

THE RELIGION OF PROTO-SEMITISM.

BY THE EDITOR.

SAMUEL IVES CURTISS of Chicago, Professor of Old Testament Theology at the Chicago Theological Seminary, has spent much time in Syria in studying the religious customs of the modern Semites with the intention of finding a key to the primitive religion of their prehistoric ancestors. The first summary of his studies appeared in a book, published in Chicago in 1902, under the title *Primitive Semitic Religion To-day*, but in the meantime its contents have been considerably increased, and in this improved form Prof. Curtiss's book has been translated by Pastor H. Stocks of Arnis, Schleswig, and lies now before us under the title *Ursemitische Religion im Volksleben des heutigen Orients*, published by Hinrichs, Leipzig, with a preface by Count Wilhelm Baudissin, Professor of Old Testament Theology at Berlin.

Count Baudissin, an authority in the same branch of work, does not agree with several details of his American colleague, yet he does not hesitate to recommend the book as a most important contribution to the study of primitive Semitic religion.

The title of Professor Curtiss's book is aptly chosen, for it suggests the plan of work pursued by the author, who believes that some religious practices of the Proto-Semites are preserved even to-day. Views alluded to in the Bible, ancient rituals, and other remnants of pre-Biblical beliefs which antedate the post-exilic monotheism, are still preserved in remote places of Syria. They agree neither with the orthodox Islam nor with Christianity, yet the people cling to them with tenacity, and it is important for our knowledge of the history of religion, to preserve an accurate account of them before they entirely disappear. Little* is left of

* On his first journey Professor Curtiss visited remote places, because there he expected the purest survival of Proto-Semitism. In the mean time he has learned that in the big cities, too, many ancient customs are still preserved. He writes:

these primitive conditions in the great cities, but the villages are to a great extent still pagan. From Professor Curtiss's descriptions we must infer that Christian, Mohammedan, and Jewish institutions are only an external polish and that the inhabitants of Syria in some obscure localities cherish in their hearts, still, the same views as their prehistoric ancestors. When they offer, *e. g.*, a *fedu*, a sacrifice of ransom by blood, the Mohammedans mumble Mohammedan prayers, Christians repeat the Lord's Prayer or the Christian creed, and Jews recite passages from the Old Testament, but the ceremony itself, and the details of the ritual and the expectations connected with it, are the same, and we have reasons to believe that they simply follow the traditional customs of the ancient Semites.

Prof. W. R. Smith has called attention to the importance of the religious life of the present Semites as a source of information concerning the primitive religion of the Semites, but he has not furnished us with the rich material that we have here collected in Professor Curtiss's work. The criticisms which Professor Baudissin has to offer are insignificant and in many respects it seems that the opinion of Professor Curtiss is quite tenable, or at least probable, in spite of his over-cautious German critic. Professor Baudissin describes the book as follows:

"The author has set himself the task to reconstruct, from the views prevalent in modern Syria and Palestine, the oldest religious institutions of the Semitic inhabitants of Canaan and its neighboring countries. He pursues the same course which for a series of problems in the history of the civilization of Arabia, the Nestor of Arabists, J. G. Wetzstein has chosen, who with methods that in their way are unexcelled and final, has after a long sojourn in the Orient learned not only to speak Arabic but also to feel Arabic and to reproduce the true meaning of the Arab. Professor Curtiss, with his remarkable American energy, has endeavored during several prolonged sojourns in remote parts of Syria, to understand, by the felicitous method of quizzing natives and missionaries, the religious customs and ideas of Syria which are not part of the religious systems now prevailing. For this purpose he has preferred to visit such parts which have been least affected by Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

"Undoubtedly he has chosen the right moment, for since we

"Since the publication of my book I have found that all of the old ideas survive in such a city as Beirut. The next investigation I have in mind is to visit at least Hama (Hamalti), Hums (Emesa), Damascus, and Jerusalem with reference to these survivals."

receive new information almost annually through reports of excavations upon Assyrian and Babylonian soil concerning the religion of the North Semitic peoples, we ought to be better posted on practices and religious conceptions, which have endured down to the present day, in order to compare them with the results of our discoveries. At the same time our author supplements the descriptions which Robertson Smith and Wellhausen have made from literary sources concerning the primitive religion of the ancient Semites as well as the Arabians."

The undertaking is fully justified, and Count Baudissin compares the conditions to the state of affairs in Grimm's *Fairy Tales*. In spite of their Christian dress, these ancient tales contain innumerable traits of German paganism. In the same way, the present conditions of Syria and Palestine betray the prevalence of the most ancient faith and customs, especially in those localities where the conquest of Christianity and Islam was only superficial. Under the surface soil of these superadded strata, we can discover institutions of a most primitive age, still unchanged, which are older even than the religion of the Old Testament. There is a belief in holy stones, in holy caves, in holy trees, in holy springs, and rivers, and even if these sacred objects bear Christian or Mohammedan names the ancient paganism becomes apparent in all the rituals connected with them.

Professor Baudissin expresses his doubt whether now and then what appears to be primitive may not be a degenerate form, and he objects especially to the idea that the victim that is sacrificed as a ransom should be considered a sacrifice of "vicarious atonement." He grants that the symbolic action of placing a razor at the throat of a murderer who wants to be freed from the evil consequences of his deed, suggests the idea that he has forfeited his life and that the sacrificial animal is offered as a ransom; also, the words "blood for blood," and other phrases suggest the idea of "vicarious atonement," but he claims that all the expressions and symbolic actions connected with sacrifices need not be explained in the sense of the Christian idea of a "vicarious atonement." While it cannot be denied that the ceremony admits the interpretation of a sacrifice offered merely as a gift for the purpose of gaining the favor of the deity, and while there is no absolute necessity of thinking of the *jus talionis*, we think that after all the difference between the two views is trivial and, even if we grant Professor Baudissin's contention, we cannot deny that the progress from the old Semitic rite to the Christian idea of "vicarious atonement" is but one step. If it

did not prevail among the primitive Semites, we must grant that its development was naturally suggested under the given conditions. At any rate, the idea of the primitive Semite that "without the shedding of blood there can be no salvation" survived in both Judaism (Lev. xvii:11) and in Christianity (Heb. ix:22).

Unfortunately for Professor Baudissin the theory of Professor Curtiss is fully borne out by cuniform documents of ancient Assyria. The idea of a vicarious atonement was perfectly familiar among the Proto-Semites. The sacrifice of animals is most unequivocally interpreted as a vicarious atonement in which an animal takes the place of man. The following quotations made by Professor Zimmern from the cuniform text will be sufficient: A priest, offering a sacrifice for some person who has engaged him for the purpose, says: "The lamb, a substitute for man, he gives for his life; the head of the lamb, he gives for the head of the man; the neck of the lamb, he gives for the neck of the man; the chest of the lamb, he gives for the chest of the man," etc.; and in another place: "A pig he gives in place for him (viz., the patient for whom the sacrifice is offered), the flesh of the pig instead of his flesh; the blood of the pig in place of his blood, he offers and may the gods accept it."

We need not add that all the details of Professor Curtiss's studies are extremely interesting and throw much light upon the Old Testament. In case of trouble the natives of Syria do not pray to God but seek the assistance of the Weli, the local Saint, or their ancestor, or the special genius of the locality whom they revere as their favorite tutelary deity, and these conditions extend even to the places where religion has been strongly modified by Islam and Christianity.

When for instance the Diab Arabians were frightened by a spread of the cholera in Tiberias, they built a Makam, a fane, to their ancestor Diab, and when it was finished every family sacrificed a white sheep and sprinkled with its blood the front wall of the Makam. They prayed their ancestor's forgiveness that they had not sacrificed enough and asked him to preserve them from the epidemic. Every head of a family slew a sheep and besmeared with the blood the foreheads of their sons. Even before the building of the Makam they used to sacrifice a sheep in the middle of the Spring for the benefit of their herds. Every shepherd offers one sacrifice and sprinkles with the blood his whole herd in the hope that the animals will be thereby protected. People sacrifice to their ancestors for the sake of the entire tribe and call their sacrifices "for the tents," a *fedu* (ransom), for "house and herd." Anyone who neg-

lects these sacrifices runs the risk of losing a member of his family or a part of his herd.

The Ruala Arabians, who pitch their tents near the Diab, have preserved also the sacrifice for the tents, but at the outbreak of a war they sacrifice to their ancestor Abo Ed-Duhur, and they believe that this will render them unconquerable. They sing:

" Abu Ed-Duhur unfailingly comes
To help those who don their garments of war.
Through his assistance their horses inspire awe."

It is commonly claimed (see e. g. Hughes's *Dictionary of Islam*, London, 1896, p. 554) that Mohammed was opposed to both Christianity and Judaism in not demanding bloody sacrifices, but this is an error. Sacrifices are limited to the month of pilgrimage but after all they are demanded, and Aisha makes the prophet say: "On the day of the sacrifice man can do nothing that is more pleasing to God than the shedding of blood (viz., of the victim). Verily the sacrificed animal shall come on the day of judgment with its horns, and fur, and hoofs, and will weighten the scales of the balances of good and evil deeds. Verily, God is pleased with its blood even before it falls to the ground. Therefore be zealous." (*Mish Kat el-Masabih*, Calcutta, 1809, I, p. 321).

In Nazareth, Professor Curtiss notices a great number of crosses and symbols inscribed in recognition of vows made to *en-Nasrije*, the Holy Virgin, as to a Weli, and so firmly are the people there convinced of the truth of the old views that a Christian of Kefr Kenna declared that even the Church of the Holy Sepulchre is a Makam. Even the practice of religious prostitution is still preserved in many places or has been abolished only lately through the interference of the authorities. The book contains much noteworthy information on this point. (e. g., chapters 11 and 16.) In order to understand the Semites as well as their religion we must bear in mind that they are Orientals and that their views as to the relations between the sexes differ from ours. Genuine love is almost unknown in Syria and Arabia (p. 49), but erotic enthusiasm reaches an extraordinary pitch of passion. The songs of Nimr, who was famous on account of the love he bore for his wife, are known and sung near Karyaten, and rank high as poetry. His great love of hospitality, too, is very sympathetic to Arabian minds. Yet the looseness of morals in parts of Syria and Arabia is such that Lot's behavior to a guest, as narrated in Genesis xix, 8, and the deportment of the Levite toward the men of Gibeon, Judges xix, 24, 26,

would be nothing extraordinary to-day (Cf. footnote p. 49). Holy men and women at sacred places serve the same purpose as did the Kadeshas of ancient times (p. 170).

Yet the common people look up to their "holy men" with religious awe and their superstition renders many things possible which stand in strong contradiction to any of the great orthodox religions, Christianity, Judaism, and Islam.

Saints and local deities are more prominent than God himself, because they are supposed to be more human and near to mankind. They are quicker in revenge and thus ought to be feared more than God. The Arabs, it is true, believe in God, but their god is more of a Bedouin sheik idealized. They do not look up to God as a father whom they ought to love, but as a powerful and capricious despot. His place of residence is frequently considered the sun. He is more powerful than their own chief but otherwise similar in kind and character. If the monotheism of Islam and of Christianity agrees little with their practices we must consider that the present Semite simply observes traditional practices but otherwise thinks very little about matters of religious importance.

Proto-Semitism as a religion is a power which is not overcome either by Roman or by Greek Christianity, nor by Judaism and the Islam. There is but one faith that can cope with it—Protestantism. Jews, Mohammedans and the Catholics of both orthodox churches remain under the sway of ancient superstitions; they continue to perform the ancient rites and become scarcely aware of the fact that they are incompatible with the spirit of their religion. However, as soon as the natives turn Protestants, they become conscious of the paganism that pervades the sacrifices, and other primitive customs. They cut loose from their ancient traditions and show greater aptitude to learn new truths.

It appears that the Protestant missions through the sober spirit of their schools exercise a most wholesome influence which it is to be hoped may bear some good fruit if not now, yet certainly in the distant future.

Professor Curtiss does not surrender the claim of Christianity to be a special revelation of God which has taken place "not merely through natural development, but through the power of God's spirit co-working with man." Yet at the same time he recognizes the right of science to investigate and does not oppose the doctrine of evolution. He says:

"I think no student who weighs the evidence can question the fact of development in the religion of Israel from elementary ideas,

such as are characteristic of the childhood of the race, to those which we find in the most spiritual utterances of prophets and psalmists. This fact can be as truly demonstrated as the development of the eagle from the egg and the egg from the parent germ, or of the mighty oak from the acorn. None who admits the facts can dispute such a conclusion.”—(English edition, p. 258.)

“The theory of the traditionalist, that the teachings of the Old Testament are new revelations direct from God, without relation to past customs and institutions, is not borne out by facts.”—(p. 341.)

“We have seen how easily the Semite deifies men, makes the saint his mediator, and for all practical purposes his god. I have shown in another place how there is nothing startling to his mind in the physical fatherhood of deity, that a mortal woman may have a divine husband. Hence there was a prepared people, in these original and natural ideas, for the mystery of the incarnation, which to them was no mystery. That Jesus should be begotten by the Holy Spirit through the Virgin Mary, as son of man and son of God, was no surprise to the Semitic mind, still believing in the possibility of such a connection even to the point of credulity.”—(p. 242.)

There are indeed cries in the Semitic world, as we see from the Babylonian Penitential Psalms, which indicate a consciousness of sin, on the part of a few select souls, far deeper than anything we find in primitive Semitism. The Babylonian Psalms reach a height that almost reminds of the Psalms of David. In one of the Penitential Psalms of Babylon we find the following pathetic confession:

“My god, my sins are seven times seven, forgive my sins.
 My goddess, my sins are seven times seven, forgive my sins.
 Known and unknown god, my sins are seven times seven, forgive my sins.
 Known and unknown goddess, my sins are seven times seven, forgive my sins
 Forgive my sins and I will bow myself before thee in humility.”

And the divine response is fraught with comfort:

“May thy heart be glad as the heart of a mother who has brought forth.
 Be glad as of a mother who has brought forth, as of a father who has begotten a child.”

“It is clear,” continues Professor Curtiss, “from the above confessions that the Babylonian had made progress beyond the primitive Semite in his consciousness of sin, and if he could have had the teaching of an Isaiah, he might easily have passed on to such a discovery of the true nature of sin as is indicated by the Old Testament saints.”—(p. 244.)

“Again, the original idea of sacrifice seems to be one derived from experience in the East, if not in the West, that ‘every man has his price.’ Hence the gods have their price. If God has brought misfortune upon man, he can be bought off; if he demands a human life, the price may be paid through a substitute; if the price is the ‘bursting forth of blood before the face of God,’ then the blood of sheep, goat, bullock, camel, the best that a man has of animal life, may avert the misfortune and cover the sin. This is indeed a crude idea. There are many stages between it and that contained in the musings of penitent Israel concerning the vicarious sufferings of the Servant, which strike through every Christian heart with love and sorrow, so that we read them with the same solemn hush, and sometimes with falling tears, as if we stood with Mary and John beneath the cross of Him who bore our sins.”—(p. 244.) “In no other way is the divine love, patience, and condescension more manifest than in its method of reaching down to the ignorance and superstition of a group of Semitic families, to teach the lessons needed, until the fullness of the times should come, when He who was to be the mediator of the love, mercy, and justice of God should be revealed.”

Such are the results of Professor Curtiss’s studies during his sojourn in the East, and such are his views concerning the relation between natural development and revelation. Considering the fact that Christianity originated in Judea, and that Judaism developed in the Orient and from an Oriental surrounding, we must grant that a thorough knowledge of Semitism from its primitive beginning to the development of a pure monotheism is an indispensable condition for a proper comprehension of Christianity, and one of the most important links in this chain is furnished by the labors of Professor Curtiss.

The picture which Prof. Curtiss draws of the modern Semite is not favorable, and if, as he contends and as his critic Count Baudissin grants, the modern Semite furnishes us with a good illustration of the Proto-Semitism, we come to the conclusion that the inhabitants of Canaan and the surrounding countries were an extremely sensual and passionate race, and their religion too was one of blood and superstition mixed with idolatrous ceremonies, many of which betray both impurity and cruelty. Traces of it are preserved in the religions which derive their origin from Semitism, and there is much that Professor Curtiss reveals in his reports which throws a new light upon the stories of the Bible. The ancient Hebrews and the people among whom they moved and lived were true Orientals, more emotional than intellectual, and their impetuosity exhibits a

deep religious sentiment, but also great faults. The Bible itself still reflects Orientalism but the spirit of the Bible is not Oriental; on the contrary it is a protest against, and a condemnation of, Oriental impurities with all the excrescences of its wild imagination. In consideration of the character of the people among whom the Biblical books received their final shape, we must admire the sober, and pure, and wholesome spirit of the Biblical redactors who worked out a nobler religion from which these primitive crudities were discarded, finally making the origin of Christianity possible.