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The Early Narratives of Genesis.

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II.

THE ASSYRIAN COSMOGONY AND THE DAYS OF CREATION.

The subjects of discussion in the present paper are the relation of the Hebrew to the Assyrian cosmogony, and the interpretation of the "Days" of Creation. It is not for a moment to be supposed that it would be possible to compress an adequate treatment of topics of such magnitude within the narrow limits of a single article. Completeness is out of the question. Our aim is only to present, with as much clearness as possible, the line of interpretation which results from the principles laid down in a previous number (April) of The Expository Times.

1. The Assyrian Cosmogony.

We might easily be beguiled into a path that would lead us far away from our immediate purpose if we attempted to examine the relationship of the Hebrew narrative of the Creation to the similar narratives preserved in the religious literature of other races. To the student of Comparative Religion the task involved in such an inquiry is one of peculiar fascination. The field of research is wide and constantly widening. The workers in it are as yet few; the work itself has only in recent years been set on foot. To the biblical student such investigations cannot fail to be helpful and suggestive. They serve to gather together into a focus those gleams, whether of the true perception or of the surviving recollection, of The Light, which seem to be the common heritage of all races, and which help to remind us that God left not Himself without a witness among the nations of the world. In spite of this, however, the results of a comparative study of the cosmogonies of the races would only indirectly assist the interpretation of Gen. i.–ii. 4. It must therefore suffice to be reminded, at this point, of the endless variety of picture in which the problem of the origin of the universe has received a solution from the religious conceptions and from the poetical imaginations of races so varied as Indians and Etruscans, Germans and Egyptians, Norsemen, Mexicans, and Greeks.

But we must make one exception. In the religious literature of Assyria, we find a cosmogony which, in some respects, stands in a different category from those of the races just mentioned. From whatever point of view it is approached, its direct bearing upon the narrative of Gen. i. must be admitted, and account taken of it. It offers us another representation of the story of the Creation, preserved in the literature of another branch of the same great Semitic family from which the people of Israel sprang. The points of resemblance between the Assyrian and the Hebrew narratives force themselves upon our notice. But it must also be allowed that the points of their dissimilarity are not less obvious. Whatever estimate be formed of the Assyrian tradition as a whole, its Semitic origin, the antiquity of its documentary history, the degree of its approximation to the Genesis narrative in some points, of its divergency from it in others, afford reasons that cannot be overlooked for including a notice of the Assyrian cosmogony in any careful interpretation of this passage of Scripture.

Until quite recently our knowledge of the Assyrian Creation narrative was derived from the fragments of Berosus, the Babylonian historian (circ. 250 B.C.), preserved in the writings of Josephus, Syncellus, and Eusebius, and from allusions to it in the works of the Neo-Platonist Damascius (circ. 530 A.D.) Into these representations of the Babylonian cosmogony it was thought probable that a good deal of more recent, exotic, and, in particular, of Hellenic, growth had been grafted.

But the success of the late eminent Assyreologist, Mr. George Smith, in deciphering the cuneiform inscriptions on the mutilated fragments of what are now sometimes called the Creation Tablets,

threw an unexpected light upon the Assyrian legend. These precious fragments had been brought to the British Museum along with other treasures of the famous library of Assurbanipal (668–626 B.C.), excavated at Kouyunjik. The date of Assurbanipal is, comparatively speaking, late. But the contents of his library probably reproduced the traditions of a very much earlier time. There is good reason to suppose that even if the tablets themselves were inscribed in Assurbanipal's reign, the narrative which they preserve is substantially the same as had been preserved from the Assyrian religious literature of a much earlier century.

The form in which it was committed to these tablets was that of a great epic poem. Its contents are now widely known through the pages of such works as Sayce's *Fresh Light from the Ancient Monuments*, Schrader's *Cuneiform Inscriptions and the Old Testament* (translated by Prof. O. C. Whitehouse), and *Records of the Past* (edited by Sayce), 2nd series, vol. i. pp. 122–153. About one-third of the poem is still missing, but the general outline of the narrative is unmistakable. It describes the Creation as taking place in seven creative acts. These are recorded in seven books or tablets, of which the second and sixth are wanting. From the first tablet we learn that in the beginning there existed only "watery chaos" (*Tiamat*), out of which sprang the primal gods "Lakhmu" and "Lakhamu," then "Ansar" and "Kisar," the upper and lower firmament, and then the Assyrian gods, Anu, god of the sky; Bel, or Illil, god of the spirit-world; and Ea, god of waters. The third and fourth tablets record the creation of light, which was represented in the victory of Merodach, son of Ea, god of light, over Tiamat, while out of the skin of the slaughtered Tiamat was constructed the wide expanse of the heavens, the dwelling-place of the Assyrian gods. The fifth tablet tells how the sun and moon and stars were implanted in the sky, and received divine command to regulate the succession of times and seasons, of days and years. The sixth tablet, which has not yet been found, must have recorded the formation of the earth and the creation of the vegetable world, of birds and fishes. The seventh and last tablet tells how the cattle and the larger beasts, and all creeping things, were made. Unfortunately, the latter part is much mutilated, and the description of the formation of man has not survived.

In spite of the wholly different setting which is here given to the story of the Creation, "the Assyrian epic," to quote Professor Sayce's own words, "bears a striking resemblance to the account of it given in the first chapter of Genesis. In each case the history of the Creation is divided into seven successive acts; in each case the present world has been preceded by a watery chaos. In fact, the self-same word is used of this chaos in both the biblical and Assyrian accounts—*tehôm*, *Tiamat*,—the only difference being that in the Assyrian story "the deep" has become a mythological personage, the mother of a chaotic brood. The order of the Creation, moreover, agrees in the two accounts: first the light, then the creation of the firmament of heaven, subsequently the appointment of the celestial bodies "for signs and for seasons, and for days and years," and next the creation of beasts and creeping things" (*Records of the Past*, 2nd series, i. 130).

On the other hand, the points of difference are equally conspicuous. In the Assyrian account the creation of light is the result of a conflict between a deity and chaos; in Genesis it is called into being by the word of God. In the Assyrian account the heavenly bodies are allotted their place before the formation of the earth; in Genesis the dry land appears before the sun and moon and stars are set in the sky. In the Assyrian account the seventh "tablet" is occupied with a description of creative work; in Genesis the seventh day is a day of rest. Most striking of all is the contrast between the polytheism of the Assyrian account and the majestic simplicity of the monotheism of Genesis. In the Assyrian account, gods as well as universe emerge from pre-existent chaos, and the work of creation proceeds by the triumph of divine power over the forces of matter inherently evil. In Genesis, God (*Elohim*) creates whatever has come into being by the utterance of His will—all is from the beginning His handiwork, and in its essence is very good.

Before we endeavour to determine the relation of the Hebrew to the Assyrian narrative, it is important to mention the existence of yet another Assyrian cosmogony brought to light in the fragments of two tablets which had also belonged to

the library of Assurbanipal. These were copied from even older sources obtained from Cutha in Babylonia, which Professor Sayce conjectures can hardly have been later than 2350 B.C. In the Cuthaean legend we have no account of an orderly succession of creative acts. The children of Chaos or Tiamat who dwelt underground are destroyed by Nergal, the god of Cutha, and after their overthrow he creates the children of men.

Placing the two Assyrian legends of the Creation side by side, we should be inclined to surmise that, in remote times, there existed in Assyria several varying traditions respecting the Creation; but that, in later times, under the influence of a more systematic theology or a more philosophic religion, the various legends received a final form in the grouping of the seven tablets of the Creation; the number "seven" being probably selected because it was a holy number in Assyria.

What, then, are we to say was the connection of the Genesis with the Assyrian cosmogony? It did not originate the Assyrian narrative; of that we may be confident. For the earlier legend that was current before the days of Abraham bears no resemblance to the Genesis cosmogony, while the later one, which does resemble the Genesis cosmogony, seems to have originated in a period when Hebrew religious thought could not conceivably have influenced Assyrian.

On the other hand, the Assyrian may have originated the Hebrew cosmogony; and, if so, would have given rise to it either directly and at a recent time, or only indirectly and ultimately. Certain critics have of late advocated the former alternative. They call attention to the fact that, with the exception of Exod. xx. 11, the references to Gen. i.–ii. 4, to be found in passages of undoubtedly pre-exilic date, are few and disputable; and they conjecture that the Jews brought back from their exile in Babylon this form of the Assyrian cosmogony adapted to their own religious use. The evidence for this supposition appears to me, so far as I have been able to form any judgment upon the matter, to be quite insufficient. Even apart from considerations of Higher Criticism, the great improbability that the pious Jews of the exile would ever have adopted the Creation narrative of their hated heathen captors is almost sufficient in itself to condemn the theory. On the other hand, the probability that the Genesis cosmogony is *ultimately* to be traced back to an Assyrian tradition may be reasonably admitted. The ancestors of Abraham were Assyrian; whether dwellers of Northern Assyria or Babylonia itself need not here be discussed. The various Creation legends current in Assyria would presumably have been preserved in the clan of Terah, and have been transmitted from generation to generation. If now our supposition is correct that the Assyrian Creation story of the seven tablets marks the orderly grouping characteristic of an age more developed in religious thought, it is reasonable to suppose that a similar and almost parallel process took place in a stock which was an offshoot of Assyria, and which was privileged, in things religious, to receive the guidance of the Divine Spirit in so superlative a degree. Thus the early traditions of the Semitic race were yoked to the service of the spiritual religion of Israel. The essential teaching of Jehovah respecting the Divine nature, the universe, and man's nature, was conveyed in the outline of a cosmogony, which, if it had its roots in the early Assyrian traditions, was finally expressed in all the dignified simplicity of Hebrew monotheism.

2. The Days of Creation.

According to this explanation, the Days of Creation in the Genesis cosmogony are to be understood as literal days; for as such they seem to be intended in the simple Hebrew narrative. At the same time, the spiritual teaching is obvious. The lesson underlying the mention of those seven days is that of the law of ordered progress which, as it were, characterises the dealings of the Divine Creator with created matter. The literal interpretation of the Days of Creation is thus compatible with the spiritual, their origin in popular tradition with their consecration for emblematical instruction. The simple narrative is made the vehicle of revelation respecting the things of the Spirit. But the seal of inspiration affixed to it does not alter the original character of the narrative, nor transform the imagery of the Israelite cosmogony into absolute canons of physical science.

I am well aware that those who have looked for scientific teaching in Gen. i. have not failed

to find it. These may be divided into two main groups according as they apply to the "Days" of Creation a literal or a metaphorical interpretation.

There are not probably many nowadays who would maintain, as once it would have been regarded as profane not to maintain, that this passage of Scripture, literally understood, contains a scientific account of the processes of Creation, which occupied six literal days. But since the time when this view prevailed, the book of Divine Revelation in Nature has been opened more widely and studied more deeply. The writing in that volume has been readily and reverently received by Christendom. Christian thought now gladly welcomes the teaching of the geologist and the astronomer. It recognises as the truth that, according to the working of the Omnipotent Creator's will, gradual change throughout infinite ages must have been the process which governed alike the evolution of sidereal systems, the moulding of the earth's crust, and the appearance of the animal and vegetable kingdoms upon its surface.

If then it was still to be supposed that Gen. i. definitely instructed us in science, some other interpretation of "the days" than the old literal one had to be found. The very discoveries of physical science suggested a solution. If "the days" were understood not as literal days but as infinite ages, or as periods in the development of the earth's formation, then it seemed as if the threatened contradiction of Scripture and science might be averted, and as if the words of Genesis might receive unexpected confirmation from the testimony of science. Accordingly the metaphorical interpretation of "the days" found very general favour. Scholars and men of science have shown how, with allowance for the exigencies of poetic language, the statements of the opening chapter of Genesis may be brought into comparatively close agreement with even the most recent results of scientific inquiry.

But just as, in the earlier phase of interpretation, it was found that, by starting from a literal interpretation, a collision with scientific facts could not be avoided, so now, in the later phase, it was an objection that, starting from the facts of science, it was necessary to have recourse to a forced or, at any rate, a non-literal interpretation. In a passage of striking simplicity of language, it is impossible not to feel an uncomfortable suspicion that it cannot be right to attach a non-literal explanation to just that one single word, the *literal* meaning of which happens to be a stumbling-block in the way of the desired method of exegesis. And surely the doubt, whether this non-literal explanation of "the days" can be correct, will be intensified in the mind of any one who also considers that the proposed explanation could never have suggested itself to the ancient Israelite, and would never to-day have been mooted, but for the discoveries of modern science.

But even the acceptance of this interpretation fails to satisfy fully the demands of scientific facts. To mention but one signal instance, the formation of the heavenly bodies on the fourth day is utterly unscientific, it is at variance with what we, through science, know to have been the actual order of creation. The assertion that not the formation but the first manifestation of the heavenly bodies through the mists that encompassed the earth is indicated in Gen. i. 14, is an explanation of the difficulty too unnatural and forced to merit serious attention.

Perhaps the objections which I here touch on are not felt by very many. But I should be wanting in candour if I did not record my impression, that the endeavour to maintain the scientific accuracy of Gen. i. entails a choice between the natural literal exegesis which defies modern discoveries and the non-natural metaphorical exegesis which is introduced just on account of these modern discoveries, in order to meet the apparent necessity of their claims.

The alternative principle of interpretation which is here preferred is free from both these disadvantages. It is embarrassed by no such dilemma. It starts with the assumption that the Divine Revelation gives us instruction on things spiritual, not on things of natural science. We are then ready, indeed we expect, to find in this fragment of ancient Israelite literature instances of collision with the results of modern science. They mark the interval between the intellectual attainment of the Israelite and the degree of precision obtained in our European learning. The whole passage must be understood as the writer presumably wrote it and his country-

men presumably understood it. To him, as to his countrymen generally, "the days" were literal days as much as "the heavens" were literal heavens and "the light" literal light.

If then we are asked what the scientific value of the chapter is, our reply must be, "As much or as little as impartial men of science recognise in it;" certainly, we should say, less than what it was once reputed to contain, but very possibly more than is now commonly attributed to it. In fairness, too, we should grant that whatever scientific value it possesses, it shares in some measure with the congenital Assyrian tradition, and indeed, though in a less degree, with any analogous cosmogonies, which agree with the Genesis account so far as to assert that the world was made by the exercise of a Supreme Power, that the process of Creation followed an ordered sequence, and that the creation of man marked the highest point in the scale of created being.

We may gladly acknowledge, as has often been claimed for this portion of Scripture, that no other known cosmogony approaches it in its capacity of adaptation to, and even of actual correspondence with, the discoveries of modern science. But were it possible that the well-known difficulties of "the days," the formation of the heavenly bodies, the priority in Creation of vegetable to animal life, and of birds and fishes to reptiles, could be successfully met; were agreement with science a thousand times closer than it is asserted to be, it would fall far short of reconciling us to the thought of the inspiration of Scripture being made the medium of scientific instruction. Paradoxical as it may sound, faith would, I believe, be more genuinely staggered by any perfectly exact agreement in Genesis with the wonderful discoveries of modern science than it ever has been, or is ever likely to be, by the familiar contradictions with science that were to be expected in a literature so ancient, and are to be found in this chapter, according to any literal interpretation.

As a matter of fact, however strongly apologists have pleaded for the "scientific" interpretation of Gen. i., their faith in Christianity has not been affected by the question. People have not lived in any real dread, lest fresh discoveries in science should upset their belief in the reality of Divine Revelation. It has been instinctively felt that the true conception of inspiration was not affected by the advance of material knowledge. The intuitive recognition of the human element in Scripture enabled men to perceive that progress in the knowledge of physical laws constituted no encroachment upon the domain of the spiritual. The readjustment of interpretation satisfies the claims of reason and belief. The primitive tradition is made, through the Divine Spirit, the first step in the stairway of Divine Revelation.

The chief apprehension that has been felt has rightly related to the belief in inspiration. And I venture to plead that the line of interpretation suggested in this and the previous paper, instead of degrading the doctrine, safeguards it from an unworthy and mechanical conception. Popular opinion is tempted to confuse inspiration with the passive receptiveness of religious ecstacy. From the introduction to St. Luke's Gospel, and indeed from the character of both historical and prophetical books of Scripture, we infer that the contents of books of Scripture are the result of patient labour and arduous research, overruled for the Divine purpose and guided by the Holy Spirit. The inspiration which, we believe, breathes through the varied and often secular material of Scripture, selected and collected, *e.g.*, in the chronicles of old times, in bare genealogies, in laws of ritual, in popular sayings, breathes too in those early narratives which in Hebrew, as in other literature, lie at the back of the more strictly historical records.

The common type which the Hebrew shares with the Assyrian cosmogony is patent. But differing from the Assyrian in this respect, the Hebrew narrative has descended to us distinguished with a sobriety, dignity, and elevation communicated to it by those whose spirit had been schooled by the Divine Teacher. Its simple story was dignified to be the messenger of profoundest truths.

On every side from which ideas respecting God and the universe were capable, in those early days, of mean or idolatrous degradation, the Israelite version of the Creation epic is fenced about. Did other nations believe in the pre-existence of matter? Israel received the doctrine of the pre-existence of God. Did they regard matter as essentially evil or as needing to be vanquished by the Deity? Israel learned that there was nothing created which God had not created in its essence good. Had the worship of the heavenly bodies become a common form of misleading idolatry? Israel learned that they were themselves the handiwork of God, and served the supreme purpose in the ordered succession of His creative work. Did some regard man's nature as the offspring of a lower emanation or of some subordinate divinity? Israel learned that man was made by the Most High in His image and in His likeness.

However much its narrative may transcend in verisimilitude the teaching of other cosmogonies in matters of human cognisance, it is but the shell and husk of the Divine Message. The eternal truths conveyed in the spiritual teaching of the chapter are infinitely more precious than any possible items of agreement with the present aspects of so changeful and progressive a study as that of the physical laws which interpret the Creator's Will.