

The Bible Student.

CONTINUING

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Two schools of theology have been for some years contending for the supremacy, variously styled, the Old and the New, the Traditional and the Modern, the Conservative and the Progressive. The contest is in some important respects different from any which the history of doctrine records. The student of ecclesiastical history is familiar with the doctrinal controversies which form the staple of its contents; he is struck with their sharply defined statements so precise and distinct, he is impressed with their narrow limitations, each emphasizing in most instances a single issue, and that issue defined with the microscopic clearness of a minute cameo. In this latest controversy there is nothing whatever of that distinctness which makes the old controversies so clear and simple, and which renders alignment *pro* or *con* as easy as the discrimination of day from night; on the contrary, there has been a vagueness and indefiniteness which has been at times oppressive, and which for a long period was as helpful to the advocates of the New as it was embarrassing to the defenders of the Old. The

programme of the former seemed for the most part to be a wholesale fault-finding with past and present doctrinal systems, lightened with large promises and vague prophecies of much improvement; its dominant note was discontent, and every dissatisfied soul by virtue of simple unrest felt drawn to a party whose voice was protest, whose mission was reform, and whose weapon was criticism. As the discontented and the dissatisfied are ever a great multitude, this new school speedily secured a large following; its discussions found ready readers, its periodicals enlisted at once strong support, and writers sprang up on every hand with objections to formulate and theories to advance. Every such writer, whatever his views, was enrolled as a member of the school, and his voice swelled the chorus of criticism, while his influence added to the prevalent unrest which it emphasized and illustrated. This feeling of unrest was aggravated and an impression of great strength enhanced by the fact that the new party found its recruits and representatives in all churches, and sometimes among men not marked by extreme reserve nor restrained by excessive

prophets who went before and apostles who came after Him. Do we accept them as inspired revealers in the name of God? Did they speak as moved by the Holy Ghost, and is their word the end of controversy for those who accept the Scriptures? But Jesus always claimed that the words he spoke were not His own but His that sent him, that his teaching was according to a commandment given him what he should say and what he should speak. Then no theory of Kenosis, and no inference drawn from this withholding from his human consciousness of one item of knowledge, should be allowed for a moment to discredit or impair his teaching authority. He was the only-begotten Son of God, and intimately acquainted with the Divine will and had the Spirit of God without measure, and was anointed above his fellows. Because Paul, referring to his wonderful vision when caught up into Paradise, said of himself "whether in the body or out of the body I cannot tell" (note the resemblance to Christ's word concerning the day and the hour, "no man knoweth * * * only the Father"), we do not therefore think to impugn the Apostle's statements on other subjects whereon he does tell us what he claims to know. If we call them inspired and authoritative unto whom the Word of God came (and the Scriptures cannot be broken), say we of Him whom the Father hath sanctified and sent into the world, Thou art liable to error and mistake?

THE IDEA OF GOD OF BIBLICAL ORIGIN.

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The idea of God is the grandest that man has. It is the idea of a being, who is real, not a mere thought; who is a spirit, with none of the peculiar properties or limitations of matter; who is one, with no partners, rivals, or companions, and who yet has a threefold nature; who is immanent in the universe, and yet apart from and independent of it; who is infinite in every natural and moral perfection; a Father and Saviour to man and the cause of all things. Man has the idea of such a being, whence did he get it? Two radical opinions exist:—That it is natural and that it is supernatural.

A. Of those who hold that the idea has originated in the mind

of man, and is, therefore, natural, I. The lowest view attributes it to *superstition*. This takes several forms, either singly or in combination. 1. Some trace it to *ancestor* worship. The grossest form of this is seen in the vegetable and animal totems, worshipped by the degraded races, and held by them to be the ancestors of the tribe. Cooper makes interesting use of this belief in his *Last of the Mohicans*.

The higher human form may have originated in more than one way. Where every ancestor is worshipped as a divinity, it probably results from attributing to parents creative and providential power, because they sustain corresponding relations to their children; bringing them into existence and caring for them afterwards. When only some noted ancestor is singled out as the object of worship, it may have been due to some such cause as this:—A remarkable man lives and impresses himself on his posterity. Like Moses, he is not seen to die, but merely disappears. His spirit seems to hover over his people. He appears in a dream, or as a shadow unexpectedly seen; or a form flitting through the forests is reported and is held to be his. He becomes a god from being a hero. Shamanism, practiced in the Ural-Altaic regions of Asia, seems to have ancestor-worship as one of its features. The Chinese, as is well known, carry their filial piety to the extreme of paying religious adoration to their parents. The Romans deified their emperors.

2. Lucretius says, "*Timor facit deos.*" Some of the atheistic evolutionists take up this idea, and contend that the belief in God is an outgrowth of superstitious fear or shame. This idea is not without some basis in truth. It may not account for the idea of a superior being; it surely will not for the true conception of God; but it does explain some of the features of the superstitious religions which have prevailed among men. Many of the ordinary gods of the race might have been born of human guilt or fear. Some of the lower religions, however, are without the idea of sin and guilt, and look upon the gods as the friends and companions of the worshippers.

3. The disposition to deify the *forces* and *objects* of nature and the higher *abstractions* of the mind has been alleged as the origin of the idea of God. That this disposition exists and has shown itself in many races is unquestionable. We have the degraded

African making a fetich of a stone or of the claw of a bird. We see our Aryan ancestors singing hymns to the sky, the lightning, the storm; the Persian kindling fires in honor of the sun; and the classic Greek deifying and worshipping valor, wisdom, love, wine, and beauty.

No one of these views satisfactorily accounts for the idea of God, for the manifest reason that no one gives it or has it. Totems are not God; nor are ancestors; nor the demons that haunt the soul of the victim of conscious guilt; nor the fetich, the sun, nor Apollo, nor Zeus. All of these theories explain the existence in man's mind of an infinitely lower and essentially different idea. The Being described in the opening paragraph is not known to any of these.

It is held, however, that these are not ideas which have produced the mature fruit of the perfect conception of God. To this, there are objections of principle and of fact. Of principle, how can the finite and the imperfect evolve the infinitely perfect? There cannot be in the fruit what was not potentially in the root, in the evolute what was not potentially in the involute. Of fact, because no case exists in which these lower ideas have ever developed into the highest and the true.

II. A second class of thinkers, chiefly philosophers, assert that the mind is able by its *reasoning* powers to construct for itself the idea of the true God. Plato makes Him the highest of the ideas, and seems to identify Him with the good. He is thus made one of the generic ideas, and distinguished from them not in kind but merely in degree. His followers made divinities of all the ideas, and make God, according to Plotinus, to be the One, transcending all being and all thought; or, according to Jamblichus, to be above the One and absolutely unqualified; or, finally, according to Eckhart, to be "nothing, which dwells in the nothing of nothing, which is before nothing." The Deity was too elevated and too pure to concern Himself with the affairs of this earth; therefore, creation was by a lower divinity, a demiurge, and the ideas became a hierarchy of inferior gods, to whom human affairs were committed.

The successors of these older philosophers in our day proclaim God to be the Infinite, the Absolute, the Unconditioned; a negative idea of whom can be had as the correlation of the finite, the

relative, and the conditioned, but whose true nature transcends all of man's power to know, and who is therefore beyond the reach of human concern.

With regard to this view, it is manifest that this metaphysical God, if He exists, is not the Being described at the introduction of this discussion; that He is too abstract for even philosophic thought to reach Him; and that, lifted above all care for man and all worship by man, He may be a God for a race superior to the dwellers upon this earth, but can never be the God whom man needs and for whom he seeks.

III. Probably the prevalent belief in orthodox Christian circles, at present, is that the idea of God is one of the native *intuitions* of the human mind, like space, time, cause, and right. Drs. Chas. Hodge, Dabney, Stearnes, and others so teach. These ideas are not asserted to be native in the sense that the mind is born with them, connate with the mind; but in the sense that the mind has such a capacity to conceive them that it need not look outside of itself for their origin. There are two criteria for these primary ideas and truths: In the first place, they are necessarily true and necessarily believed to be true; and in the second place, they are simple, incapable of being reduced by analysis to anything more elementary. Being, time, space, cause, unity, right, and beauty meet these conditions. For example, time necessarily exists and we cannot conceive of its non-existence; moreover it is elementary and cannot be resolved into simpler constituents.

1. The idea of God is *not simple*. The Neoplatonic conception of Him as pure, unqualified being is simple; but God, as He exists and as we conceive Him to be, is the most richly complex being in the universe, combining in Himself every conceivable excellence.

2. The idea of God is not only not simple, it is also *not necessary*. That the idea of God's existence is true; that is, God exists as a fact; but is not like mathematical facts a necessary truth, is shown, a. By the fact that some men of sound, mature minds are ignorant of God's existence. Every man knows of space, time, cause, but some men know nothing of God. This is true of two classes of persons: (1) Some degraded savages have been found utterly ignorant of a superior being, as shown not only by their own confession but also by their language being destitute of any

word to express such a being. (2) Persons deaf from infancy, are in the same state of ignorance, until enlightened by others. Indeed, we need not go to these extreme cases; we may rather put forth the challenge, that no human being can be found now living, outside of the influence of Bible instruction, who possesses the true idea of God.

b. Moreover, a necessary truth is one which compels the assent of every sane mind. Cases can be found of intelligent, candid men, who deny that God exists; they not only do not intuitively, necessarily believe in His existence, but positively refuse to receive the idea as a fact after it is given to them. Men may profess to disbelieve in the reality of time, or space, but their actions show that they do believe in them. The acts of the atheist do not prove that he believes in God's existence.

Our present inquiry is not as to the truth of God's existence, but as to the origin of the idea we have of Him. Surely the idea cannot be native to the mind, when millions are without it, and a few that have it positively reject it.

B. We have now tested all the natural theories as to the origin of the idea of God, and have found none of them satisfactory. It is not a superstition, nor an evolution; it is not the result of metaphysical reasoning; it is not a native intuition. We have the idea; we ask again, whence did it come?

I. Let us go back in the history of recorded human thought, and see where we first find it. It is in the writings of a historian, the author of the *Pentateuch*. We find the idea in this old Hebrew classic. The author of the *Pentateuch* had it; where did he get it? This is the information which it gives; it says that God manifested Himself to the fathers of our race. These *theophanies* were usually by means of a visible object, and always by means of uttered language. So God appeared to Adam, Eve, Cain, Abel, Noah, Abraham, Lot, Isaac, Jacob, and Moses. To them He made known His existence and partially revealed His character. Adam and Noah were the common fathers of the race. They knew God, and from them, in a more or less corrupted form, the knowledge has been transmitted by tradition from generation to generation until now.

It is not unreasonable but probable that God would thus show Himself to the beings He had made in His own image; at first to

commune with them in their primitive purity; and, after the fall, to preserve the knowledge and worship of Himself among men. We need not wonder at the grossly perverted forms in which we find the idea of God among men now. We need not be surprised that some of the most degraded races have lost it entirely. Paul writes, "Knowing God they glorified Him not as God * * * and changed the glory of the incorruptible God for the likeness of an image of corruptible man, and of birds, and fourfooted beasts, and creeping things."

II. The patriarchs got a partial idea of God from personal communion with Him. The manifestations were sufficient for their day and purpose. It pleased God, however, to reveal Himself more fully, and at the same time more permanently. This He did by means of the *written* page, the Word, the utterance of Himself, the Scriptures, in which "men spake from God, being moved by the Holy Ghost." In these writings of the Old and the New Testaments, we have the idea of God, presented in its rounded fulness and unerring accuracy. These are the first written records of the race which contain it.

III. God began the revelation of Himself to man by means of the imperfect disclosures of the theophanies; He made it more full and perfect in the Scriptures; He has completed it by the most wonderful of them all, the *incarnation* of Himself. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. * * * And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us (and we beheld His glory as of the only begotten from the Father) full of grace and truth." Jesus Christ is the final, full-orbed, living, loving revelation of God to man.

That incarnation of the Deity commends itself to man as reasonable is shown in the avatars of Hindoo mythology, and in the many instances found in the Greek and Roman myths. They differ from the Christian as the counterfeit from the genuine.

In a review of this brief discussion, it seems clear that the idea of God comes to man, not from within, but from without; it is not naturally conceived by man, but supernaturally revealed to him. Dr. Dabney objects to this view (*Theology*, p. 6,) on the ground, that if the mind of man cannot originate the idea, it cannot receive it when imparted. Surely this is not true. Many a mind of limited capacity thoroughly understands the principle of the steam engine, none of whom could have originated it. The

ordinary school boy sees clearly the propositions of Pythagoras and Euclid in geometry, and yet not one such mind could have discovered them.

Not a single instance can be found where the unaided mind of man has attained a true conception of God; The Greek philosophers, Anaxagoras, Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, are the nearest approach to it. It is undeniable that their writings contain many interesting and truthful statements as to the Deity; and it is manifest that they are feeling after God, if so be they may find Him.

It is clear, however, that their views were fatally defective in at least two particulars. They had no conception of the Trinity, nor of God as either the Creator or Saviour of men.

Moreover, we do not know how much of the truth they taught had been handed down to them from tradition of the patriarchal theophanies; or had been received from the teachings of Jews from the Old Testament Scriptures. Some of the old Jewish and Christian philosophers, followers of Plato and Aristotle, assert that their masters were indebted to Jewish sources for the truths they held as to the Deity.

Aristotle, as quoted by Cicero, says, "Suppose these men were to have come up to the surface of the earth, but to have gathered from an obscure legend that a Deity and divine powers exist." Plato traveled extensively, came into contact with many different races, and during his stay in Egypt was doubtless thrown with intelligent Jews.

Palestine bordered on the Mediterranean; from Solomon's time the Jews had friendly relations with Tyre, the commercial metropolis of the world, whose sailors visited every port; the Jewish people began to scatter from their native land as early as 700 B. C., three hundred years before the age of Socrates; under these conditions, it is practically certain that Jews had gone first to Corinth and then to Athens, and that the Greek sages had full opportunity to learn their ideas of the Deity.

We believe that no writing of any prophet or priest, philosopher or sage, can be found in ancient or modern times, penned outside of the knowledge or influence of the Bible, which will give a complete and accurate statement of the idea of God. This fact ought to settle the question. We owe the idea of God to His primitive revelation of Himself to the fathers, to His presentation of it in the Bible, and to its personification in Christ.