

ORIGIN OF SUPERSTITION

Archbishop Trench calls words, „the indestructible vesture of thought.”

The original thought may have become corrupt, obscured, or obsolete; but the word remains „indestructible,” and by it we may recover the thought. Superstition is such a word. It originally meant something standing over or above—something that remains or has taken the place of something else. It is, therefore, akin to supersede and superimposed. So the tree stands over or above the root of which it has grown; so other subsequent cities have stood over and buried out of sight the genuine Homeric Troy. But as the something to which the word refers is always false or delusive in distinction from the true, so, (we may say) does the fungus „stand over” the fallen and decayed tree in whose substance it is rooted. Nature and the world, like wheat and the corn field as well as religion, are full of such false parasitic outgrowths, bred from the decay of higher organisms which only exist in lower and degraded forms—superstition.

The word superstition, thus gives us an important thought, of which it is the „indestructible vesture.” Something previous, and in a purer and better form, was before superstition. What was it? A comparative history of the oldest religions, such as those of Egypt and Persia and India and China, surprises us with many likenesses to the Bible faith. Trench has beautifully illustrated this idea in his Hulsean lectures, „The Unconscious Prophecies of Heathendom,” under such headings as these: „The Vanquisher of Hades,” „The Son of God,” „The Perfect Sacrifice,” „The Redeemer From Sin,” etc. These things were in the oldest religions, anticipations of the true and obscured by myth and superstition; but how did they get there? The idea of a suffering God was not unfamiliar to the Eastern mythologies—one who, like the Egyptian Osiris, also descended into Hades and there judged the dead righteously. And in their worship these religions were all originally monotheistic. The inference is, of course, the one suggested by the word superstition. It is an independent peep into the Eastern world, far up under the dawn. Outside the Jewish nation and uninfluenced by it, before Abraham’s day, before the evolution of superstition, there was among the scattered nations a purer religion, and one received, apparently, from the same general reservoir of truth. Nor, if Moses was inspired to record for us the true history, need this surprise us. And Christ must in some way be got rid of, before skeptics can get rid of „Moses and the prophets.” According to the Mosaic chronology Abraham was fifty-eight years old when Noah died: he lived to be one hundred and

seventy-five, and even then died thirty-five years before Shem! Up to that time these two patriarchs of the flood were living somewhere among those Eastern nations. They are not mentioned, nor any of the nations except Egypt, because they no longer touched the onward historic stream. But, at the dispersion of Babel, some two hundred years before Abraham's birth, these two must have gone with some of the descendants, carrying with them, as they had already made known, the true religion, and something of the earlier civilization.

This fact of an earlier religion, however soon and widely it may have become corrupted, explains some things which the brevity of Scripture has left obscure. When Abraham, himself a monotheist from the Euphrates in the East, was in the vale of the Jordan in the far West, there came to him and blest him, Melchizedec, „Priest of the Most High God;” whilst not far off there was Abimelech and his people, with whom still dwelt „the fear of the Lord.” This in Canaan itself, and in the very neighborhood of Sodom! But from beyond that same distant Euphrates, 470 years later than Abraham's time, came Balaam to confront Moses and Israel; a man who worshipped the same God with Moses, and by the same name: „I cannot go beyond the word of Jehovah, my God;” the man who, when the king of Moab, in his terrible extremity, proposed to „sacrifice his first born,” uttered those sublime words, recorded only by Micah: „Jehovah hath showed thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God!” „Hath showed thee”—where, how, in what early record known to both Balaam and the king as the word of the „Lord?” Moreover, of this Balaam from the far Euphrates it is said, that he „knew the knowledge of the Most High”—the very word used for God by Abraham and Melchizedec in the valley of the Jordan. Except once in Deuteronomy, we do not meet it again till the history gets back to the Euphrates, to Daniel, to the Chaldeans, to Nebuchadnezzar the Assyrian, and to Cyrus the Persian. They all use it, as evidently the earliest and the descended term for the one God. It brought Cyrus, as belonging to a common monotheistic worship, into sympathy with the Jews. It is known to-day among the mountains of Thibet; and in the form of Shang-Ti, is the one missionaries in China have adopted to express the idea of God.

This word (in its different forms), Most High, the Highest, the Lord God of Heaven, is, indeed, itself pregnant with thought. It indicates a process of thought and a conviction in the earliest men as they looked up to heaven; a conviction of a One God who was above all in power and glory, and to be worshipped. It was a source of conviction independent of any other source of knowledge, as, for instance, Noah and Shem; and how strongly it impressed them is crystallized in the word they used and handed down to indicate God. David felt precisely the same when he exclaimed: „The heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament showeth his handiwork.” And this has an intimate bearing upon some present discussions about the heathen. Paul declared them „without excuse.” Why, upon what ground? Upon the ground that „the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made.” Their lapses

into idolatry and superstition, with the consequences, were purely willful—they „did not like to retain God in their knowledge.” Up the stream of universal history there was that knowledge, „clearly” to be derived, in all ages, from the same overspreading testimony, the heavens. The power of that testimony and its effect upon the earlier men, lives in many languages, in that „indestructible” word, the Most High God.—A. G. Vermilye.

REMARKS BY THE EDITOR

The above observations are valuable, considered in connection with Paul’s inspired account of how ignorance and superstition came to be so wide-spread throughout the world, as detailed in Romans 1:18 to 3:23. Deplorable and dense as the ignorance and superstition of the world is, it is well that all should see that it is not the fault of God, that it is not because God made men degraded and vile. It is necessary that this be fully recognized as an offset to the growing idea that God did a very imperfect work in the creation of man, and that present progress from darkness and superstition, to light and reason and civilization, is merely human development—evolution.

Be it noted, that the Scriptures everywhere give one harmonious account of the origin and cause of evil and ignorance in the world, and show that God is not guilty; they tell that „God hath made men *upright* but they have sought out many inventions” (Eccl. 7:29); and that it was when and because man was not desirous of retaining a knowledge of God in his heart that God gave them over to a reprobate mind. (Rom. 1:28.) Thus sin, which entered at Eden (Rom. 5:12), manifested its tendency to be continually downward, except as God introduced „the salt of the earth” (those exercised by his truth—led of his spirit) whose *influence* has been to keep the social mass from utter corruption. Thank God for the blessed assurances of his word, that though the world has been thus left largely to its own course, that both angels and men may see the real tendencies of sin, yet, that when this severe lesson has been well illustrated and deeply impressed, then He will through his anointed ones, Christ Jesus and his Bride the overcoming church, arrest the sway of ignorance, and sin, and superstition, and cause the knowledge of the Lord and his perfect plans to fill the earth. Thank God that his promised kingdom (the glorified church „a royal priesthood”—rulers and teachers) shall re-establish righteousness and give to the billions of earth (who, as inheritors of sin and weakness, have never known or been able to appreciate righteousness, purity, and their attendant joys), an opportunity to taste and see that the Lord is gracious and that wisdom’s righteous ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace.

When thus the right is known, and its results appreciated, all will be permitted to choose good or evil, right or wrong, righteousness or sin, obedience or disobedience to God; and according to their choice, they shall receive their final and lasting reward; according as it is written, „The wages of sin is death [extinction, the withdrawal of all life], but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus

Christ," to as many as truly accept of him as their Lord and Master.

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