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Two Exegetical Notes on St. Paul.

BY PROFESSOR THE REV. H. A. A. KENNEDY, D.Sc., D.D., NEW COLLEGE, EDINBURGH.

II.

Colossians ii. 10-15.

THE theosophy which was being urged upon the Colossians laid more emphasis upon the elemental spirits (τὰ στοιχεῖα) of this world than upon Christ (2⁸). We know from Gal 4^{3, 8-10} that Paul associated elemental spirits with both Judaism and Paganism. In the former, he evidently identified them with angels, having in view the innumerable angelic beings connected in current Jewish thought with natural forces, of which we have ample evidence in the Apocalypses. In the latter, he would be acquainted with the extraordinary place given to planetary and other spirits as influencing the affairs of men. Now angel-worship is one of the most distinct features in the curious blend of Judaism with an apparently incipient form of Gnosticism which was claiming the adherence of the young Christian community at Colossæ (2¹⁶⁻¹⁸). So there can be little doubt that when he speaks of πάσης ἀρχῆς καὶ ἐξουσίας (2¹⁰), and of τὰς ἀρχὰς καὶ τὰς ἐξουσίας (2¹⁵), he has in view those incorporeal beings which, in themselves, might be considered as non-moral, but which the Apostle had come to regard as evil rather than good, because they seemed to contest the supremacy with Christ. In the propaganda at Colossæ they were brought into line with a scheme of genuine legalism, consisting in elaborate rules of abstinence and the institution of sacred days, which were regulated by the movements of the planets. But long before this Paul was accustomed to look upon angels as sponsors for the Law, and in his letter to the Galatians (3¹⁹) he had used that idea for the express purpose of disparaging legalism. In the Colossian theosophy it is probable that these angelic powers were introduced as mediators to bridge the gulf between the Most High God and frail humanity, and there is nothing to forbid the hypothesis that here already we have an approximation to the series of æons or emanations so minutely developed in some of the later Gnostic systems. That, indeed, seems the natural implication of the statement regarding the πλήρωμα in v. 9, even if the term has not yet been appropriated

to describe the plenitude of power concentrated in the supreme Deity, but distributed among intermediate spiritual forces which become less divine and more largely infected with earthliness as they approach the material world in order to help mortal man to ascend through them to God.

In opposition to such speculations, Paul boldly appeals to the inclusion in Christ of the entire Fullness of the Divine Nature in bodily or organized form (2⁹, σωματικῶς). The latter term is difficult. Perhaps it is intended to impress upon his readers that in Christ, the historical Head of the new humanity, they reach a concrete apprehension of what God is and does. In any case, the next clause (v. 10), which introduces our special passage, lays stress on the completeness, the Divine completeness, of the life which Christians attain in fellowship with Christ. With a brief reference to Christ's full sway over every member of the hierarchy of spiritual powers in which the Colossians are being exhorted to confide, Paul goes on to remind them of the experiences through which their Christian life had passed.

At this point a controverted question emerges. 'In him,' says the Apostle, 'you were actually circumcised with a circumcision not hand-made, consisting in the stripping-off of the body of flesh, that is, the circumcision of Christ' (2¹¹). It is difficult to understand how some scholars set the words ἐν τῇ ἀπεκδύσει τοῦ σώματος τῆς σαρκός as merely explanatory of the idea in ἀχειροποιήτω. Thus, e.g., Dr. Moffatt translates the phrase: 'with no material circumcision that cuts flesh from the body.' But is it likely that Paul should describe the act of physical circumcision by a phrase which has become technical for one of the central elements in his thought? The same objection seems entirely to preclude the reference of this 'circumcision' to baptism. Paul's phrase receives its precise explanation in Ro 6^{6, 7}: 'our old man was crucified with him, in order that the *body of sin* (τὸ σῶμα τῆς ἀμαρτίας) might be abolished, so that we should no longer be in bondage to sin: for once a man has died he is liberated from the claims of sin.' Another expression of the same idea appears in Ro 8³: 'God, having sent his own

Son in the likeness of flesh of sin (*σαρκὸς ἁμαρτίας*) and with reference to sin, condemned sin in the flesh.' This is, of course, one of Paul's efforts to elucidate the meaning of the Cross. Christ, by becoming man, entered into the organic life of sin-burdened humanity. This humiliation, which involved exposure to temptation and continual contact with evil, He bore willingly. The climax of the experience was a death of shame. That death Paul describes, in the light of this circle of thought, as God's condemnation of sin in the flesh. The death of the Sinless in His identification with the sinful and in His horror of sin is an exposure of what sin means for the Divine Nature. Sin slew the Son of God, but that meant that He passed out of relation to it, having suffered all that it could inflict, and in so doing triumphed over it once for all in His risen life. In Him as risen, a principle has been disclosed which has given the death-blow to sin. This principle can be appropriated even by those still hampered by the 'body of sin,' when by faith they enter into that intimate union with Christ in which their wills become one with His in dying. Accordingly, in our passage, the 'circumcision not made with hands,' 'the stripping-off of the body of flesh,' and 'the circumcision of Christ' refer primarily to the Cross, and, as applied to believers, are equivalents of what Paul elsewhere describes as 'being crucified with Christ.' They cannot refer to baptism, as has so often been asserted. That is made absolutely clear by Ro 6⁶ taken in close connexion with the present statement. And the same idea is found in a compressed form in Col 1^{21, 22}: 'You who were at one time alienated and enemies [to God] . . . he [God, or, possibly, but not probably, Christ] reconciled in the body of his flesh through death.' The reconciliation was made possible through the annihilation of the principle of sin, first in Christ, the organic Head of the new humanity, then in those who were ideally 'crucified' with Christ.

Now, as has been hinted above, Paul never thinks of 'death to sin' either in Christ's case or in ours without thinking at the same time of 'resurrection to newness of life.' The whole process he saw pictured in the ritual of baptism. And this was not a mere picture. In Ro 6⁴ he describes the rite as 'our baptism into his death.' The phrase is pregnant with meaning. For the early Church, baptism was the crowning testimony to faith, the seal put upon the attitude of the

believer to Christ. It marked the moment when the convert turned his back upon the past with all its associations, and in the eyes of all men identified himself with the community of Christ's followers. The sentence quoted from Romans reminds us of what that identification meant, of the position which in the eyes of the faithful entitled a man to be admitted into the Church. It was nothing less than fellowship with the dying Redeemer in His passing out of all relation to sin, in His liberation from the environment of evil.

The analogy which commended itself to Paul's mind for this decisive and final step was the burial of Christ. That was the proof of death. If He lived again, it must be with a new type of life. The ceremony of baptism provided a remarkable parallel for the Christian. His immersion beneath the baptismal water symbolized and was to him a sacrament of his deliverance from his old environment. Hence Paul, in reminding the Colossians of their connexion with Christ in His crucial experiences, after he has emphasized their fellowship with His death, briefly alludes to their similar fellowship with His burial, a fellowship stamped on their minds in the impressive ordinance of baptism (2^{12a}). This element in their experience is more elaborately set forth in Ro 6^{3, 4}, but on precisely the same lines, and with the same object in view, namely, to prepare for the further representation of their resurrection with Christ.

The connexion of thought, as I have attempted to trace it, makes it almost certain (as against Lightfoot) that the *ἐν ᾧ* of the next clause in v.¹², like *ἐν ᾧ* of v.¹¹ and *ἐν αὐτῷ* of v.¹⁰, must be referred to Christ and not to baptism. Indeed, one has little doubt that the sentence, *συνταφέντες αὐτῷ ἐν τῷ βαπτίσματι*, is parenthetical, although that by no means implies that Paul considers it of secondary importance. But while the most natural course is to connect *ἐν ᾧ* with *Χριστοῦ*, it may alternatively be linked with *αὐτῷ* in the parenthesis. There is no instance in Paul's Epistles of baptism being described as the basis or instrument of resurrection with Christ. So that the allusion to it here is a passing one. It is by fellowship with Christ that they were raised in His resurrection (*συννηέθητε*), 'through faith in the working of God who raised him from the dead' (2^{12b, c}). Here, as always for Paul, faith is fundamental. So that even if *ἐν ᾧ* were strained to

agree with τῷ βαπτίσματι, the vital energy of the spiritual 'resurrection' of Christians is not connected by Paul with any magical efficacy in the rite, but exclusively with faith.

But the subject of the new life of the Christian in communion with the risen Christ has too important a bearing on the present situation of the Colossians to be dismissed at the end of a paragraph. Therefore Paul sets himself afresh to bring out its implications, more especially in view of the perils to which they are exposed. He does not hesitate to repeat what he has said, with far-reaching amplifications: 'You, I say, who were dead by reason of your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, you he [God] made alive in fellowship with him [Christ]' (2^{13a}). Two points may be noted. The expression here used, 'the uncircumcision of your flesh,' brings out into bold relief what he had called in v.¹¹ 'the circumcision not hand-made, consisting in the stripping-off of the body of flesh.' Their former lives had been diametrically opposed to the attitude and spirit of the crucified Redeemer. There was no renunciation in them. So far from being 'dead' to sin, its principle had the mastery over them. This confirms what was said above as to the meaning of τῇ περιτομῇ τοῦ Χριστοῦ. It is not intended to be a description of baptism, but baptism recognizes it, inasmuch as the former involves the open confession of a definite attitude towards the death of Christ. Further, the presence of σύν in συνεξωποίησεν immediately followed by its combination with αὐτῷ shows that there is nothing otiose in the linking of συνηγέρθητε to ἐν ᾧ above, and that therefore no argument can be drawn from this in favour of relating ᾧ to βαπτίσματι.

The Apostle next proceeds, mainly in a series of participial clauses, to describe the conditions of the new life in Christ. It presupposes (1) God's forgiveness of all our transgressions (2^{13b}); (2) His obliteration of 'the bond for which we were liable, consisting in rules and regulations, that bond which menaced us: that he has completely removed, having nailed it to the cross' (2¹⁴). In Eph 2¹⁵, which belongs to the same circle of ideas, he speaks of Christ as 'having abolished the principle (νόμον) of commandments consisting in rules and regulations (δύγματαν).' And he obviously has the same result of Christ's activity in view when, in Ro 10⁴, he affirms that 'Christ is the end of the law as a means of attaining

righteousness for every believer.' Once Christ's method has been made plain, the method of legalism ceases to be valid. All this bears directly on the situation at Colossæ. The attempt is being made there to re-introduce a religion of δόγματα, of which examples are given in 2²¹. So that the warning given in vv.^{20, 21}, like that of vv.^{16, 17}, is already implied in the present passage.

The statement of v.¹⁵ is not to be taken merely in connexion with the clause immediately preceding (προσηλώσας κ.τ.λ.). It belongs to the complete idea of v.¹⁴, the removal of the old system of rules and regulations. If this connexion has been missed, it is because readers have ignored the Apostle's association of the legal order with incorporeal beings whom he names in this passage, as often elsewhere, ἀρχαί and ἐξουσίαι. As far back as his First Epistle to the Corinthians he regards these powers as hostile to Christ, for he speaks of Christ as abolishing them (15²⁴). In his letter to the Ephesians, evidently contemporary with Colossians, he declares that the most critical conflict for Christians is with the ἀρχαί, the ἐξουσίαι, the world-rulers of this darkness, the spiritual powers of wickedness in the heavenly regions (Eph 6¹²). Now, in Galatians, one of the disparaging features of the Law to which he refers is its administration by angels (3¹⁹). This was a turning of the tables on his Jewish-Christian opponents, because the introduction of angels in connexion with the giving of the Law was meant to enhance its glory. Even in Stephen's address, when he reminds his audience that they 'received the law by the administration of angels' (Ac 7⁵³), the reference is intended to heighten the culpability of those who have been unfaithful to so wonderful a gift. And when the writer to the Hebrews describes the O.T. legislation as 'the word spoken through angels,' he subordinates it only to that spoken through the Lord (He 2^{2, 3}). But Paul's continued reflexion on what the Law had achieved in dealing with men's religious needs made him less and less tolerant of it. Perhaps this reacted on his conception of the ἀρχαί and ἐξουσίαι. Or, it may be that his attitude towards them intensified his hostility to legalism.

In any case, when we bear all the facts in mind, it is plain that the connexion, recognized in Judaism, between these spiritual powers and the ceremonial Law, precisely suits the purpose of his argument here. The Colossians were being pressed to sub-

mit to a religion of regulations, and alongside of this, perhaps in intimate relation with it, to aim at reaching God through a hierarchy of angelic mediators. Paul has spoken of the abolishing of the Law in Christ crucified, and of the removal thereby from men's minds of a menace which constantly tormented them. But the abolishing of legalism is necessarily the riddance of those powers which superintended it. Accordingly, there is not much difficulty in deciding what the crucial term ἀπεκδυσάμενος (v.¹⁵) means, although it has been the occasion of such endless debate. The subject of the participle must be the same as that of all the verbs in its immediate context—of συνεξωποίησεν, of χαρισάμενος, of ἐξαλείψας, of ἤρκεν, of προσηλώσας, unless there is good reason to the contrary. From the nature of these actions, that can only be God. In the light of the context it is equally clear to whom the stripping-off of the ἀρχαί and ἐξουσίαι relates. Those who adopt the extraordinary position of making Christ the subject of the verbs in vv.¹⁸⁻¹⁵ take ἀπεκδυσάμενος κ.τ.λ. to mean that in His victory on the Cross Christ stripped off Himself the inferior powers associated with the maintenance of legalism. Others, who hold to the only tenable view, that God is subject, either press the use of the middle and interpret it of God divesting Himself, in the

death of His Son, of angelic mediators, or give the verb the vague sense of 'despoiling' the powers. But it must be noted that, from beginning to end of the passage which we are studying, the object of all the Divine actions described is humanity, or, rather, Christian believers. Why, then, should the direction of the action be altered with this participle? Are not all the requirements of the context completely met if we supply the same object here and translate: 'having stripped off *us* the powers and authorities, he exposed them publicly, triumphing over them in it [the cross: or, possibly, in him, *i.e.* Christ]?' That is, Christ's victory over legalism, won in the might of God, once for all liberated Christians from the old order and its administrators. In that victory, God made manifest the utter inadequacy of a ceremonial system. 'Is it conceivable,' the Apostle asks, 'that those who have entered upon spiritual freedom should desire to return to bondage?' The passage, which in many respects offers a remarkable parallel to Gal 4¹⁻¹¹, prepares the way for what immediately follows, in the first instance, for the warning against legalistic propagandists (vv.¹⁶⁻¹⁹), and then for the disclosure of their own danger, that of going back upon the momentous step they had taken when they died with Christ to the elemental spirits of the world (2²⁰⁻³⁴).

Literature.

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