

The Bible Student.

CONTINUING

The Bible Student and Religious Outlook.

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Historicity of The Scriptures. The matter of the trustworthiness of the Scripture narrative as a historical record has been most prominently and practically brought to the front in the Presbyterian Church very recently by three cases of application for licensure in widely separated sections, two in Eastern Presbyteries and one in the middle West.

THE BIBLE STUDENT has had something to say not long since about views promulgated in very popular and influential journals not under Presbyterian auspices; on this occasion our text is furnished by a paper standing high in Presbyterian circles and one which in times past has wrought valiantly for the conservative faith of orthodox Presbyterianism. In its early history it stood in the fore-front and was a champion indeed, bright, alert, acute, able and sound; within the last few years it has altogether shifted its ground, and while at times it seems unsettled and uncertain in its deliverances, it is very rapidly becoming radical, dragging its old anchors most fearfully, and it promises soon to be absolutely adrift. To those who were familiar with its position twenty-five years

ago, its present attitude presents a strange and sad contrast.

A Case in Point. We give herewith an account of one of the cases which furnished occasion to this journal for its declaration of principles.

The journal's own version of the matter is as follows:

On being asked, "What would you tell an inquirer with reference to the first chapters of Genesis," he answered: "I would tell him that the tendency of modern scholarship is to regard the account as legendary." It is to be noticed that he did not undertake to state his own view on the subject, but what he thought was the trend of scholarship. To the question how he would reconcile the view that Jonah was not historical with the authority of Christ, he replied: "Jesus was ignorant of the facts." And to justify himself he appealed to Bible language in Philipians ii. 7,—“But emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being made in the likeness of men,”—and Mark xiii. 32,—“But of that day and that hour knoweth no one, not even the angels which are in heaven, neither the Son, but the Father.” He evidently holds to an extreme form of the kenotic view of the person of Christ. On the subject of future probation, he would not assert that this doctrine was not taught in the New Testament.

THE SOCIOLOGY OF JOSEPH'S DAY.

ETHICAL.

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Of theoretical ethics we fail to find the expression of a single principle, true or false, complete or partial, in the Genesis life of Joseph. The abstract ethical terms, duty, obligation, ought, right, wrong, punishment, and penalty, are nowhere found in the narrative. There is no annunciation of that universally accepted principle of social ethics, the golden rule. We do not marvel at these omissions, for while it is interesting to note the fact, the fact merely means that there is no occasion in the story to deal in abstractions; everything here is concrete.

We are limited, of course, to social ethics, the duties of man to his fellowman, and seek to note every fact of importance coming under this category. That the *moral obligation* of men to each other is *recognized* is shown, not so much by special statements, as by the fact that it underlies, as it were, the whole history. Laban shows that he felt it, when he voluntarily recognized his duty to requite Jacob's services with wages (Gen. xxix. 15; xxx. 28), and Jacob, when he complained that Laban had not dealt fairly with him (xxix. 25; xxxi. 41). The same fact is shown in the sacredness manifestly attached to covenants (xxx. 44-54). It is the basis of Reuben's vain effort to save Joseph from the jealous anger of his brothers (xxxvii. 21, 22); and of Judah's pathetic appeal to Joseph for Benjamin (xliv. 18-34). In these instances we see that the claims both of justice and mercy were acknowledged.

That we may form a correct estimate of the *general state* of Joseph's moral environment, so far as our record will allow, we shall direct attention to specific acts. Men usually do right in their outward dealings with each other, probably in every stage of civilization, even the lowest. This may not be due to the highest motives; indeed, it is not; and yet as an actual fact instances of wrong-doing, so far as the external act goes, are exceptional. We form our judgment of men's character from their deeds which rise above or fall below the general moral level. Moreover, every community has its grades of moral representatives, the lowest, the middle, the highest; and in making our estimate we must con-

sider to which of these moral classes the actors belong. In this history of Joseph, it would seem that we are brought face to face with the doings of probably the best men and women of that day.

Are there any acts recorded which rise *above the level* of moral mediocrity? Is this true of *Joseph's treatment* of his *brethren*, after they had threatened his life and sold him into slavery? He had the power to execute upon them summary and well-merited punishment; he could have hung them, as Pharaoh did the baker. He forebore to do this; he did not even execute the ringleader, who was probably Simeon, nor his active associates, the sons of Zilpah and Bilhah, and possibly Levi. For this self-restraint he deserves credit. That this was more gracious than most men would have been may be true; that it amounts to moral heroism can hardly be asserted. He had given his brothers provocation in reporting their misconduct (xxxvii. 2), and in the exhibition of a feeling of superiority which had called forth his indulgent father's rebuke (xxxvii. 10). Moreover, he had spoken roughly to his brothers on their first appearance before him in Egypt, and had unjustly accused them of being spies (xlii. 7, 9, 12, 14). He put them all bound in fetters into prison for three days, and kept Simeon there until they had gone back to Canaan and returned. Added to all this, they were his brothers, the sons of his loving father.

Joseph's control of himself in his relations to the *wife of Potiphar* is the most interesting and noticeable moral event recorded in his relations to his fellowmen. It has made his name a synonym for continence, or rather, chastity; as is well known in our English literature. That his self-restraint was rare under such a temptation and that it deserves to be regarded as morally sublime is a well founded general judgment. The cynical critic, however, might suggest that other and lower motives than those of chastity might have influenced and determined him; that fear of summary punishment from the jealous and infuriated husband, who was his master, might have been the deterrent cause; that, moreover, the temptation would not have been so serious to him, if we may suppose that, like Potiphar, himself being a domestic slave, he was really a eunuch, as Jewish tradition declares him to have been. Such suggestions are forbidden by that charity which thinketh no evil, and which binds us to believe that he was controlled by the three motives which he avowed to the tempter: re-

spect for his master's rights, a conscientious conviction that it was great wickedness, and a pious belief that it was a sin against God (xxxix. 9). Moreover, his subsequent fatherhood might seem to disprove the suggestion that he was a eunuch; and yet it is said that those made eunuchs after developed puberty were not wholly impotent.

There are other deeds in the history which rise above the level. If it be true that Joseph's coat of many colors was, like the similar dress of David's daughter Tamar (2 Sam. xiii. 18), an official dress, worn as the heir to the patriarchal authority and as possessing the birthright of the firstborn, then we would look for envious jealousy in Reuben, who had been thus dispossessed of his natural prerogative in favor of a younger brother, who was eleventh instead of first in the line of succession. We are indeed expressly told (1 Chron. v. 1), that the birthright was transferred from Reuben to Joseph; and the same fact is intimated in the patriarchal blessings or prophecies pronounced by Jacob upon his sons (xlix. 3, 4, 26). We look in vain for any indication on the part of Reuben of rebellion against this act of parental authority, or even of jealous irritation against Joseph, its beneficiary. Most of the other brothers show their resentment at the elevation of Joseph, and carry it to the extreme of proposing to kill him (xxxvii. 18). But Reuben, who had best reason to be offended, dissuaded them from executing their murderous intent (xxxvii. 21, 22), and rent his clothes with grief, when he learned that during his absence the others had sold Joseph into slavery (xxxvii. 29). This is surely magnanimous. A similar generous spirit is shown by Reuben in offering his two sons to Jacob as a pledge for the safety of Benjamin (xlii. 37). We thus see, what every day's observation confirms, that high virtues and low vices may show themselves in the same character.

Judah's case should not pass unnoticed. Allusion has already been made to his effectively touching plea to Joseph on behalf of Benjamin. He first proposes to share Benjamin's fate, as the supposed thief who had stolen Joseph's cup (xliv. 16). When Joseph refuses to punish the innocent with the guilty, he then pleads for the guilty Benjamin in the interest of his aged father (xliv. 29-34), and again proposes to be Benjamin's substitute (xliv. 33). This is a notable instance of brotherly love and filial piety, as well as of fidelity to a trust (xliii. 9).

These are all the instances of more than usual virtue brought to light in our narrative; and they unquestionably show that the best men in that day were capable of acts of high moral grandeur. Possibly we should refer also to Potiphar's self-restraint in the comparatively mild punishment, which he visited upon Joseph for his supposed misconduct with the wife of his master; and to Pharaoh's generous treatment of Joseph and Jacob's family, upon the interpretation of his dreams and wise administration of his affairs by Joseph; but these acts, while commendable, are not extraordinary, morally considered.

The instances of *low moral* conduct are more numerous and equally as decided. Let us look at the *women*, whose character and action are usually a fair test of the community to which they belong. Remembering that the women mentioned are presumably amongst the best of their environment, it is significant that none of the details given with regard to any one of them is specially creditable; but, on the contrary, that every special fact mentioned showing moral character is discreditable. There is some unfavorable statement made about every woman, that is noticed at all beyond the mere giving of her name; except Asenath, the wife of Joseph, and no moral act of hers is recorded, good or bad. Leah and Rachel are presented to us as sensual, dominated by their appetites, and jealous of each other (xxx. 1, 14-16). Rachel is guilty of theft, idolatry, and deception (xxxi. 34, 35). There is no intimation in the narrative that Dinah resented the indignity done her by Shechem; she was about fifteen years old at that time, according to the usual chronology (xxxiv. 2, 3). Bilhah had incestuous connection with Reuben (xxxv. 22). Tamar was voluntarily guilty of adultery and incest with her father-in-law (xxxviii. 13-18). Potiphar's wife persistently tried to corrupt Joseph, and then falsely accused him (xxxix. 7-18). These are all the women named, except Zilpah, Shuah, Esau's three wives, Timna, Mehetabel, and Serah; of whom nothing involving morality is recorded, unless the fact that Zilpah and Timna being concubines can be so regarded. It is a dark picture of the women of that day.

Of most of the *men* nothing noticeably moral is mentioned; but of the more prominent there are facts narrated which present their character unfavorably. We shall begin with *Jacob*, next to Joseph the hero of the story. Without going back in the narra-

tive to refer to his defrauding Esau of the birthright and blessing, and his repeated falsehoods to Isaac, we notice his dealings with Laban as characterized by trickery, at least questionable, if not positively dishonest (xxx. 37-42). It seems a hypocritical aggravation of this course that he should ascribe it, as he does, to the providence of God (xxxi. 9, 42). Moreover, he dares to say to his wives, "Ye know that with all my might I have served your father" (xxxi. 6); although he knew that he had virtually robbed Laban, of which his cowardly flight seems to be a confession (xxxi. 20, 26, 27).

Joseph, our hero, was without question a remarkable man from every point of view, physical, intellectual, moral, spiritual. It is specially interesting, therefore, to see whether any of his recorded acts are morally doubtful, if not positively reprehensible. His reporting the evil conduct of his brothers to his father (xxxvii. 2), was proper perhaps in any event; and was a duty, if, as some think, he was placed with them by his father as an overseer by virtue of the birthright, which, forfeited by Reuben the first-born of Leah, had been conferred on him as the first-born of Rachel, whom Jacob seems to have regarded as his true wife (xliv. 27); Joseph was then seventeen years old. It seems manifest from the narrative that his father's preference of him had given him a feeling of self-importance, which led to an arrogant bearing towards his brothers (xxxvii. 5-10), and which called forth his father's rebuke (xxxvii. 10). His treatment of his brothers, so far as the rough talk and imprisonment are concerned (xlii. 7, 17), may be considered the expression of a just indignation. There are, however, features of this treatment that are not justifiable; his imprisonment of the innocent Reuben (xxxvii. 21, 22, 29, 30), along with the guilty, his knowingly untrue accusation of them as spies (xlii. 9, 12, 14, 16), and his deceptive stratagem to retain Benjamin (xliv. 1-17). Reference may be made in this connection to his superstitious use of the cup for divination (xliv. 5, 15); which however is a religious rather than a social failing. His neglect to communicate with his old and loving father for a period of more than twenty years is one of the strangest facts in his history. On the assumption that writing was not known to him, opportunities of intercourse by means of the trading caravans existed. Moreover, after his exaltation to princely power, there was no reason why he might not have sent a special messenger to

his father. That he may have been indifferent seems probably true from his strong affection for Benjamin and earnest effort to secure and retain him, compared with the absence of any message to his father or attempt to bring Jacob to Egypt along with Benjamin (xlii. 15-20; xliv. 1-17). It must be remembered, however, that he did inquire tenderly concerning his father of his brothers (xliii. 27); and, on the other hand, it is a somewhat suspicious circumstance, that Jacob apparently distrusted Joseph's mere word of promise, and required him to swear (xlvii. 30, 31), that he would do as he had said. As there were palliating circumstances connected with all these questionable acts, they do not seriously lessen our admiration of Joseph's moral character. Every doubtful deed of his has been mentioned, so far as we have information, if we may except his reduction of the Egyptians to serfdom under Pharaoh (xlvii. 23).

Laban was a crafty fox, and flint struck flint when he and Jacob came into business contact with each other. The golden rule controlled neither, but it was a struggle to overreach the one the other, in which Jacob carried off the prize. We probably cannot rely fully on the truth of Jacob's charge that Laban had changed his wages ten times (xxxi. 41); and yet it is doubtless true, as Jacob asserted, that Laban was a hard and exacting master (xxxi. 39). His moral character is further discolored by the fact that he was an idolater (xxxi. 19).

Esau's resentment towards Jacob was natural and justifiable (xxxii. 6); and, had Jacob on his return from Padan Aram met him with defiance, we could not condemn him if he had visited exemplary punishment upon the man who had defrauded him of his rights. He showed a commendable, magnanimous spirit when he met Jacob with the affection of a brother (xxxiii. 4).

The indignation of *Simeon* and *Levi* at the treatment of their sister is to their credit (xxxiv. 31). The manner in which they expressed their resentment was in the highest degree reprehensible; it combined deceit that smacks of sacrilege (xxxiv. 13-17); wholesale murder of the defenceless (xxxiv. 25, 26); reducing of the innocent women and children to slavery (xxxiv. 29); and the robbing of those thus wronged of all their property (xxxiv. 27-29). It was the vengeance of barbarians, and was severely and justly rebuked by Jacob, not however on the highest ground (xxxiv. 30; xlix. 5-7).

Not to more than mention the idolatry that existed in Jacob's household (xxxv. 4), the incest of *Reuben* with the concubine of his father (xxxv. 22), was regarded by Jacob as of such gravity that he not only gave on his dying bed a caustic reprimand to this first-born son (xlix. 4), but also punished the offense by the forfeiture of the birthright (1 Chron. v. 1).

While it is true that Joseph had in a measure provoked the indignation of his *brothers*, nevertheless their proposal to kill him (xxxvii. 20), their selling him to strangers for foreign slavery (xxxvii. 28), and their deceitfully cruel hiding of their sin from Jacob are justly regarded as amongst the most shocking crimes in history. In this Simeon, Levi, and the sons of the concubines were certainly the leaders and possibly the sole participants. Judah's conduct was probably prompted by the desire to save Joseph from the lingering death by starvation and thirst in the waterless pit (xxxvii. 24), or from a more speedy murder by the other brothers (xxxvii. 26).

Judah's illicit connection with his daughter-in-law Tamar was on her part, both in act and purpose, the sin of incest; but was on his in the act only incest, and in purpose whoredom, a less serious offense (xxxviii. 16-18).

The crime of the chief baker for which he was doubtless justly hanged (xl. 22), and the ungrateful forgetting of Joseph by the chief butler (xl. 23), may be merely mentioned.

What impression does this recital of the acts of Joseph and his contemporaries make as to their moral status? Surely as to the women an unfavorable one; and as to the men that they had not passed beyond the semi-civilized stage. Is there a marked moral difference in the history between Joseph's family and those with whom they lived? With the exception of Joseph, whose moral pre-eminence is great, there does not seem to be. While Potiphar's wife doubtless showed greater vileness than is seen in any of the women of Jacob's household; on the other hand, the treatment of the Shechemites and of Joseph by Jacob's sons finds no parallel for moral obliquity in anything alleged to have been done by those not akin to Joseph. We must, however, as heretofore be cautious as to inferences, as we do not know what unrecorded crimes may have been committed. As is natural the narrative is much fuller with regard to acts of Joseph's family than as to their contemporaries.