and trust the true author."—*Letters and Poems of Bishop Moule*, Letter 51.

In view of this difference of opinion, a country clergyman, by no means deficient in reading or thought, lately remarked to the writer of this article that he thought anyone must be an ass who tried to preach before a country congregation on the first three chapters of Genesis. I replied that in that case he was talking to an ass, as I had done so on more than one occasion. Thinking that possibly some other readers of the Churchman may be of the same opinion as my friend, I will endeavour, with the permission of the editor, to sketch the lines on which I venture to think that useful and non-controversial sermons may be preached on the contents of these chapters.

I.—The text of the first might be ch. i. 31: "God saw every thing

that He had made, and, behold, it was very good." The picture of creation given in the first chapter of Genesis sets before us four important truths.

(*a*) In verse 1 it teaches us that "in the beginning God created the heaven and the earth." Spirit is prior in existence to matter. Matter was not self-existent, as atheists would maintain, nor did it owe its existence to any inferior being, as the old Gnostics supposed, but it was brought into existence by the Supreme Spirit whom we call God. This is the fundamental article of our faith. We believe "in one God the Father Almighty (or, rather, All-ruler, as the Greek *παντοκράτωρ* should be more correctly translated), maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible." Stress on this basic truth is quite sufficient in a rural pulpit, without going into the question whether F. W. Faber was right when he wrote of God:

> "I see Thee in the eternal years
> In glory all alone,
> Ere round Thine uncreated fires
> Created light had shone."

And when he penned the more familiar lines:

> "When heaven and earth were yet unmade,
> When time was yet unknown,
> Thou in Thy bliss and majesty
> Didst live and love alone."

Or whether Bishop J. E. Mercer was not more correct when he said:

"Creation was not a definite event happening at some time in the life of the Creator, after the lapse of a past eternity of solitary existence; it is an outcome of creative activity that is co-eternal with the Being of God Himself."—*The Problem of Creation* (1917), p. 305.

(*b*) But, secondly, this chapter teaches us that the universe did not spring into existence at once. The process of creation was gradual; there were six successive days of creation after an indefinite time during which the earth was in a state of chaos. To that extent the chapter agrees with what God has since revealed to us by what we call science. But any attempt to press the analogy between the two is, to say the least, unsatisfactory and inconclusive. Some have endeavoured to do so by maintaining that the days of Genesis were intended to mean periods of an untold number of years. But the mention of evenings and mornings seems to be fatal to this theory.

It is difficult to see how an evening and morning can describe the beginning and end of an æon. Moreover, the theory is obviously inconsistent with the first three verses of ch. ii., which connect the weekly rest of the Sabbath with the rest of God on the seventh day, after having completed the work of creation in six similar periods of twenty-four hours.

(*c*) Again, the chapter teaches us that all that God created was good. This is repeated seven times, the seventh assertion being emphasized by the prefix "very." It is a moral and spiritual truth and a condemnation in advance of the errors of the Manichæans, who taught that matter, or nature, was created not by a good and holy God, but by an evil spirit; and of the early monks, who believed that everything connected with the body was evil and that they ought to free themselves from it as much as possible. The sevenfold assertion teaches us to look to God as the source of all that is good—beauty, truth, and moral perfection or love; and it warns us against supposing that pain and suffering and sacrifice are in themselves evil. The beauty of God's creation is displayed in the glories of the heavens—the colours of sunrise and sunset, the varying forms of the clouds, and the splendour of sun, moon, and stars; the loveliness of earth with its trees and shrubs and flowers and varied landscapes, and of the sea with its many twinkling smiles; and its goodness is shewn in the vast amount of sentient happiness which prevails in the animal world, and possibly also in the vegetable world; while its truth is set forth in the constancy of the laws by which it is governed and which enable men to turn it to their own account.

(*d*) Lastly, and this is the most important lesson of all, the chapter teaches us that man was made in the image of God. All the earlier stages of creations, so far as our earth is concerned, led up to this; that God might have children, who, so far as was possible for limited creatures, should be like Himself, and should be able to return His fatherly love towards them by a childlike love to Him and a childlike trust in Him. But this involved two things—(i) a possession by man of an independent individuality, and a freedom of will, with the risk of abusing that freedom; and (ii) a gradual and progressive education and development which St. Paul, in his day, regarded as still to be completed at some future time (Rom. viii. 19–22).

" God is Spirit," said our Lord (John iv. 24) ; and in our Creed we affirm our belief in His Spirit as " the giver of life." It certainly seems more consonant with what we know of the workings of spirit and of God's subsequent dealings with the world to suppose that creation was effected by the infusion of God's *Spirit*, or, in other words, of *life*, into matter, thereby causing its gradual and progressive development into various forms, than to suppose that God, like a human carpenter or artificer, moulded all these forms separately.

II.—The chief lesson intended to be conveyed by the narrative in ch. ii. 4 to end, is expressed in the 24th verse, " Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife ; and they shall be one flesh," which was quoted by our Lord as conclusive against the lax ideas on the subject of divorce which prevailed in His day. In the first chapter it had been stated that God created mankind " male and female," which was not declared of any of the other living creatures ; but this was hardly sufficient to denote the difference between the relation to one another of the two sexes in mankind and their relation in the case of the other creatures. To emphasize this difference, the compiler of Genesis was inspired to insert this second account of the creation of the earth, which evidently comes from a separate source and differs from the first in many important particulars. Clearly its main purpose is to teach the light in which woman is to be regarded in the constitution of the human race, in being a help suitable for man, and especially in being the lifelong mate of her husband. In all ages of the world's history woman has had no small share in the social and political and religious life of mankind ; though it seems to have been reserved for the present generation completely to recognize in how many respects woman can materially assist man, and to take full advantage of her services. But marriage in some form or other has from time immemorial been a feature which has differentiated mankind from the rest of the animal world. The females of other creatures are, for the most part, merely united for a short time to the males for the purpose of producing offspring and sheltering the first tender days of their offspring. When this time is past, they separate and forget all about the males with whom they were united and the offspring which they brought forth ; and the offspring go their own way without any remembrance or thought of their mothers. But the protracted period during which God has ordained that the young of the human

race remain immature and helpless, requires that their parents shall bestow on them prolonged care and protection ; and this naturally leads to a succession of offspring of the same parents growing up in the same home. Thus arises the relationship of the family which is extended to grandchildren and to collaterals. But God did not intend that the connection between husband and wife should merely consist in a physical union. The wife was to be a spiritual help to her husband. They were to be joint-heirs of the grace of life (1 Pet. iii. 7). And marriage was destined, in process of time, to assume a mystical significance. For St. Paul, in Eph. v. 22–33, wrote that " the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ also is the head of the Church." " Husbands, love your wives," he added, " as Christ also loved the Church, and gave Himself up for it. . . . He that loveth his own wife loveth himself, for no man ever hated his own flesh ; but nourisheth and cherisheth it, even as Christ also the Church ; for we are members of His body." St. Paul was, no doubt, thinking of how the parable or allegory of Adam and Eve was fulfilled in Christ (Whom in 1 Cor. xv. 45 he calls another Adam) and the Church. For the Church came into being by the sleep of our Lord in the grave and His resurrection from it, and St. Paul calls the Church His body. The Apostle then goes on, like our Lord Himself, to quote the great lesson of the parable : " For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall be joined unto his wife, and they two shall be one flesh." " This," he adds, " is a great mystery ; but I speak concerning Christ and the Church," which in Rev. xxi. 9 is called " the bride, the Lamb's wife." Rightly, therefore, do we look upon the union of man and wife as Holy Matrimony.

III.—The last of the three chapters under consideration, dealing as it does with the entrance of sin into the world, is clearly the most important of them from a spiritual and religious point of view, The origin of sin or moral evil is wrapt in insoluble mystery, but two things are clear : first, that there was a period when there was no sin or moral evil on this earth of ours ; and secondly, that at some time or other it entered in, since for centuries past, and at the present day, there has been, and is, only too much of it. It was impossible for lifeless matter to sin, and therefore it did not exist on the earth until life came here. Nor can we recognize any sin or moral evil in the vegetable world, though here the struggle for existence begins

between one plant or tree and another. When we come to the animal world, a later development, we find this struggle becoming more acute. Pain now comes upon the scene, and one creature preys upon and destroys another. But still there is no sin or moral evil; each creature merely obeys the law of its being—and we may safely say that no animal has any sense of right or wrong, except, to a certain limited extent, some domestic animals who have been taught it by their contact with man. There was, therefore, no sin on this earth until man came into it; and as there is abundance of sin on the earth now, it is clear that at some time or other the first sin must have been committed by some human being who for the first time awoke to the difference between moral good and moral evil. Is the Eden story an historical record of this incident, or does it teach us the occurrence of the incident by way of allegory or parable? We have no right to dogmatize upon the question or to assert that those who hold a contrary opinion upon it to our own must necessarily be foolish or wrong. We do not know the origin of the Eden story or the source from which the compiler of Genesis derived it, or through how many generations and in what manner it was handed down before it reached him. No one can say for certain that the events recorded in the story did not actually happen as they are narrated in Genesis iii. But, on the other hand, we may be allowed to think that it is highly improbable that they did so, and that a general knowledge of the universe and of God's workings in it teaches us that they did not so happen. But if so, how do we account for the story being found in Scripture which is given to us by inspiration of God? Can God have allowed what is false to be included in it? The answer to this question depends on a right understanding of what is true and what is false. A statement or a narrative is true or false according as it conveys a true or false impression to the mind of the person to whom it is made; and whether it does this or not, depends not only on the form and contents of the statement or narrative, but also on the condition of the mind of the person who receives it. A statement which is perfectly true and would be fully understood by a grown-up person may convey an entirely false notion to a child. In order to give the child a true idea of the matter, or as true an idea of it as he is able to form, it may be necessary to use language which is, strictly speaking, inaccurate. And what applies to the childhood of an individual applies also to

the childhood of the human race. If the revelation of Divine truth was only gradual as men were able to bear it, and was not fully made until our Lord Jesus Christ came into the world, we need not be surprised if such a mysterious part of it as the origin of sin was at first taught in the form of an allegory. Allegory or parable was largely used by our Lord Himself in His teaching. It is the best way of instructing children, and shall we dare to say that it was not the best way of instructing the childhood of the human race? Is it not sometimes the best way of teaching our own enlightened selves? Do we not sometimes learn more from fiction than from history? Allegory is not false. On the contrary, what can be truer than Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*? It contains far more and far deeper spiritual truth than the actual *Life of John Bunyan*. And if it is objected that St. Paul in his Epistles refers to the temptation of Adam and Eve by the serpent as if it actually occurred, we may reply that, in the course of religious teaching, events in the *Pilgrim's Progress* are frequently referred to, and lessons are drawn from them, as if they had actually taken place.

But whether we look upon the Eden story as history or as allegory, we must all acknowledge that it is a marvellous and unrivalled picture of sin, its origin, its causes, and its effects, and that the story contains lessons of most profound truth for men of all ages. In the first place, it teaches us what sin actually is. It is disobedience to the laws of God, which are, in other words, the laws of nature and of our being. Man has been so constituted by God that he may lawfully do certain things, while there are other things which he ought not to do. He has also been endowed by God with the faculty of knowing these laws and limitations; but at the same time he has liberty, if he chooses, to transgress them. If he uses this liberty, he commits sin, he breaks the laws of God and nature, and must in some way suffer for it, since these laws cannot be broken with impunity. And the story of Genesis iii. goes on to tell us fully and accurately what are the causes which lead to sin. "When the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat" (verse 6). She had three motives for transgressing this law of God—her bodily appetite, desire to gratify her sense of the beautiful, and an ambition to be wiser, or, in other words, to rise in the scale of existence. And every

temptation to sin may be classed under one or other of these three headings, which are here represented as present together, and at one and the same time, to the mind of Eve. They are the same three headings of which St. John speaks in the second chapter of his First Epistle when he says (verses 15–17): "Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. . . . For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the vainglory of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world." The woman saw that the tree was good for food—the lust of the flesh; and that it was a delight to the eyes—the lust of the eyes; and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise—the pride of life. Overcome by these temptations, man fell and sinned originally; and overcome by one or other of them, and sometimes by two or all of them together, men have been continually falling and sinning ever since. Our Lord, in His threefold temptation, was assailed once by the lust of the flesh and twice by the vainglory of life, and perhaps also once by the lust of the eyes in viewing all the kingdoms of the world.

It is to be noticed also, as to these three classes of temptation and sin, that they all consist in a misuse, a misdirection or misapplication, of proper and lawful faculties of our nature. Man was created with bodily appetites, which he is at liberty, nay, which it is his duty, to satisfy within the limits laid down by the law of God. But he can, and, as in the Eden story, does, transgress these limits, and then it is sin, and he is bound sooner or later to suffer for it. Again, he was created with a faculty for perceiving and loving the beautiful, and within lawful limits he is at liberty, and it is actually his duty, to cultivate and indulge that faculty. But if this interferes with or runs counter to his other duties and his obedience to the law of God, it becomes unlawful, it becomes a snare and leads to sin. And, in like manner, progress and advancement in wisdom and knowledge, and in the general conditions of life, is the law and destiny of the human race. We cannot doubt that man was created, not to remain for ever in a primitive and savage state, but to move forward in arts and science and literature and to obtain continually increasing knowledge of the forces of nature, and control over them. But all this was intended to be done in an orderly and reverent way, with due regard to the laws of nature, which are the laws of God. If these laws are not observed, the process, instead of being lawful and right, is sinful, and, so far as it is sinful, no real benefit can come from it.

The Eden story relates that the unlawful attempt of the man and the woman to better their condition in a way forbidden by God resulted in no improvement of their lot, but in a signal degradation. Truly, as a recent commentary has well put it:

"In this famous 'Eden Story' we possess a wealth of moral and spiritual teaching regarding God and man. The intention of the writer is evidently to give an answer to the question, 'How did sin and misery find their way into the world?' As is natural among Orientals, he put his reply into narrative form; and though it is generally accepted that the details are to be interpreted symbolically rather than literally, yet they are in marvellous agreement with the real facts of human nature and experience. Adam is the representative of the human race. The story of his temptation, fall, and consequent forfeiture of Paradise, shadows forth some of the greatest mysteries of the human lot—the strangely mingled glory and shame of man, his freedom of action, the war between the law in his members and the law of his mind. It thus seems to have a universal significance, and shows each man, as in a mirror, his own experience. When he reads this narrative his conscience says to him, like a prophet of God, 'Thou art the man.'"

But the Eden story does not end here. In God's address to the serpent, it contains the prophetic promise: "I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel." These words are generally regarded as referring to our Lord, and they have, no doubt, a special significance in reference to Him. The serpent bruised His heel by causing His death on the Cross; but by His glorious Resurrection He dealt a fatal blow to the serpent's head. The words, however, have a far wider meaning. They mean that throughout the long course of man's history, Evil shall commit dreadful ravages, but that in the long run Good will prevail. This is our sheet-anchor of confidence in the final victory of Good and the ultimate establishment of the Kingdom of God amid all appearances to the contrary.

Such are the lessons to be drawn from the first three chapters of Genesis. They contain truths which will endure throughout all ages and for all time.