

THE THIRD COMMANDMENT.

BY THE EDITOR.

WE are all familiar with the text of the Third Commandment in Exodus xx. 7, and Deuteronomy v. 11, which reads as follows:

“Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain* for the Lord will not hold him guiltless that taketh His name in vain.”

We have become accustomed to the interpretation of this commandment to the extent that the very phrase “to use the name of God in vain” has become a typical English expression which means swearing or blaspheming, but among Hebrew scholars it is well known that the meaning of the sentence is by no means settled. The traditional interpretation is an unwarranted modernisation of the text, and we may be sure that it is wrong. Ancient habits, customs, and the general world-conception of ancient Israel were different from ours, and wherever then blasphemy has been forbidden the punishments were much severer than a vague threat in general terms that the trespasser “will not be held guiltless.” †

Other instances of the translators reading their own interpretation into the Hebrew text are frequent and we will mention one only which is typical. In Genesis xii. 8, we are told that Abraham builds an altar to Yahveh and invokes his name. The word “to call on” or “to invoke” ‡ is the same that is used in pagan worship in the usual sense of adoration combined with sacrificial offerings, but Luther, thinking of his own mode of calling on God, substitutes the Protest-

וְיָשָׁא אֱת־שֵׁם־יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיךָ לְשׁוֹן:

† לְשׁוֹן = guiltless. The root הָקַר *haqar* means “pure,” “free,” “empty.”

‡ In Hebrew, קָרָא (*qara*); connected with the Greek *κραζειν*; the German, *Krählen*, the English *cry* and *crow*, means, “to call out loudly,” and is then used in the sense “to invoke” when offering a sacrifice.

ant mode of worship by translation that "Abraham preached on the name of the Lord,"* as if "preaching" had been a regular institution and the main feature of worship in Abraham's time.

Prof. L. B. Patton seems at last to have solved the problem of the 'Third Commandment in an article which appeared of late in the *Journal of Biblical Literature*. He interprets the words "to lift up" נָשָׂא (nasha') the name by "calling out in worship" and gives further a plausible explanation of the word לָשָׁוׁי (lashav') which is translated "in vain" in the authorised English version, by suggesting that it means nothing more nor less than "empty-handed," "without sacrifice," "without offering a gift."

This interpretation of the sense is supported by a number of parallel passages in Exodus, Deuteronomy, and Leviticus and agrees well with the general tenor of the Hebrew religion. The law which requested that sacrifices should be connected with all acts of worship, is frequently insisted upon and is a thought that would be quite natural in the ancient time of the people of Israel, not only in Judæa, but also among the pagans. We read in Exodus xxxiv. 20 and xxxiii. 15, "and none shall appear before me empty." (See also Exodus xx. 23ff., and xxxiv. 12ff.)

Accordingly, Professor Patton proposes to translate the 'Third Commandment "Thou shalt not cry aloud the name of Yahveh when thou hast brought no sacrifice."

Professor Patton's explanation is more than merely probable and may serve as an instance how different the traditional interpretation of the Old Testament is from its original meaning. The translators of the Hebrew Scriptures frequently read into the text their own sentiments and thus adapt it to the needs of their own times, a procedure which is quite natural, and, for devotional purposes, even legitimate, but cannot very well be countenanced by scholars. Times have changed. Former generations clung firmly to the letter and so were obliged to make the Scriptures conform to their own convictions, but since we are beginning to grow into the estate of manhood, we want to know the truth, and we trust that the truth will do no harm. The truth is holier even than our faith.

* "Predigte von dem Namen des Herrn."