



This is a digital copy of a book that was preserved for generations on library shelves before it was carefully scanned by Google as part of a project to make the world's books discoverable online.

It has survived long enough for the copyright to expire and the book to enter the public domain. A public domain book is one that was never subject to copyright or whose legal copyright term has expired. Whether a book is in the public domain may vary country to country. Public domain books are our gateways to the past, representing a wealth of history, culture and knowledge that's often difficult to discover.

Marks, notations and other marginalia present in the original volume will appear in this file - a reminder of this book's long journey from the publisher to a library and finally to you.

Usage guidelines

Google is proud to partner with libraries to digitize public domain materials and make them widely accessible. Public domain books belong to the public and we are merely their custodians. Nevertheless, this work is expensive, so in order to keep providing this resource, we have taken steps to prevent abuse by commercial parties, including placing technical restrictions on automated querying.

We also ask that you:

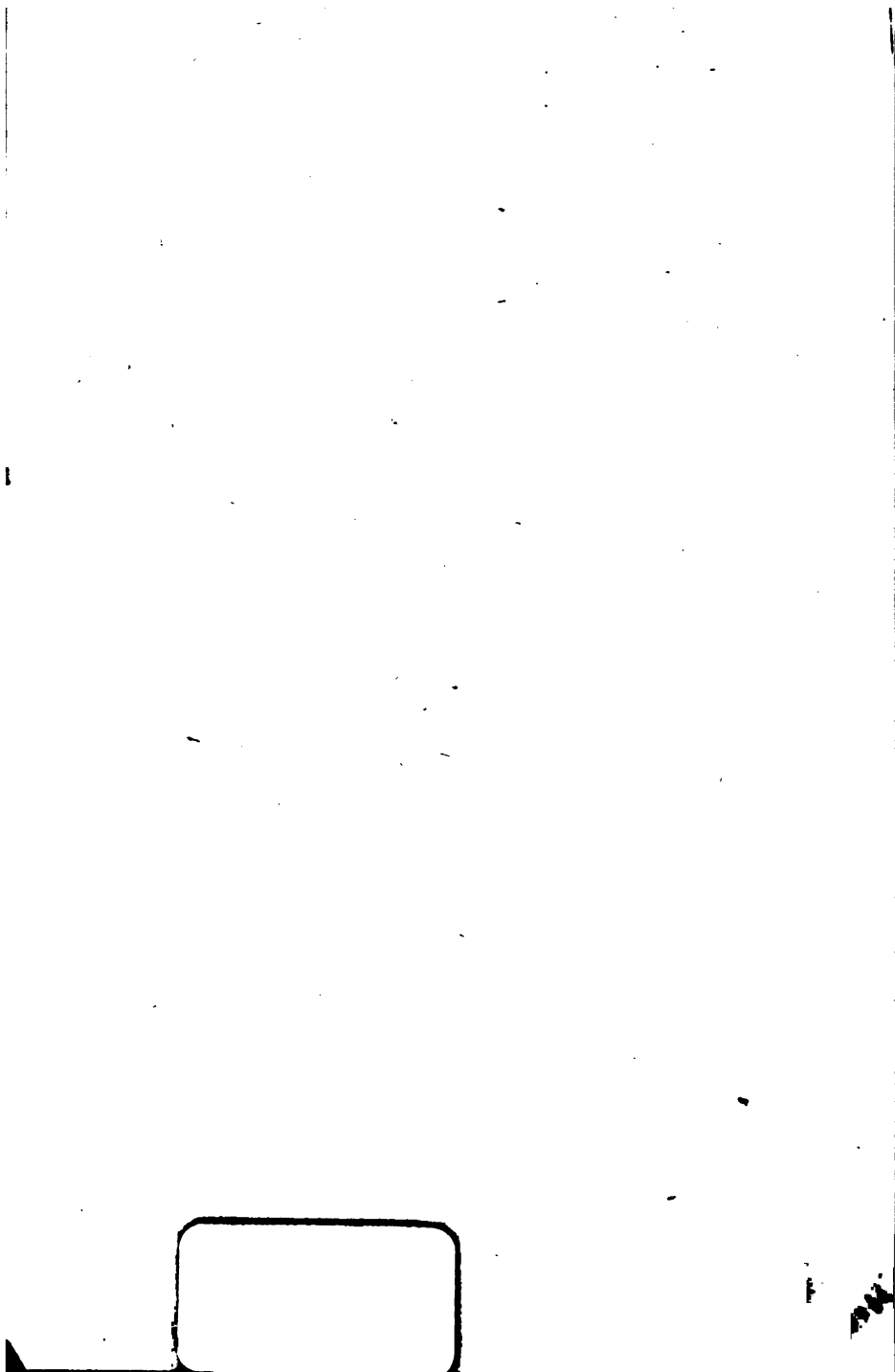
- + *Make non-commercial use of the files* We designed Google Book Search for use by individuals, and we request that you use these files for personal, non-commercial purposes.
- + *Refrain from automated querying* Do not send automated queries of any sort to Google's system: If you are conducting research on machine translation, optical character recognition or other areas where access to a large amount of text is helpful, please contact us. We encourage the use of public domain materials for these purposes and may be able to help.
- + *Maintain attribution* The Google "watermark" you see on each file is essential for informing people about this project and helping them find additional materials through Google Book Search. Please do not remove it.
- + *Keep it legal* Whatever your use, remember that you are responsible for ensuring that what you are doing is legal. Do not assume that just because we believe a book is in the public domain for users in the United States, that the work is also in the public domain for users in other countries. Whether a book is still in copyright varies from country to country, and we can't offer guidance on whether any specific use of any specific book is allowed. Please do not assume that a book's appearance in Google Book Search means it can be used in any manner anywhere in the world. Copyright infringement liability can be quite severe.

About Google Book Search

Google's mission is to organize the world's information and to make it universally accessible and useful. Google Book Search helps readers discover the world's books while helping authors and publishers reach new audiences. You can search through the full text of this book on the web at <http://books.google.com/>

A 410376

THOUGHTS OF A
FREE THINKER



BL
2780
.T52

THOUGHTS OF A FREE-THINKER



THOUGHTS
OF A FREE-THINKER



LONDON
ADAM AND CHARLES BLACK

1900



Review 6-7 31 11 11

PREFACE

It would be affectation on the part of the writer of this book to pretend that he expects it to be received without protest, and probably vehement and angry protest, by most of the clergy and many of the laity of the various Christian denominations.

Some may be anxious to dispute the correctness of the conclusion arrived at, viz.; that the Bible is not a Divine revelation, and, as such, a book demanding reverent acceptance and beyond the reach of criticism. To these it need only be said, that any arguments they may be able to adduce in refutation of the conclusion arrived at in these pages will be considered with the attention they deserve, with such attention as the author would desire to have extended to his own arguments. But while argument will not fail to be regarded, mere denunciation and invective will be simply ignored.

Others there are, no doubt, who will urge

Preface

the desirability of keeping silent on a subject so momentous. "Why," they will ask, "shake the faith or distress the soul of the believer?"

The best reply to that question is another—Will it be maintained that belief is good, whether that which is believed be true or untrue? Or, to put the same question in a slightly different form,—Will it be contended that benefit can be derived from belief in that which is untrue?

In this little work one problem only will occupy our attention: is the Bible a Divine revelation of truth, or is it not? If it be, let the great army of divines, whose function it is to defend it, do their duty; surely the result cannot be doubtful; what can one effect against so many? But if it be not a Divine revelation; if it be a great work, and well worthy of study, yet not rightly to be termed the Word of God, let us frankly recognise the fact, nor too much dread the consequences of the discovery.

The aim of these few pages is not that of establishing truth but only exposing error. And of two things we may rest assured: (1) that error is always pernicious; and (2) that the surest way to arrive at truth is to eliminate error.

CONTENTS

CHAPTER I

	PAGE
THOUGHTS ON FREE-THINKING	9

CHAPTER II

THOUGHTS ON DIVINE REVELATION AS BEING A BAR TO FREEDOM OF THOUGHT	17
---	----

CHAPTER III

THOUGHTS ON THE HOLY SCRIPTURES	20
---	----

CHAPTER IV

THOUGHTS ON THE BIBLE COSMOGONY AND THE TEMP- TATION AND FALL OF MAN	26
---	----

CHAPTER V

THOUGHTS ON THE ETHICAL FOUNDATION OF RELIGION	40
--	----

CHAPTER VI

THOUGHTS ON THE EXPEDIENCY OF PROCLAIMING UN- WELCOME AND DISTURBING TRUTHS	47
--	----

Contents

CHAPTER VII

	PAGE
THOUGHTS OF GOD AND HIS DEALINGS WITH MAN AS DEPICTED IN THE BOOK OF GENESIS	52

CHAPTER VIII

THOUGHTS ON JOSHUA'S ARREST OF THE SUN	70
--	----

CHAPTER IX

THOUGHTS ON GOD AS HE IS REPRESENTED TO US IN THE BOOK OF JOB	74
--	----

CHAPTER X

THOUGHTS ON THE ACCOUNT GIVEN OF GOD BY THE BIBLE, AND OF THE CLAIM MADE FOR IT THAT IT WAS DIVINELY REVEALED	78
---	----

CHAPTER XI

THOUGHTS ON THE DIFFICULTY OF ASCERTAINING THE TRUTH CONCERNING GOD AND HIS WORK	84
---	----

CHAPTER XII

THOUGHTS ON THE SCOPE DESIRABLE TO BE GIVEN TO THE PRESENT INQUIRY INTO THE ORIGIN AND AUTHORITY OF THE SCRIPTURES	91
--	----

THOUGHTS OF A FREE-THINKER

CHAPTER I

THOUGHTS ON FREE-THINKING

IN every department of human knowledge or speculation, thought is free, religion only excepted. And religion is excepted because it is asserted that in the case of religion a divine revelation of truth has been vouchsafed to man.

It will be readily conceded that the man who thinks freely on other subjects is doing right ; but it is maintained that he who thinks freely on religion is doing wrong, because he is presuming to set his own judgment above revealed truth.

And the free-thinker himself would be the

Thoughts of a Free-Thinker

last to dispute the proposition that Divine revelation cannot be subject to human criticism.

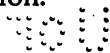
For the free-thinker, therefore, when he enters the domain of religion, everything depends on his acceptance or rejection of the claim put forth on behalf of religion: that it is divinely revealed truth.

And when this question comes up for decision, it has first of all to be observed that religion has various forms and comprises many conflicting statements, each asserting for itself the sanction of Divine revelation.

It has thus come to pass very naturally that the sinfulness of free-thought and strict inquiry in the province of religion is not regarded as a general rule applicable to all cases.

It is not religion generally, but only our own religion which is hedged with the mysterious and awe-inspiring sanction of divinity.

A Jew may think freely, and examine and judge calmly and impartially of the claims of Christianity. The Christian may think freely about the religion of Mahomet, and reject it without being accused of sinful presumption.



On Free-Thinking

But a Christian must not think freely about Christianity; and to reject its inspired record would be impious.

Now when we realise that impiety is imputed to the free-thinker only when he thinks of his own religion, it becomes evident that the charge of impiety must in every case be a simple begging of the question.

If a Moslem doubt the truth of the Koran, he is, from a Moslem point of view, an impious wretch and accursed. But if a Christian doubt the truth of the Koran, and insists on examining its claim to be revealed truth before receiving its testimony and its teaching, such independence and free thought will be justified and applauded by his fellow Christians. Mahomet asserted that he received the Koran direct from God; and it is evident, that unless we are permitted to doubt and to challenge this assertion, we have no option but to receive the Koran reverently.

That which God has directly communicated to man, man must necessarily receive: to criticise it would be presumptuous and foolish.

Yet obviously in the case of every religion

Thoughts of a Free-Thinker

the question of the genuineness and extent of the revelation claimed must needs be a matter for inquiry and criticism, otherwise we may all be as reasonably Mormons on the word of Joe Smith as Moslems on the word of Mahomet, or Christians on the word of John or Paul.

The claim of any religion to be regarded as of Divine authority needs to be examined and tested before it can be accepted and acknowledged by thinking men.

And of all men, the believer of the Divine origin of religion should surely be the last to object to such analysis. For criticism is like nitric acid. The acid destroys the alloy and leaves the gold untouched. In like manner criticism, which destroys error, cannot injure, but will discover truth.

Thus far we have spoken of religion generally ; but what is true as regards religion generally, is equally true as regards our own particular form of religion.

If the claim of the Koran that it is of Divine origin and authority needs to be tested before it can be accepted, the claim put forth on behalf of the Bible that it is the depository of divinely

On Free-Thinking

revealed truth needs also to pass through a like ordeal of examination and criticism.

And this is a process which has been sanctioned and even urged by men who have been admired as religious teachers, and revered as learned theologians.

But while they have thus by anticipation sanctioned and approved the free-thinker's bold and impartial examination of the Scriptures, they have themselves shrunk from doing that which they have advocated. The impressions of a life-time, the religious atmosphere in which they have been brought up and in which they lived, rendered the free exercise of the intellect in this case impossible to them. The writings which they had been taught to reverence as Divine it seemed sacrilegious to question too roughly.

As well might the idolater of old have been expected to view the idol as mere wood or stone, and to banish from his soul the superstitious awe with which custom and tradition had enshrined it.

Yet certain it is that until the bent head of the worshipper has perforce to give place to the

Thoughts of a Free-Thinker

bold and fearless glance of the iconoclast the idol must remain the object of awe and mystery.

The time has at length arrived when the Bible, which has become the idol of the Protestant, as the Pope has become the idol of the Catholic section of Christians, should be examined fairly, impartially, judicially, without fear, and without favour.

And this examination is to concern itself not with details : the authenticity of a word or a phrase, the authorship of one passage or the correct or incorrect translation of another.

In order to determine whether this mass of Hebrew and Christian literature, known to us as the Bible, is or is not of Divine authority, we must consider the assertions and dogmas it contains, and judge whether they harmonise or conflict with the knowledge and ethics which are now the common property of our race.

And clearly it will not be necessary to wade through the whole mass of these ancient writings ; if a certain number of the leading assertions are shown to be unfounded and

On Free-Thinking

untrue, the claim of the collection to be Divine and infallible must needs be rejected.

And it may be asked—what then? If the claim of the Scriptures, or rather of the expounders of the Scriptures on our blind allegiance be successfully repudiated, what then?

Why, this then follows, that whereas revelation has been, as we have observed, the sole bar to freedom of thought in religion, the denial of revelation will be the removal of the bar: and thought will be free.

The yoke of that which is false will be lifted off the necks of men. Perplexities and insuperable difficulties which have assailed the minds of the devout will disappear.

How many good and earnest folk have sought in vain to harmonise the “eye for an eye, and tooth for a tooth,” of the law, and the vengeful and bloodthirsty aspirations of the Psalms, with the injunctions to “love your enemies,” and “do good to them that persecute you” of the New Testament? Are not all these and many more equally irreconcilable passages to be found in the sacred volume; and how is the plain and unsophisticated intelli-

Thoughts of a Free-Thinker

gence to deal with them when all are to be accepted as revealed wisdom, and in short, as the very Word of God?

Retain the theory of revelation, and there is no way out of the maze of doubt and difficulty.

But assume that the attribute of revelation and consequent infallibility has been erroneously ascribed to these writings, and at once all difficulties vanish.

It is perfectly natural and might have been anticipated that different men in different and distant epochs of history should hold and express different and even opposite opinions and beliefs even upon essential and fundamental points, and thus the human mind, freed from a burden which should never have been laid upon it, which ignorance imposed, and superstition has retained, the human mind, I say, freed from the fetters of traditional theology, will be left unburdened to seek the truth by the same methods as have proved successful in other fields of inquiry.

CHAPTER II

THOUGHTS ON DIVINE REVELATION AS BEING A BAR TO FREEDOM OF THOUGHT

WE came to the conclusion in the last chapter that the question whether free thought and inquiry is or is not permissible in the case of religion is absolutely dependent on the answer to the other question : whether religion itself is or is not a Divine revelation of truth and therefore of Divine authority.

Hence, for the free-thinker the question of revelation is the first and most important and the most decisive of all questions.

In the case of Christians, the question of revelation is concerned with the Bible : those writings, known as the Holy Scriptures, are commonly referred to as the Word of God ; and every statement and dogma to be found in

Thoughts of a Free-Thinker

them is received with profound reverence and respect.

Our task, therefore, is to determine if possible whether the position thus accorded to them, as being of Divine origin and authority, is or is not absolutely their due.

And it must be evident, I think, that if they are indeed the Word of God, they will on the severest examination be found free from error and misstatement. For to suppose that an assertion or statement, which is plainly erroneous and mistaken, is nevertheless of Divine origin, is surely a supposition which no thinking man will be prepared to agree to.

This question of the origin and authority of the Scriptures is so absolutely the turning point and dominating factor in Biblical investigation, that I devote this short chapter to impressing on the reader of these thoughts, the fact that our one aim and endeavour in the following pages will be to elucidate this single problem, and confirm the mind in the conclusions which may be arrived at.

The Bible is either a Divine revelation of truth, or it is not. Either we must reverence

Revelation the Bar to Free-Thought

it as the Word of God, or criticise it as the work of man.

We cannot calmly investigate that which we are bound by its very nature and origin to worship.

There is no middle course possible, and until this all-important question be decided, no other question regarding religion can be so much as approached.

If the mind of man be confronted in the Holy Scriptures with the unerring declarations of the Deity, there is then indeed no room for doubt, inquiry, or any process of intellect.

Only in the case that these writings, like all others, are fairly subject to our reason, can it be possible, with any hope or prospect of success, to enter upon the study of religion.

CHAPTER III

THOUGHTS ON THE HOLY SCRIPTURES

THE Bible is revered by Christians as being the Word of God.

Christians are divided into two great parties : those who belong to the Roman Catholic Church ; and those numerous bodies who, on various points, dissent from the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church.

Of these the former has decreed that God is the author by inspiration of all the parts of all the books, and Catholics are bound by decrees of General Councils to accept as infallible truths every narrative and every assertion in any part of any one of the books distinguished by the Church as sacred and canonical. And it has been declared by the Pope—who is himself infallible—that “It is

On the Holy Scriptures

absolutely wrong and forbidden either to narrow inspiration to certain parts of Holy Scripture or to admit that the sacred writer has erred. For the system of those who, in order to rid themselves of these difficulties, will not hesitate to concede that Divine inspiration regards the things of faith and morals and nothing beyond,—this system cannot be tolerated. For all the books which the Church receives as sacred and canonical are written wholly and entirely, with all their parts, at the dictation of the Holy Ghost. And so far is it from being possible that any error can co-exist with inspiration, that inspiration is not only essentially incompatible with error, but excludes and rejects it, as absolutely and necessarily, as it is impossible that God himself, the Supreme Truth, can utter that which is not true.”

This is the ancient and unchanging faith of the Church solemnly defined in the Councils of Florence and of Trent, and finally confirmed and more expressly formulated by the Council of the Vatican.

And the Protestant, though he may refuse to accept the ruling of the infallible Church

Thoughts of a Free-Thinker

on other points, holds firmly to this orthodox view of the sanctity of the Holy Scriptures, and does not hesitate habitually to speak of the Bible as the Word of God.

The thousands of preachers who every Sunday address the faithful in Church or chapel, found their discourses each on some fragment of the sacred and inspired writings, every such fragment or text, even when torn away from its context, being regarded as indisputable truth, because it is of Divine origin, and as such not to be doubted or criticised, but only expounded.

The man, therefore, who within the limits of Christendom ventures to impugn this view is regarded very much in the same way as a man in an idolatrous land would be regarded who should venture to slap the face of the idol.

Now, when one bears in mind this position of affairs, and turns to the opening sentence of the sacred writings: this Word of God—the infallible depository of revealed truth—it is strange indeed to find that this brief sentence contains more glaring inaccuracies and false statements than can be easily

On the Holy Scriptures

matched from any passage of equal length of any writings whatsoever.

“ In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. And the earth was waste and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep: and the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters. And God said, Let there be light; and there was light. And God saw the light that it was good: and God divided the light from the darkness. And God called the light Day, and the darkness He called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, one day.”

Here we have it stated succinctly and categorically that in the beginning the earth was a formless waste of waters and in darkness. Then the Deity made, not the sun, but light: divided the light from the darkness, and called the one Day and the other Night.

This is the account as we find it in the opening passage of the Bible.

What are the facts?

In the beginning the world was—not a formless waste of waters—but a molten globular mass. As such it certainly was not in darkness, for it emitted light from its own molten and

Thoughts of a Free-Thinker

incandescent mass ; and it was, moreover, then as now illumined by those sources of light from which alone light is derived, namely, the sun and other heavenly bodies.

We are told, furthermore, by the chronicler, that the light then miraculously formed was divided from the darkness no less miraculously retained, and the alternating periods of light and darkness termed Day and Night were constituted.

Again, we must inquire, what are the facts ?

What is Night ?

Night is simply the shadow of the earth—neither more nor less.

If we could get away from the earth, and watch it from a sufficient distance, what should we see ?

We should find that light is not fluctuating but permanent. Throughout the whole twenty-four hours the effulgent and scorching sun would shine upon us. But on looking on the earth we should observe that, as it circled round the central luminary, one side of it was thrown in shadow on account of its own opacity. And the inhabitants of that tiny globe call that shadow Night. Outside the limits of the terrestrial globe there is no Night, and never has

On the Holy Scriptures

been, but all the empty measureless space is filled with light.

Thus it was, long before this comparatively tiny globule of molten matter started on its daily circle round the central mass, and thus it will be, doubtless, long after the whole system shall have perished.

Other systems, other much huger suns, are scattered in bewildering profusion through space, illuminating that space with a constant, steady, ceaseless flood of light, universal and undimmed, except where here and there some opaque body, arresting the passage of the waves of light, throws a portion of the opaque body into shadow.

And these little patches of uncertain shade may, by the dwellers on those revolving orbs, also be termed the Night.

But the light which is constant and universal, and the darkness which is intermittent and altogether local, are both due to that sun and those stars or more distant suns which the Hebrew chronicler supposes to have not been yet in existence in the beginning when God created light and divided it from darkness, and called one Day and the other Night.

CHAPTER IV

THOUGHTS ON THE BIBLE COSMOGONY AND THE TEMPTATION AND FALL OF MAN

WHEN we open the Bible, the first thing we come upon is a cosmogony, or an account of the creation of the universe.

In this Hebrew cosmogony it is stated that the period of creation was six days.

On the first day the world is a chaos of water, and it is dark. On this day light is created; and although there is as yet no sun, there is already an inexplicable alternation of light with darkness, so that it is possible to call the one Day and the other Night.

On the second day the firmament was created. This is a solid dome arching over the waste of waters beneath, and bearing above another great body of waters which should

On Cosmogony and the Fall of Man

evidently afterwards descend at intervals in the form of rain.

On the third day the waste of waters is gathered together into oceans and seas, and the dry land appears. And on the dry land grass grows, and trees and all manner of vegetation.

On the fourth day lights are placed in the firmament or dome-shaped roof which had been created on the second day. These lights were so placed in order to give light to the world : two great lights, the sun during the day and the moon during the night,—Day and Night having been, in some inexplicable fashion, already in existence during the three days previous to the creation of the sun and moon. And it is quaintly added : to these—that is, the sun and moon, the great lights—He added the stars.

On the fifth day the fish in the sea and the fowls of the air are created.

On the sixth day the earth brings forth animals and creeping things, and all the creatures which live upon the land. And, finally, on the sixth day we are told God made man in His own image and gave him dominion over all

Thoughts of a Free-Thinker

other living creatures. We are told, furthermore, that He made man male and female, and bade them be fruitful and multiply, and rule over fish, fowl, and beast.

And thus in six days was ended the making and fashioning of all things both in heaven and earth.

Now, directly we proceed to the examination of this Hebrew cosmogony, the unwisdom becomes very apparent of claiming for it the support or sanction of Divine authority. For probably in no quotation of equal length from any writing could so many and demonstrable errors be detected.

On the first day Light is created, and Day and Night, light and darkness, alternate while yet there is no sun or moon or stars. We know very well how such a statement would be characterised if made by a modern writer who should attempt to give us an account of the origin of all things.

On the second day a firmament was placed above the waste of waters, itself carrying and bearing up a similar huge body of water. Now we know very well that the overarching sky,

On Cosmogony and the Fall of Man

the blue vault bending down and touching the horizon, is merely an optical delusion. There is no such vault, but only infinite space above and all round us. And as to the waters supported by the firmament, and divided by it from the waters below on the earth, we know not only that there is no such body of water above us, but that, as the world is constituted, no such arrangement is physically possible.

Furthermore, on this point an interesting fact may be noted, that for the modern world the very terms 'above' and 'beneath' have become obsolete. On this spherical surface what is above the dweller on one spot is beneath the dweller at the Antipodes, and of course *vice versa*.

On the third day dry land is formed ; vegetation of all sorts makes its appearance ; there still being, it must be borne in mind, no sun, moon, or stars.

On the fourth day these lights are formed and set in the firmament to give light to the earth. They are set in that firmament which divides the water which is above the earth from the water which is under the earth. If such a

Thoughts of a Free-Thinker

cosmogony were presented to us, derived from any source other than the one which we have been wont to regard as of Divine origin, would it be necessary to examine the statement or follow it any further ?

How such a mass of error and absurdity is to be reconciled with Divine revelation is indeed a marvel.

Yet if only we cease to ascribe to it a Divine origin, the cosmogony is neither strange nor singular. Every great Eastern nation has produced an account of the origin of all things ; and, when examined, each of these will be found to have many points of strong resemblance to this Hebrew cosmogony.

In most, it is stated or assumed that the world was originally a waste of waters. The transforming power or Deity is described as hovering in the form of a bird or a wind over the surface of the deep. The Hebrew is not the only account which placed the creation of light anterior to the creation of the sun and the other heavenly bodies. The Egyptian and the Hebrew assert that all things were created by the Word of God ; the Indian says that the self-

On Cosmogony and the Fall of Man

existent Lord created the waters by a thought.

All these ancient nations, it will be observed, assume or state water as the primal condition of matter ; whereas we now know that the earth and the other heavenly bodies are molten masses of matter passing at great speed through space, controlled in their orbits by an universal condition or law, and slowly cooling as they circulate in the paths which inexorable circumstances assign to them. Water, therefore, was not, as the ancients imagined, the primal state of the world, but great and almost inconceivable heat. As to such notions as that the sun and stars were created subsequently to the earth, and for the purpose of giving light to the earth, or that light and day and night preceded the advent of the sun and the other heavenly bodies, they serve only to demonstrate and assure us of the state of absolute ignorance of the mechanism of the universe which prevailed when they were promulgated.

These discrepancies between old time guesses and the ascertained facts of modern science are neither surprising nor of importance ; and we need no more distress ourselves about the

Thoughts of a Free-Thinker

errors of the Hebrew cosmogony than about the errors of the Assyrian, the Indian, or the Egyptian cosmogony, had we not been led to attribute to the first a Divine origin and infallible authority which we should never dream of ascribing to the others.

It may be, however, that some theologians, anxious to defend the position of the Scriptures as revealed truth, will be content to claim for the Bible a more narrow and restricted infallibility. As the infallibility of the Pope is confined to questions of faith and morals, even so the infallibility of the Scriptures may be thought to have a like limitation.

Let, us, therefore, pass on from the cosmogony of the first chapter.

In the second chapter, after the assertion in the first few verses that God rested from His labours on the seventh day and blessed it, we come to a second cosmogony, brief, incomplete, and in one important respect different from the first. In the first cosmogony it is stated that God made man, male and female, and blessed them, and commanded them to increase and multiply, and bear rule over all other living

On Cosmogony and the Fall of Man

creatures. But in the cosmogony of the second chapter, God is declared to have made man from the dust of the earth ; to have planted a garden, and to have set him therein. And thereafter follows an account of the woman, her temptation by the serpent, and the Fall of Man.

Now this story

“Of Man’s first disobedience and the fruit
Of that forbidden tree ”

is no mere episode or under-plot ; it is the main argument and foundation of both the Jewish and Christian religions. As such it is most deserving of careful and impartial consideration, and the question, whether it is to be accepted as revealed truth, must necessarily govern, in a great measure, our decision on the claims to Divine revelation put forth on behalf of the whole of the Scriptures.

And what is this story of disobedience and punishment ?

It is scarcely necessary that it should here be sketched even in the barest outline, for the narrative in its minutest details is very familiar to all of us.

Thoughts of a Free-Thinker

The man is created and placed in a garden prepared especially for his accommodation. He is warned, however, not to touch the fruit of a particular tree, which being placed in the garden, must have been placed there on purpose to try him. And so long as he remains alone he obeys the injunction. After a time a woman is miraculously formed and presented to him as companion. And she, being tempted by the Evil Spirit (here mentioned for the first time), who assumes the form of a serpent, eats of the forbidden fruit and induces her companion to eat also. In punishment for this disobedience the pair are cursed, the ground is cursed for their sake, they are driven from the garden, and all their descendants are cursed to the remotest generation and to the number of thousands of millions.

Such is the story of man's fall and its consequences as we find it in those Scriptures which are revered as the Word of God.

Now to enable us to take an unbiassed view of the narrative, and to form an impartial judgment on its ethical aspect, let us suppose that a human king had issued the prohibition

On Cosmogony and the Fall of Man

and awarded the punishment. What would be our verdict? Should we not unhesitatingly pronounce the story to be childish and absurd in the highest degree? And should we not, if for the sake of argument we admitted the authenticity and truth of the narrative, pronounce the conduct of the king to have been inhuman, tyrannical, and unjust to an almost incredible extent?

And it must be further remembered that the analogy between the Deity and the king would be by no means close, and that the differences between them would tell altogether in favour of the king; because the king would not have created the man, and would not therefore be responsible for the strength or weakness he might display; nor would a mere human being be able with certainty to foreknow the result of the experiment. But by hypothesis God, being All-powerful and All-knowing, must needs be responsible for the strength of the being He had made proving insufficient to withstand the strength of the temptation to which He subjected it; and it is clear also that He must have

Thoughts of a Free-Thinker

known, even before the commencement of the trial, what would inevitably be its disastrous result.

But it may be asked, if the story be so inherently improbable that to us it seems absurd, how came it to be devised? and yet more strange and inexplicable, how came it to be received as a Divine revelation and the foundation of a faith?

The answer would seem to be this: although the narrative now strikes one as grotesque and would not be credited if told of any living ruler, yet if we search the records of the Eastern world in ancient times, the actions of great kings may be found scarcely less defensible; and the awe and submission with which their most atrocious sentences were received by their people lead us to understand how even such a story as that of Adam and Eve in Eden could find acceptance and be the subject of reverent belief.

The acceptance of it by the free and energetic races of the West, and in modern times,—their acquiescence in and reverence for a sentence so obviously excessive, unjust, and iniquitous,—

On Cosmogony and the Fall of Man

is no doubt stranger still, and cannot be understood till we appreciate and allow for the force of immemorial tradition and early training ; and until, by a patient study of the past, we arrive at an insight into the process by which both the Old and the New Testament attained to the reputation of being inspired documents containing a Divine revelation.

As we observed with the Hebrew cosmogony that, if only a Divine origin were not assumed, it would take its place among Eastern cosmogonies with much that was similar to them, and little to distinguish it from others : so we may observe that the essentially childish and outrageous story of Eden would take its place unnoticed, and naturally enough, as a part of ancient Eastern Mythology, if once it were no longer seen through the distorting medium of imputed revelation and divinity.

Yet so difficult is it to escape from this distorting medium, and for those who have been used to see the scriptural statements only in the dim religious light of the devotee, to view them in the broad daylight of reason and common-sense, that a few further remarks on the

Thoughts of a Free-Thinker

monstrous disproportion between the sin and the sentence may still be needed.

Let such persons consider what would be their feelings of disgust and horror if a murderer of the worst description,—say a cold-blooded, wholesale poisoner, a matricide or patricide,—should be, supposing such a thing were possible, condemned by any human tribunal to the like punishment: the criminal himself to be cursed, all his environment to be cursed for his sake, and all his children and descendants to share the curse and condemnation through endless generations.

And let them consider further, that in the case supposed the tribunal awarding the punishment would be in no way responsible either for the weakness of him who was condemned or for the incidents of the temptation to which he had succumbed.

All this, however, would fail to justify in our eyes a sentence so ruthless, so far-reaching, so utterly out of proportion to the offence committed. Punish, you would say, the criminal himself; but to involve in his condemnation and punishment myriads innocent and yet unborn is

On Cosmogony and the Fall of Man

to commit a crime of far greater magnitude than that which you affect to punish.

And if we should so address any human tribunal guilty of pronouncing so unjust and monstrous a sentence, how shall we dare, on the strength of a passage in an ancient manuscript of unknown age and authorship, to impute to the Creator of all things an action so abominable?

If the Maker of all things were capable of such folly and wickedness, woe indeed to us! For what might we not apprehend from One who could tempt to his destruction the creature He had created, and then curse him and his with a curse so monstrous and so disproportionate to any possible offence, that we are appalled and horror-stricken by the very thought of it?

CHAPTER V

THOUGHTS ON THE ETHICAL FOUNDATION OF RELIGION

IN the preceding chapters, we have passed in review the statements in the opening chapters of Genesis, with the object of determining whether the work is worthy of being termed the Word of God.

We first examined the cosmogony with which the writing begins, and we had no difficulty in deciding that it was not divinely revealed. It cannot have been divinely revealed, for the simple reason that it is not true.

It affects to give us an account of the formation of the visible universe.

In modern times the various parts of the visible universe have been themselves inter-

On the Ethical Basis of Religion

rogated and examined by accurate observation and modern scientific instruments, and they have themselves told their own history.

The Hebrew account states that the earth and the sun, moon, and stars were created in six days.

Astronomy and geology assure us that they were created, not in six days or in six centuries, not in six thousand years, nor in six million years.

We have already considered the six days' work in detail; and is it not plain that the writer of Genesis was absolutely ignorant of the whole physical conditions, the shape and dimensions of that universe, the order of the creation of which he presumes to narrate? And is any one willing to contend that an account so completely inaccurate was nevertheless of Divine origin?

Leaving the Hebrew cosmogony, we turn next to the consideration in the second chapter of the early statements of Hebrew Mythology: the story of the creation of Adam, his settlement in the Garden of Eden, the creation of Eve, the disobedience of that first pair

Thoughts of a Free-Thinker

to a Divine command, and the sentence, the terrible and far-reaching curse which was pronounced upon them.

Now we here have to do with something less concrete, less obvious; and it may seem therefore to some less easy to determine than statements of physical fact, such as that there is a firmament above us, or that light and day and night were created before the sun and other heavenly bodies.

When we come to wrongdoers, and the punishment inflicted upon wrongdoers, we leave the domain of physics and enter the domain of ethics. The great and fully ascertained truths of geology or astronomy will not aid us here. But are there no great and general principles in the moral or ethical domain on which we can firmly rely? I think myself that there are. I think that it will invariably be found that where a religion attributes to the Deity a line of conduct on a lower plane than that which we might reasonably expect from worthy men, the conscience of man will eventually reject and repudiate that religion. And this is a course not only reason-

On the Ethical Basis of Religion

able, but logically unavoidable. For if we suppose that there is a Creator, surely it follows that He must be at least as good as the best of His creatures, otherwise the stream would rise higher than its source, which is not in our experience.

And if anything were needed to confirm us in the above opinion, it would be found in the reflection that we are by no means the first who have stood face to face with this problem of the truth or the falsehood of a faith. To go no further back in history than the time of the Romans, we find that the gods of Rome became discredited largely, and perhaps chiefly, by these ethical considerations. Civilised, intelligent, honourable Romans began to view with disgust and contempt the alleged lives of the gods, and to ask themselves whether it were possible to believe in the traditional and priestly account of Deities who indulged in criminal and base actions, such as any noble and high-minded man amongst themselves would be ashamed of.

In like manner it appears to me that if

Thoughts of a Free-Thinker

we should find that our own religion imputes to the Creator a line of conduct so irrational, a policy of vengeance so inequitable and shocking, that every humane and honourable man would shrink from it, eventually in the minds of men a revulsion will take place of such strength and energy that it will break down the habitual reverence and awe with which they have been accustomed to receive the teachings of religion ; and they will attain to a conviction, that what is so ethically monstrous cannot possibly be, as they had supposed, divinely revealed truth.

If we examine the Biblical account of Adam and Eve, the Fall of Man, and the sentence pronounced upon him, from the ethical standpoint, to what conclusion must we come? Is the conduct here ascribed to the Creator other than grotesque and outrageous?

Would any father among us place his children in temptation ; place them in such a position of temptation as that he knew they would succumb ; give them the injunction not to commit some trivial and apparently unimportant action ; and then on their failing to observe the

On the Ethical Basis of Religion

injunction, would he curse them with a curse so searching, so far-reaching, so absolutely inveterate and terrible that the most iniquitous sentences of a Jeffreys would seem humane in the comparison?

Suppose such conduct to be alleged against one of us, and at the same time it were asserted that the father guilty of such conduct was a wise, loving, tender-hearted and beneficent being, what should we say? Should we not repudiate the story as a grotesque and incredible fiction?

And yet we are required by the theory of a Divine revelation to believe that the Creator of the universe was guilty of conduct no less odious.

Surely it is more easy to suppose that the unknown compiler of Genesis was as ignorant of God's dealings with man as he evidently was of the manner of God's creation of the universe.

But if so, if the account of the Fall of Man and the curse pronounced upon him be no more revealed truth than is the account just previously given of the creation of the universe,

Thoughts of a Free-Thinker

does not the theory of Divine revelation receive a rude shock, and may we not prepare ourselves to find that it has as little justification in the later as in the earlier parts of these voluminous scriptures? And this result is the rather to be anticipated, inasmuch as the Fall of Man is the very groundwork or basis of the Biblical religion.

CHAPTER VI

THOUGHTS ON THE EXPEDIENCY OF PROCLAIMING UNWELCOME AND DISTURBING TRUTHS

IN the last chapter we came to the conclusion that the first pages of the Bible containing the Hebrew cosmogony and the account of the Fall of Man could not be accepted as of Divine origin, as being the Word of God.

The cosmogony is flatly contradicted by the established facts of scientific investigation in geology and astronomy ; and the account of the Fall of Man stands absolutely condemned when viewed from an ethical standpoint.

And it was argued further that if the Fall of Man were not accepted as revealed truth, a similar decision might be inevitable in regard to much or all of the Scripture narrative.

At this point a question is sure to be asked—

Thoughts of a Free-Thinker

the question whether, even supposing the Scriptures not to be absolute truth, is it wise, by proving and proclaiming the fact, to run the risk of unsettling people's minds and destroying their faith ?

In undertaking a task of this sort it is worthy of note how frequently the difficulties which arise turn out to be not new but very old difficulties.

This question of the advisability of proclaiming or concealing truth, which here confronts us, is a question which was raised in an acute form centuries ago when the truth that the earth is a spherical body moving round the sun, and not a flat surface round which the sun moves, was discovered and announced.

The priests, as guardians of religion, were quick to see that the new assertions of astronomy were in flat contradiction to Scripture ; and that to accept them would be inevitably to weaken if not destroy men's faith in the Bible as the infallible exposition of revealed truth. They therefore forced Galileo to retract his teaching, and endeavoured, as far as they were able, to stifle, if they could not controvert, the evidence of science.

On Expediency of Publishing Truth

But ultimately all these efforts were in vain, and a knowledge of truth spread and prevailed in spite of the opposition of bigotry and ignorance.

So long as the mind of man can be kept in darkness, the bondage to superstition and the belief in what is false may be maintained ; but when once light is let in, when once man is permitted to read and study and reflect, the reign of error is doomed, and the time of enfranchisement is approaching.

And this is the true answer to the question regarding the advisability of canvassing the claims and pretensions of religion as of other things.

The triumph of truth, the diffusion of light is inevitable in the long run, and it would not be desirable if it were possible, and it would not be possible even if it were desirable, to prevent the human mind from concerning itself with these questions, and seeking eagerly, and we may hope ultimately seeking successfully, to obtain the answer to them.

But it may be said, admitting the force of what is above urged, and assuming that truth

Thoughts of a Free-Thinker

will always ultimately prevail, yet, is it necessary or wise to anticipate the result and to proclaim it prematurely?

To that I reply, no man need fear the premature announcement of truth.

Emerson has a shrewd remark to the effect that no one can learn anything he has not prepared himself to learn. And that is only another way of saying, that in order that it may live, not only must the seed be good, but the soil must be suitable for its reception. Seed sown too early falls, as it were, upon a rock, where it will inevitably perish. Only when the soil is suitable will it live and germinate.

Many times truths have been proclaimed by men who were in advance of their age, and then not only has the truth itself been rejected but the man who had given utterance to it has been persecuted or slain by his fellows.

Such a man was Bruno. He published, towards the close of the sixteenth century, certain books on astronomy, and was guilty of the crime of having taught the plurality of worlds. His astronomical opinions were accurate, his speculations concerning the plurality of worlds

On Expediency of Publishing Truth

were ingenious and probable, and have been shared by many modern astronomers. Nevertheless the fact remained that in holding these views he was before his time, and his promulgation of them was therefore premature. We need not be surprised, accordingly, to find that the Inquisition hunted him down. He nobly and bravely refused to recant, and was burnt at Rome in the second month of the last year of the sixteenth century.

With such examples before us of the impossibility of man unduly hastening the inevitable but slow march of truth, I should hesitate to express my convictions on the subject of religion and Divine revelation, did I not see daily indications not only of latent disbelief on the part of many, but sounds of a growing tendency to boldly avow an incredulity which in many minds is neither recent nor unreasonable.

CHAPTER VII

THOUGHTS OF GOD AND HIS DEALINGS WITH MAN AS DEPICTED IN THE BOOK OF GENESIS

RELIGION is concerned with God and with God's dealings with man. And it is asserted that we have in the Bible a Divine revelation of Himself by God, and an account of His dealings with man in certain instances.

When endeavouring to ascertain what basis there may be for faith in the Divine revelation of the Holy Scriptures, it is evidently of the first importance to scrutinise closely the picture they present to us of the Creator of the universe.

Now we know that in the Bible the qualities of justice, mercy, long-suffering, and many others equally noble, are freely ascribed to the Deity ; but if we disregard the abstract qualities

On God as Depicted in Genesis

which are said to be His attributes and confine ourselves to observing concrete cases of His alleged dealings with man, we shall find that the Hebrew Scriptures never scruple to depict Him in the character of a capricious and unjust autocrat.

We have already considered His dealings with humanity in the matter of man's temptation and fall.

But the conduct attributed to the Deity in that case can be paralleled in many similar instances.

We have not to go far to light upon a second. Adam and Eve are reported to have had two sons, the elder Cain, the younger Abel, "and Abel was a keeper of sheep, but Cain was a tiller of the ground." Now when the parents of these two were placed in Eden it is related that God said, "Behold, I have given you every herb yielding seed which is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree in which is the fruit of a tree yielding seed: to you it shall be for meat."

"And in process of time it came to pass, that Cain brought of the fruit of the ground an

Thoughts of a Free-Thinker

offering unto the Lord. And Abel, he also brought of the firstlings of his flock and of the fat thereof. And the Lord had respect unto Abel and his offering: but unto Cain and to his offering he had not respect."

Here we have each man bringing a part of the proceeds of his labour as an offering to the Lord. If either were entitled to expect a more favourable reception of his proffered gift, surely it would be he who brought a part of that vegetable produce which it is asserted had been specially given by God to man for his food. What happens? Out of mere caprice, for no alleged default or deficiency of the unhappy tiller of the soil, his offering is rejected and his brother's is accepted.

Mutato nomine. Let such a story be told, not in the Bible, not of God, and what would be our verdict?

But it is in the Bible; it is ascribed to God, and men are found who will stifle their sense of justice and applaud in the case of God what they would reprobate and denounce if it were related of a man.

Most of the earlier myths enshrined in the

On God as Depicted in Genesis

Bible are absurd and childish in a high degree. But it is not this aspect of them that here concerns us. What we are to observe is the picture they present to us of God.

We have seen that, in the story of the Fall of Man, God is represented as absolutely unsuccessful, and certainly not very wise. This description of Him is not stated in so many words, nor indeed is it stated in any way intentionally. But it is the conclusion inevitably to be drawn from the narrative. The world and man are created in a state of innocence, and all is pronounced to be very good. But an alien and hostile power is suffered to invade Paradise and corrupt the innocent inhabitants. When this happens, the Creator, in a kind of rage or pet, curses the whole of His fair creation. Now this is what might readily occur in the case of the ignorant and emotional primitive man, but we should expect something better of the calm and well-balanced intellect of a civilised being. We should be surprised, indeed, if a great inventor or designer nowadays made, in the first place, an apparatus too feeble to stand the strain to which it must be subjected,

Thoughts of a Free-Thinker

and then, if he should chance to be guilty of such an error of judgment, should lose control of himself, and destroy, not only the apparatus itself, but everything surrounding it. Yet this is the course of proceeding ascribed to Him who is assumed to be almighty and all-wise.

But let us examine another of these ancient stories : the account of Noah and the Deluge. We are not going to concern ourselves, except incidentally, with the difficulties of accepting this miraculous occurrence. We desire only to observe the way it exhibits to us God and His procedure.

First it tells us that the alien and hostile influence which invaded the world and brought about the Fall of Man did over a long period so mightily flourish and extend, that the whole world was full of iniquity. Goodness, the divine quality, was everywhere defeated ; evil, the satanic quality, was everywhere triumphant.

In these circumstances the Divine Author of all things has to consider the position and decide what had best be done. And He does not decide, as it might appear reasonable that

On God as Depicted in Genesis

He should do, to destroy this evil and too feeble race and begin anew ; but He determines to destroy all of them except one family only, and to make a fresh start with these few individuals, who, if they were any way better than the rest, were yet equally frail and equally open to corruption with the hosts of humanity which should perish. And having decided on this plan, a pestilence is not sent among them, nor any means of destruction of the race employed which was compatible with the normal rules that govern the universe : but a stupendous miracle or over-riding of those general rules is resorted to, and the world is brought again into what the chronicler supposes was its primitive condition, namely, a waste of water.

Supposititious windows are opened in the mythical firmament, and the waters which do not exist above the firmament fall upon the earth and submerge it until the very mountains are covered. As this act of destruction would blot out not only the human race, but all the animal creation, it is provided that pairs of all creatures shall be housed in the same vessel which preserves Noah and his family.

Thoughts of a Free-Thinker

It will be observed that the Flood is a very clumsy contrivance for effecting the result aimed at, namely, the destruction of the human race, which could easily have been effected by a disease attacking man only, and necessitating no occurrence which would seem to us miraculous and incredible.

But as I have said before, these details are of very minor and subsidiary importance.

What we have mainly to consider is the account it presents to us of the Deity.

By a stupendous and inconceivable miracle, He destroys all living creatures except one pair of each species. There would seem to be no reason for thus sparing and preserving these, except the difficulty of replenishing the earth again after the Deluge. Whether the creation anew of all animals and of man would have been more difficult or more miraculous than the Deluge itself may seem doubtful to us ; though, of course, to one who believed in the waters above the firmament, and the windows in the firmament, the narrative may have well presented a different aspect.

On God as Depicted in Genesis

But let us not allow ourselves to be too much or too long engrossed by these minor though very real difficulties and inconsistencies.

Granting, for the sake of argument, the literal correctness of all particulars of this narrative, what, let us consider, was the object of the Deluge, and was that object attained? The object surely was not only to sweep away a community that had become hopelessly and irreclaimably corrupt, but also to give the race that had so far failed to live up to the high standard of its creation, a fresh start, a new chance to do better in the future. And what happened, according to the Bible narrative? In a few generations we find the cities of the Plain flourishing and full of evil, insomuch that they had to be destroyed by fire.

Now, were all this related of any earthly monarch, should we hesitate to declare that his scheme for the betterment of the race had failed utterly, and any reputation he might have for wisdom or foresight rested on very inadequate foundations?

And assuredly the Hebrew chronicler, doubtless quite unintentionally, gives an account

Thoughts of a Free-Thinker

quite as unfavourable of the wisdom and proceedings of the Creator of the universe.

Let us next consider the case of Abram's journey into Egypt.

“And it came to pass, when he was come near to enter into Egypt, that he said to Sarai his wife, Behold now, I know that thou art a fair woman to look upon : and it shall come to pass, when the Egyptians shall see thee, that they shall say, This is his wife : and they will kill me, but they will save thee alive. Say, I pray thee, thou art my sister, that it may be well with me for thy sake, and that my soul may live because of thee. And it came to pass, when Abram was come into Egypt, the Egyptians beheld the woman that she was very fair. And the princes of Pharaoh saw her, and praised her to Pharaoh : and the woman was taken into Pharaoh's house. And he entreated Abram well for her sake : and he had sheep, and oxen, and he-asses and men-servants and maid-servants, and she-asses and camels. And the Lord plagued Pharaoh and his house with great plagues because of Sarai, Abram's wife.”

On God as Depicted in Genesis

Here we have the Hebrew patriarch, through mere fear for his own safety, falsely representing his wife as his sister, allowing another man, deceived by that misrepresentation, to take his wife from him, accepting as the reward of his lying and deception presents from the man who had unwittingly injured him. And what does the God of the Hebrews do? Does He punish the man who has been guilty of deception, and who has enriched himself at the expense of his wife's virtue and his own honour? Not so; a tribal God does not plague His own people, but plagues with great plagues the unwitting and therefore innocent offender.

If that is equity, justice, righteousness, then all our ethics need, indeed, to be re-cast.

The man who, through ignorance and misled by wilful deception, commits an unintentional wrong, is grievously plagued; and the man who has contrived the situation, and who has been guilty of lying and pusillanimity, is rewarded.

If God be regarded as the Creator of all things and the Father of all men, the narrative we have been considering is wholly inexplicable, and God's dealings with man, if defended at all,

Thoughts of a Free-Thinker

must needs be defended with all the resources of sophistry and special pleading. But view God not as the God and Father of all, but as simply the tribal God of a chosen people, and in the view of the ancients and of tribes of more modern times, everything is perfectly natural and what is to be expected.

Does anyone who knows history suppose that 300 years ago the head of one Scottish clan would have allowed any consideration of abstract justice, or the merits or incidents of any particular quarrel, to stay his hand from supporting his own clan against the alien? That the MacCallum More should decide for the Campbell against, say, the Mackenzie or the Macdonald was a matter of course. Whether the particular Campbell concerned had acted in all respects as the saints and angels might approve was not the question; the chief was expected to support his own clansmen as the clansmen would certainly support the chief under all circumstances.

In ancient times the God of a tribe or family was regarded as the head of that tribe or family; and that He would defend and support His own

On God as Depicted in Genesis

against all others was a foregone conclusion. And from this point of view, and from this point of view only, does a narrative like that of Abram's journey to Egypt, and what happened there, become natural and intelligible.

On any other supposition it is impossible to avoid the conclusion that an injustice was committed when the deceiver and wrongdoer was protected and rewarded ; and the deceived, who did wilfully no wrong, but who, on the contrary, altered his conduct, and so far as lay in his power repaired and atoned for the injury he had unwittingly committed, was nevertheless selected to be grievously plagued.

And here I can imagine the exclamation of horror of some good people. "What, do you dare to say that God acts unjustly?" Nay, I do not say so, nor think so. But assuredly, on the supposition that He is the God of all, He is so depicted in the Hebrew Scriptures—those very scriptures which ye good people accept and honour as His own Word—the Divine and unimpeachable record of Him and of His doings.

The next Biblical character, the account of

Thoughts of a Free-Thinker

whose career we will glance at, is Jacob, the grandson of Abraham. And again we must bear in mind that it is not with the conduct of the man that we are here mainly concerned, but with the light thrown by the story on the Hebrew conception of Jehovah and His dealings with man.

As to the crafty Jacob himself, the supplanter of his brother, the deceiver of his father, the trickster who enriched himself at the expense of his hard-dealing but less astute father-in-law, there can be no doubt what the verdict of honourable and fair-dealing Englishmen would be, were Jacob and his iniquities and meanness given to us in any other chronicle. But it is not with this shifty, underhand personage himself that we are here chiefly concerned. What we have to consider is the part assigned to God in these transactions.

Are we to understand that God ordered and arranged that Jacob should achieve success by fraud and misrepresentation? Or are we to believe that when Jacob disguised himself and deceived his almost blind father, he not only got from him by artifice the blessing which Isaac

On God as Depicted in Genesis

supposed himself to be conferring upon his eldest son, but at the same time forced the hand of God, who had not designed that such wrongdoing should be rewarded?

There seems in this case to be no escape from the dilemma: either God intentionally and designedly blessed and rewarded iniquity, or else the craft of Jacob snatched from the Creator a position and a blessing which were never intended for him. Thus in this Bible narrative God is depicted inferentially as either the rewarder of evil, or as impotent to prevent the successful machinations of evil.

And once more we have to ask ourselves: can such a representation of the Deity be accepted as a Divine revelation of what God is like and how He acts?

Does God bless and reward the wrongdoer, or is He liable to become the impotent tool of the crafty and unscrupulous?

When we proceed next to consider the career of Joseph, with the account of whose death the book of Genesis closes, we seem at first to find ourselves in an atmosphere of a much higher standard of ethical purity

Thoughts of a Free-Thinker

than that which we have just escaped from in the history of his father.

The innocent young man who was hated and sold by his brethren, and who resisted the temptations of his master's wife, is in a dramatic manner delivered out of prison and exalted and rewarded. This is just as it should be on the supposition that God, who is good, encourages goodness and punishes iniquity.

But before the end of the story is arrived at, a circumstance occurs which exhibits the procedure and providence of God in a very different and extraordinary light.

Joseph, divinely inspired, interprets correctly Pharaoh's dream. He is raised to the highest office under his new master, and virtually governs the kingdom in his name. And what does he proceed to do? He takes from the cultivators of the soil the whole of the great surplus of corn during the seven years of plenty, and then, on the occurrence of the seven years of famine, he takes advantage of the cruel necessities of these very people to get from them the whole of their property,

On God as Depicted in Genesis

the total acreage of the realm, in exchange for that very necessary of life which he had already taken from them.

Now suppose such a story were related of anyone in any country in these days.

Say that in India the Viceroy should during good years compel the cultivator to bring into the national granary all surplus food-stuffs, and should then, on occurrence of famine, proceed to strip each owner of his little patch of land in exchange for that very grain which had been before exacted from him, what should we say of such a transaction? Would it not be denounced as the most tyrannical and cynically immoral plan of spoliation and confiscation ever devised?

And yet we are required to believe, on the authority of the writer of Genesis, that this was done in the land of Egypt by a man specially raised up and miraculously enabled to put the plan into execution. And in the whole account there is not a word of protest, or any recognition whatsoever that the land so obtained for Pharaoh was wickedly or inequitably obtained. Joseph, after a long

Thoughts of a Free-Thinker

life, distinguished by every mark of royal and Divine favour, dies in the odour of sanctity, and is mourned as a great and worthy ruler by the very people he had wronged and robbed.

As I have said, change but the date, and relate this very story as an occurrence in modern times, and the nefarious deed and the perpetrator thereof, the man who had taken advantage of a people's dire necessity to rob them of their land, would be universally execrated.

But the story is in Genesis, and we are all therefore required to believe that Divine inspiration has recorded with tacit approval as a beneficent act what every feeling of justice, equity, and pity for the starving would lead us energetically and heartily to condemn.

And on further consideration it will be plainly perceived that in this last instance, as in the others, the whole difficulty is due to, and arises from, the supposititious Divine origin of the record.

Put aside the theory of a Divine revelation, judge this scripture as we should judge any other ancient writing, and it will clearly

On God as Depicted in Genesis

appear that at the remote period of its composition, not only were the facts of modern science absolutely unknown to the writer and undreamed of by him, but that his ethical standard was so widely different from ours that he could unhesitatingly ascribe both to God and man, actions which would fill us with horror and disgust.

And if we should inquire further how it came to pass that the logical inference which is to be drawn from his narrative failed to be visible to the writer, we should have to ascribe it to the uncritical spirit and child-like faith natural to an early and primitive condition of society.

To the child, most stories are wonderful and none incredible ; and it seems never to occur to the immature intellect to reason : if this were as is stated, what follows ?

And, on the other hand, the imputation of a Divine origin has hitherto served to shield the writings of Biblical authors from that critical examination which would have been, as a matter of course, accorded to any and every uninspired writer.

CHAPTER VIII

THOUGHTS ON JOSHUA'S ARREST OF THE SUN

A FURTHER revelation of God is afforded us by a certain most extraordinary and notable miracle, namely, the arrest of the motion of the sun in the heavens for the space of a whole day.

The first thing that must strike us in this record of a unique transaction as set forth in Holy Scripture is the absolute ignorance of astronomical facts which is involved in it.

Doubtless the arrest of the sun and the moon is supposed to be strictly miraculous. At the same time it is evident that in the view of the writer of the Biblical account, the greater light that ruled the day and the lesser light that ruled the night followed each other consecutively, each in its allotted path across the

On Joshua's Arrest of the Sun

firmament, and that to arrest their progress for a time would simply prolong day and defer the night.

To those who are aware that the sun does not move round the earth but that the earth moves round the sun, and that the earth at the same time revolves rapidly round its own axis, the miracle becomes indeed a most stupendous and complex one. To arrest the rotation of the earth on its axis would bring inevitable destruction to all things on its surface, unless simultaneously miraculous interference and control were exerted over the normal properties of water and the atmosphere. Nor is that all; for the stoppage of any one of the heavenly bodies in its path must affect and tend to alter the course of every other moving sphere within the circuit of its own system, and, probably to a less extent, in other and more remote systems.

These considerations, tending to show the almost infinite magnitude and complexity of this miraculous interference with the normal conditions of the universe, are adduced, not as showing the improbability of the miracle, be-

Thoughts of a Free-Thinker

cause that is a question that does not at present concern us.

It is necessary to note the immense scope and range of the miracle, since that question of magnitude has a very direct and very important bearing on the motive of the Almighty in undertaking it, and the amazing and important object to be attained by it.

Assuming, therefore, that the miracle took place, why did it take place?

What was the object of this grand miracle, which, properly understood, involves a number of miracles, each stupendous and almost inconceivable?

The object, according to the statement of the writer, was to furnish a certain tribe, then engaged in slaughtering its enemies, a few more hours of daylight in which to make an end of the foe, and, as far as was possible, utterly to exterminate them.

Truly the disproportion between means and ends seems very remarkable. There appears to us to be so many ways of accomplishing the destruction of a few hundreds of human beings which would avoid the necessity of this colossal

On Joshua's Arrest of the Sun

disturbance of the general operations of nature, that it is difficult indeed to accept such a narrative seriously.

To assert that someone had constructed a hundred ton steam hammer to crush a fly, would, although utterly absurd, be a less glaring disproportion of the adaptation of force to be employed to result to be accomplished than is involved in this account of Joshua's arrest of the sun.

CHAPTER IX

THOUGHTS ON GOD AS HE IS REPRESENTED TO US IN THE BOOK OF JOB

It is evident that the author, whoever he may have been, of this ancient poem was in that state of mental development in which God is chiefly recognised in the wildest and most terrifying aspects of nature—the lightning, the storm, and the whirlwind.

“Hearken ye unto the noise of his voice,
And the sound that goeth out of his mouth.
He sendeth it forth unto the whole heaven
And his lightning unto the ends of the earth.
After it a voice roareth ;
He thundereth with the voice of his majesty ;
And he stayeth them not when his voice is heard.
God thundereth marvellously with his voice ;
Great things doeth he, which we cannot comprehend.”

But while we note in passing this archaic

On God as Depicted in Job

conception of God as a mighty, mysterious, and awful being, what we wish chiefly to refer to here is the representation we have of Him arrayed in all the majesty of storm and whirlwind, catechising Job regarding all those natural phenomena which to the ancients were so incomprehensible and so perplexing.

Whereupon the foundations of the earth were fastened? How the waters of the sea were controlled that they should rise from low to high water mark, and there be stayed? Where is the way to the dwelling of night, and as for darkness, where is the place thereof? Hath the rain a father? Or who hath begotten the drops of dew? Out of whose womb came the ice?

Such were some of the then unanswerable questions propounded to Job out of the whirlwind.

It is a revelation, surely, rather of the ignorance of man as he was, than of the wisdom of God at any time. Most of these difficulties have been overcome by human diligence and inquiry; and the then inscrutable questions are now very easily to be answered.

Thoughts of a Free-Thinker

But that is not the point to which our attention needs to be directed. What we have chiefly to consider is this picture of God arraying Himself in all the terrors of His Majesty, and engaged in confounding and crushing man with His interrogations and with His irony.

Is that a picture of the Creator of the universe which we can accept as obviously true and inspired by Himself? Is it not rather a picture of the Divine mind and conduct which in all essential features is outrageously impossible?

Imagine a great astronomer, or any eminent man of science of mature powers and great attainments, confronted with a child of tender years, vaunting his own powers and overwhelming the infant with questions which to the babe must necessarily appear unanswerable.

If we can imagine such an encounter possible, should we not say that the man demonstrated rather his own almost inconceivable littleness and meanness of spirit than the weakness and ignorance of his puny opponent, which needed no demonstration?

On God as Depicted in Job

And yet it is in the guise of the strong domineering over and terrifying the weak which is presented to us as a revelation of the Deity in this ancient poem.

Far from leaving on the mind the impression of superhuman and divinely revealed perfection, this picture of God seems to me to be so crude and so unworthy, that only its antiquity and the ignorance and want of critical skill then prevailing could possibly excuse it.

If the Creator of the universe were capable of such conduct, unhappy indeed would be the fate of man.

But once more our consolation is in the thought that the Creator of man must needs be incapable of conduct of which many large-hearted and large-minded men would assuredly be ashamed.

CHAPTER X

THOUGHTS ON THE ACCOUNT GIVEN OF GOD BY
THE BIBLE, AND OF THE CLAIM MADE FOR
IT THAT IT WAS DIVINELY REVEALED

IN considering the question of the origin and authority of the Bible—indeed, when considering any question relating to the Bible—we must constantly bear in mind what the Bible is. We must remember that it is not a book; the very word in the original is a plural. It is a collection of scriptures or writings of, for the most part, unknown authorship, the composition of which extended over many centuries.

In other words, it represents almost the whole mass of Hebrew literature. It begins, like many other literatures, with a cosmogony altogether fanciful and completely exploded

On God as revealed in the Bible

by the facts as ascertained by modern research. It goes on to give ancient myths belonging to the prehistoric period very similar to and not less grotesque and improbable than the myths of other ancient races. Afterwards we have books of historic narrative, in which, as in all other ancient historic narrative, a certain proportion of fable is embedded in the relation of events which actually happened, and the description of persons who really existed.

And besides these historical books, we have in the Bible other books containing a record more or less authentic of the utterances of the prophets, an order of men who were regarded as inspired teachers, and who did not necessarily belong to the priestly caste.

Now to anyone whose eyes are not dazzled by the effulgence of an assumed Divine revelation, this great mass of manuscripts will reveal, as might be anticipated, many conflicting theories, and many divergent and irreconcilable statements, as to the nature and operations of the Deity.

It is obviously impossible, and, fortunately,

Thoughts of a Free-Thinker

it is wholly unnecessary, that we should undertake a minute examination of all the innumerable details of these voluminous scriptures. If they really are, as some suppose, divinely revealed truth, then no doubt they will contain no misstatements, no contradictions, and nothing but what every man may readily and unhesitatingly receive.

At anyrate we may confidently expect to discover in them such a harmony and clearness in the main outlines of the story as must carry conviction to every unprejudiced mind.

Now, the first thing we should eagerly seek for in the inspired records will be an account of God; and, secondly, a statement of His relation and dealings with the human race.

And when, with these objects in view, we search the Scriptures, the first thing that strikes us is that the God of the Hebrews, as here depicted, is, like all other ancient deities, a strictly tribal God. He is the God of Israel; Israel is His peculiar people; and it is obvious that one of the chosen race would have been as amazed and horrified

On God as revealed in the Bible

at the suggestion that Jehovah concerned Himself about or felt any tenderness for other peoples, say the Egyptian or Babylonian, as the Egyptian or Babylonian would have been amazed and horrified by the suggestion that Bel or Ammon felt any concern or any inclination to help the Jews or any other alien race.

So strong was this conviction that Jehovah both could and would go to any, even the most extravagant lengths, in protecting and aiding His own people, that we find in the Scriptures an account of how on one occasion their Deity performed the most astounding and far-reaching of all conceivable miracles: altered the whole course of the procession of nature, stayed the regular movements of the heavenly spheres, a proceeding the far-reaching and disastrous consequences of which only an astronomer can fully appreciate. And for what purpose? In order that His chosen people might go on slaying its enemies until they were utterly crushed and exterminated.

It may be urged that this view of God as a national God was altogether modified after-

Thoughts of a Free-Thinker

wards by other prophetic utterances. No doubt. But what does that prove? Does it not prove to any unbiassed intelligence that in these Hebrew Scriptures differing and indeed contradictory pictures of God and His dealings with His creatures are to be found; and that in the case of the Jews as in the case of other races, as the centuries passed, different generations held different opinions as to the nature of God and as to His dealings with the human race?

In the history of every people it is easy to trace how the vicissitudes they pass through, the trials they undergo, and especially their contact with other peoples and other forms of religion, tend inevitably to modify and alter their own original opinions or form of faith.

And assuredly the history of the Jews and their religion forms no exception to the general rule. To say that their original faith was Divine and perfect, and therefore that they were uninfluenced and unaltered by their contact with the doctrines and speculations of the Babylonian, the Assyrian, or the Egyptian systems, would be to ignore

On God as revealed in the Bible

the plainest evidences, and some of the most striking passages in the Hebrew Scriptures.

But if we are constrained to admit that the religion of the Hebrews was acted on and modified by the religions, the spiritual and the eschatological doctrines of other peoples, what becomes of that firm basis of unique and Divine revelation which has been commonly ascribed to it?

CHAPTER XI

THOUGHTS ON THE DIFFICULTY OF ASCERTAINING THE TRUTH CONCERNING GOD AND HIS WORK

ONE of the most striking peculiarities of ancient races was their truly childlike credulity. The critical faculty was not yet born. Every statement, every pronouncement of their teachers was received with reverence. Their attitude, whether toward their earthly or their heavenly ruler, was very naturally identical. It was one of dumb, unquestioning, slavish submission. The orders of the king must be obeyed. It was not for them to question the justice or the equity of his orders. However unjust, however atrociously cruel, they must be carried out without flinching and submitted to with patience and resignation.

On the difficulty of ascertaining Truth

And if this attitude of passive obedience and non-resistance was the only befitting attitude towards the earthly ruler, how much more certainly must it be the only befitting attitude when the conduct and decrees of the heavenly King were in question ?

In modern times, and since the birth of that science which is born of doubt and inquiry, the human mind has dared in some countries to deny that venerable axiom of ancient statecraft, that the king's wish and will is everything, and the people's nothing in the balance. The doctrine of passive obedience and non-resistance to the Lord's Anointed has been tried and found wanting, and is now exploded and repudiated by free peoples ; but the slavish doctrine still holds extended and unchallenged sway in the domain of theology.

And be it observed that in the case of the Divine Ruler there is by no means the same certainty of what His wish or will may be as exists in the case of the earthly ruler.

No man hath seen God at any time ; and if there are many who, in divers places and at divers epochs in the history of the world, have

Thoughts of a Free-Thinker

undertaken to define and set forth the Divine attributes and intentions, these voices are not in unison but widely divergent.

If we accept the free man, the man of intelligence, in whom the reasoning faculty is developed and in constant practical operation, as the highest type of humanity, we cannot surely forbid him to exercise, in the highest province open to human intelligence, the same endeavour to examine all things and accept only that that is approved by his reason, which we know that he habitually exercises in other and less lofty provinces of research. And where it is a question of the will of God, it behoves us to bear in mind that, when we are told this or that is the will of God, we hear, not the utterance of the Divine will, but the assertion of some fellow human being.

If we postulate that there is a God and that He is almighty, then clearly there can be no question of acceptance or rejection. For who shall resist the Almighty? But if it be a question of accepting or rejecting a human assertion that such is His will, that is a very different matter.

On the difficulty of ascertaining Truth

It would be useless, because impossible, to resist the will of God, but it is oftentimes not only possible but wise to resist and reject the assertions of men concerning Him and His work.

If we look through the history of religion we shall perceive that the pictures presented to us of God, of what He is and what He does, are not conditioned by the actual being and doing of the Creator, but by the mental condition, the experience, the plane of thought and elevation of character of those who fashioned the picture.

The man whose imagination seeks to penetrate the veil of the unseen and discover the nature and objects of Him who has created and who controls all things, sees ever one and the same picture : a glorified edition of himself.

The reflection of an object, we must remember, depends not solely nor even chiefly on the body reflected, but principally on the nature and condition of the reflector. The imperfect mirror will exhibit to us an imperfect resemblance of that which it exhibits to our eyes. And the human mind has not only its imperfections but its limitations. It can give only an

Thoughts of a Free-Thinker

imperfect picture of those features of the subject which come within the narrow limits of its understanding. It can give no picture at all, not even an imperfect one, of those aspects of truth, beauty, or goodness which lie outside the bounds of its own consciousness.

The broad-minded, tolerant, and large-hearted man will see much that is invisible to the dull-witted, little-souled, bigoted pedant; yet the best will see but little, and will, so long as he relies only on his imagination, be woefully misled by his emotions.

Man has been endowed with the faculty of research and the reasoning faculty. By the exercise of those faculties he has attained to the knowledge of all that he knows; and not until he shakes off the shackles of tradition and authoritative assertion, and seeks to discover truth in this field as he has successfully done in others, will he attain to even partial and rudimentary knowledge of those hidden mysteries of life and God which religion guesses at.

Before all things, therefore, it is necessary, if we would set foot on the threshold of truth,

On the difficulty of ascertaining Truth

that we should gently but firmly put from us those guesses which the human imagination has formulated into religions.

We must use, not our imagination, but our reason. We must be guided, not by sentiment, but by observation. We must note with unprejudiced mind what actually occurs. We must not try to fit the actual to the hypothetical, but must deduce slowly, painfully, but exactly from ascertained facts the conclusions to be drawn logically and inevitably from them. Even in this way mistakes will be made, as mistakes have been made in every branch of human inquiry. Yet time, further knowledge, further reflection, will correct these inevitable mistakes; and gradually there will arise a firm structure, founded, not on surmise and hypothesis, but on actual observation, and advancing step by step by process of logical sequence.

And the method of prosecuting the task of ascertaining the truth will be not a new method, not an untried or doubtful method, but a method tried on many and important and extensive fields of research, and rewarded by many great and incontestable triumphs. Only

Thoughts of a Free-Thinker

when applied to the solution of the problems of religion will it be a new method.

While men tried to guess and theorise about the problems of astronomy, geology, or physiology, they learned nothing, and their so-called knowledge was but darkness; only when founded firmly on rigid deductions from carefully and accurately ascertained facts did they emerge into light.

In like manner we can only hope to acquire trustworthy knowledge of the Creator and His methods by diligently recording and studying the actual conditions of life, and attempting to carry the argument up from what is to what must be.

CHAPTER XII

THOUGHTS ON THE SCOPE DESIRABLE TO BE GIVEN TO THE PRESENT INQUIRY INTO THE ORIGIN AND AUTHORITY OF THE SCRIPTURES

In these few chapters we have been trying to determine the question whether the Bible is a Divine revelation of truth and fit to be termed the Word of God. Now the voluminous writings known to us as the Bible may be divided into two portions: the first portion being commonly known as the Old Testament, and the second portion as the New Testament.

Of these two divisions our thoughts have been so far directed only to parts of the first, that is of the Old Testament.

In this publication I do not propose to enter upon any consideration of that portion of the Scriptures known as the New Testament.

Thoughts of a Free-Thinker

There are several reasons inducing me to refrain from publishing any remarks on the New Testament at present.

In the first place, the whole of the Bible is held by Christians to be divinely revealed, and not the New Testament only. And, indeed, so intimate a connection is there between the Old and the New Testament that it would be difficult indeed to view the one part as revealed truth and not so to view the other.

If we reflect, for instance, on the relation of the plan of Redemption set forth in the second part of the Scriptures, with the account of the Fall of Man given in the first part, it must be evident that no decision bearing on the one can fail to influence and probably even determine our view of the other.

I therefore think it well to confine our attention in this work to portions of the Old Testament; because while our verdict on that portion will tend to be conclusive as to the whole, yet our judgment on the Old Testament will be less biassed than it must needs be when the New Testament is brought under review. Christianity is doubtless an

On the Scope of this Inquiry

outcome of Judaism, yet we, being Christians and not Jews, the mind will necessarily move more freely when we are weighing the statements of the Old Testament than it would when weighing the statements in the New Testament.

Another weighty reason for restricting our investigations at present to the Old Testament is, that when a problem has to be solved, the more closely we can concentrate our attention on those points only which are of vital importance the better. In attacking a fortified position it is not advisable to attack every part of the whole line ; there is almost always some critical and dominating position which, once seized, is decisive of the event, and renders an attack on the other works unnecessary.

In the case of the Bible, the dominant and decisive position is the theory of Divine revelation.

Is the book divinely revealed, or is it not divinely revealed? That is the question.

If it be decided in the affirmative, criticism is excluded, and reverent study and exposition only permitted.

