

INTELLECT, RELIGION AND THE UNIVERSE.

BY H. R. VANDERBYLL.

I.

QUITE a number of people, especially those who fervently desire to find, and as a consequence generally *do* find, a veiled superior wisdom in the literary remains of our ancestors, seem to think that the ancients had progressed at least as far as we have towards solving the mystery of existence. But our ancestors did not possess the average intelligence that we possess to-day, even as our present gray matter is not of sufficient development to warrant its ownership by a thirtieth century human being. We should never look backward for equal or greater intelligence, nor ahead for deeper ignorance. Time, human experience, or evolution—call it what you will—labors hard to *develop* man's brain. The history of human development is the history of intellectual progress, and not that of the mind's inactivity or decline. A thousand years of history invariably bridge a greater and a lesser darkness. And the Present is always brighter, so far as intelligence is concerned, than the past.

I confess that it is an easy matter to make ancient manuscript read in perfect accord with our personal views on existence. This is especially the case with the so-called sacred scriptures. It being the modern tendency to find hidden meaning and cleverly concealed divine revelation in every single sentence of the Bible, we meet with a staggering number of Bible interpretations, and with an equally staggering number of blessed and sole possessors of the "key to the scriptures." But there are no more keys to ancient literature than there are to Emerson's essays. The single key necessary to interpret the Bible is the ability to think with the ancient writer's mind and to see the universe as conditions permitted him to see it. In order to acquire that ability one should study ancient history, ancient facts, rather than hang fanatically on the lips of a modern wizard who finds for one heavenly powers and eternal bliss in any of one's quotations from the Bible.

Of course, the ancients counted their bright men and leaders. Even the prehistoric man had his fellowbeing of superior intelligence who was keener than the average man in the matter of sensing an approaching storm, and capitalized that fact by pretending to call forth rain and thunder with the aid of his magical gifts. The magician is the intelligent man of the prehistoric age. And so there were among the Hebrews certain men who were able to make a correct survey of the present, something which the average man was unable to do, something, in fact, which the average man of to-day is incapable of doing. These men drew their conclusions concerning the immediate future from their observations of the present, conclusions that were often correctly and sometimes wrongly drawn, and were called, prophets. The prophet is the intellectual leader of biblical times.

There are at all times a few intellects ahead of the average intellect. History numbers its intellectual pioneers who knowingly or unknowingly cut a rough path through the wilderness of the immediate future. The average man is incapable of keeping pace with the leader, but follows the beaten track in spite of himself, and not without a great deal of delay, and lingering by the wayside.

But it is folly to judge a people by a single individual. There was but one Jesus in his time, one Galilee in his, and one Newton in his. The English people are not composed of Shakespears, nor the German people of Goethes. Among the Hebrews there were certain men called prophets, who judging from their alleged sayings, were considerably brighter than the average man of their days. It appears that they had a little broader conception of deity and existence than the one which happened to be popular. And in Babylonian history we meet with a king named Hammurabi, alleged author of a Code of Laws. It strikes me that certain of these laws, although they were formulated between forty and fifty centuries ago, would not be entirely out of place even in our present civilization.

But not every Jew was a prophet, nor every Babylonian a Hammurabi. Prophets and Hammurabis were individual souls detached from the collective soul of the masses like the few stray clouds that precede the large body of storm-clouds. Our own present thinkers and teachers are able to descend to the level of the masses while the average man is incapable of raising himself to their intellectual and moral level.

We should not therefore go back a few thousand years to find

in the ancient Hebrews authorities on the subject of the mystery of existence. In the first place, they lacked the intelligence to be authorities, even their intellectual leaders who thought a century ahead of their time. And in the second place, we persist in reading and studying their literature with a fixed conception of the deity in our head, which conception we assume to have also been that of the old Hebrew. The result is that we are compelled to resort to interpretation, after which ancient Hebrew literature acquires the distinction of being the sublimest drivel that ever was circulated around the globe.

By assuming that the ancient Hebrew had our modern conception of deity, we enlarge his skull far beyond its natural limits. Let us consider that whereas we, of to-day, possess a full-grown deity and a ready made religion, the ancients had nothing of the sort. Contrary to a popular notion that the truth about God was revealed to man at one time in all its fullness, our Christian religion is the result of long and steady growth, and certain of our present religious conceptions found their origin in crude conceptions of dark, remote ages. Even our present ready-made, inherited religion does not escape an occasional touch of improvement, and indications are that a forcible touch is due at present.

What near-sighted person it was who first declared a collection of ancient manuscripts to constitute the "word of God!" He does not live in thought in an eternal universe wherein evolution is constantly weaving her web of progress, who imagines that the alpha and omega of truth is to be found in his favorite belief, religion or dogma. We have not begun to comprehend the divine marvel of existence, let alone the nature of the deity. Our doctrines are as yet fanciful children's dreams, and our worship has not yet lost its earmarks of superstition and myth-making. Nothing of which to be ashamed! Slowly but steadily, man is learning and developing, and each new century records an improvement in the condition of mind and in the nature of thought.

When speaking of human development, we should not have in mind a thing of secondary importance only, viz., the art of living and of prospering. Several thousand years before the Christian era, the Sumerians were sufficiently intelligent to dig canals for irrigation purposes. They fenced in their land, plowed it, sowed their seed, and reaped their harvest. More than twenty centuries before the birth of Christ, the Code of Hammurabi fixed among other things the wage that had to be paid for different kinds of

labor performed. It stipulated what a doctor was permitted to charge, and what a patient was compelled to pay, for different treatments and operations. It threatened the architect with a severe penalty who built a house poorly and thereby caused injury to the tenant. It condemned the judge to death who misused his high office and knowingly pronounced an unjust sentence. All these things indicate civilization and intelligence, but not necessarily an intelligence that is capable of traveling from home and of surveying a universe and its inexorable laws.

The few bright lights of ancient civilization are perhaps the brighter because they shine in an appalling darkness. Alongside of the wealth and the magnificence of Babylon we must place a list of Babylonian star-gods and consider certain revolting religious practices that originated in the worship of those gods. Solomon's temple, the crowning material glory of Hebrew civilization, contained practically every symbol belonging to foreign heathen worship.

That which we call civilization, something which we can trace back to people who lived seven thousand years ago, is not necessarily indicative of all-around intelligence. There is an intelligence which is the natural product of the subconscious desire for self-preservation. Many animals possess it, and probably inherit it from a long line of ancestors who gradually acquired it while fighting for their existence. Also man possesses it, and his intelligence grows as the problems of living with his fellow-being become more intricate. Man's former battle with nature was, and his present struggle for the possession of the purchasing dollar is, instrumental in developing it. It is the product of thought of self.

But to be a keen salesman, for example, does not necessarily imply high intellectual development. The intellect develops mostly in single directions. For instance, it may above all things discern the possibility of a profitable sale, or it may easily discover a method of successfully defeating an undesirable competitor. How many big business men, however, whose opinions are solicited on account of their prominence in the world of finance and business, reveal a gross ignorance of the laws of human nature and of those of nature in general?

Yet is it the aim of evolution to develop the intellect in every direction, in order that it may become a fit instrument with which to comprehend and to interpret the marvels of boundless existence. The ultimate goal of the intellect is the realization that man lives in an infinite-eternal universe whose unchangeable laws are such

and such, rather than the ability to build an all-destructive dreadnaught or to manufacture a desirable article of comfort and luxury. Many steppingstones lead to that goal, and the one which is to raise our intellect to the next one is our present toil, labor, business or profession.

Now, history records a constant broadening of the human mind, its tendency to develop in more than a single direction. The intelligence that originally centered upon ME and its wants and comforts, in modern times makes expeditions into the vastness of the universe. And as time and evolution more and more refine the originally coarse gray matter of the human being, the world about him becomes larger and larger. The earth begins to take shape, and suns to travel, through an immense world-abbyss. The less attention man pays to ME, the more ITS presence, the presence of the infinite universe, impresses itself upon his mind. It is what raises him above the level of the beast, this ability to at least partly ignore his belly and his ME, and to pay some attention to the universe of creatures, and flowers, and stars and dizzy depths that engulf him.

We may rest assured that the ancients dwelt in thought in a small universe bounded by their appetites and by their immediate personal interests. We may expect them, as a consequence, to have been ignorant of the laws of nature, blind to the existence of a marvelously governed universe. For no man sees the universe, much less studies it, who only sees himself.

When centuries of hardships, struggle and experience have coaxed them from their shell of intense self-centeredness, we may be prepared to look for broader thoughts, for a better understanding of the laws of nature, for a more universal conception of the ruling power of the world. It somehow seems that the flame of intelligence receives a new vigor and brightness from occasional calamities and hardships that rudely awaken man from his dream of self-centeredness. Thus we find that the exile of the Jews tore them away not only from their country but also from themselves. And the result was, as shown by the literature of that period, a considerably more universal viewpoint of existence.

II.

It is equally foolish, I think, to turn away in disgust from the ignorance of the ancients as it is to attribute to them a superior understanding of things divine. The main purpose of human evo-

lution being the development of the intellect, God only knows what ignorant and superstitious creatures we may prove to be to our thirtieth century descendants. If it be a mistake to seek the solution of the Great Riddle in the allegories, superstitions and myths of the ancients, it is a worse mistake to suppose that the final answers to all questions are furnished by religion in its present form.

A religion is not created overnight, and our own Christian religion has no distinct date of birth. Were it not for the fact that our minds are either too lazy or else too pre-occupied to inquire into the history and the origin of our religion, we should realize that its foundations reach through the numberless strata of ancient conceptions concerning the mystery of existence down to the very first explanation man ventured to offer of a natural phenomenon. These strata include the sun-worship of the Persians, the worship of the tribal deity, Jehovah, the moon-and-star-worship of the Babylonians. Their levels sink down into the night of historical times when the Sumerians and the Akkadians inhabited the valleys of the Tigris and the Euphrates. Their levels have left faint traces in the depths of prehistoric times when man centered divinity in his fellow-being, and bloody, human sacrifices were supposed to transmit divine power to the soil and call forth an abundant harvest.

And I suppose that in order to find the ultimate origin of our present religion, we should search as far back as the birth of human thought and reason. We should go back to the age of the Neanderthal man, to Dubois' Java man, and still further back to the twilight days of human existence when man ceased to act altogether automatically after having acquired the germ of reason. To-day is the composite product of a thousand yesterdays, and present thoughts are the blended affects of a million preceding causes of which the first one was man's first thought.

It is with a certain kind of emotion that we should read how thousands of years before the Christian era, man, equipped with a mere germ of brain, lived life to the best of his ability, asked himself questions about the mysterious universe in which he found himself, and answered them also to the best of his ability. And when reading about the thoughts and the conceptions of the ancients, we should bear in mind that man at all times acts and thinks as well as is within his power. The nature of his actions and his thoughts are dependent on the nature of his mental equipment. His activities, mental and otherwise, reveal a certain average degree of brain-development of which they are the necessary expressions.

Looking backward on the road of history, we must expect the earlier and cruder products of human evolution to reveal a deeper ignorance concerning the nature of the universe than we at present do. Their universe at first must have been a very small one, considering the insignificant powers of their undeveloped brain. Only such phenomena as apparently influenced their intensely self-centered existence, drew their attention and became the foundations for their beliefs, and for their bloody rites. Vegetation, especially in connection with agriculture, and weather-conditions, in particular the stormy sky with its thunder and its lightning, were principally observed by them.

Mysterious, divine power caused the seed to sprout and the harvest to be abundant. But the source of this divine power was not found in nature, her domain being too large to be surveyed by an intellect whose activities were naturally very limited. In one of his fellows the prehistoric man found the source of the power that was also able to bless him with a rich harvest. And so he proceeded to sacrifice his divine fellowbeing and to bury him in the soil from which he expected rich returns, thereby transmitting the divine power from the man to the soil.

This divine man also able to call forth the rain and the thunder from the sky, and in this case again, natural phenomena were considered to be creations of a human being's magical power.

We see then that man lived, at the beginning of his career of development in a very, very small universe, and that he possessed an equally small god. His god resided in the body of a man, who ate and drank and lived like a man, and was superior to the ordinary being only in this respect that he possessed magical gifts. We should bear in mind, however, that his beliefs, his worship, his rites—his religion, if you wish—were the direct result of his inability to see a universe, and of his faulty explanation of natural phenomena. To word this a little differently, his beliefs and his superstitions constituted an endeavor to explain certain phenomena of the universe.

It may be added, that religion at all times embodied such an endeavor. On account of man's inability to explain correctly, the elements of magic and of the supernatural interwove themselves with religious doctrine. Their presence was necessary in the absence of understanding and of logical explanation.

III.

Man's universe broadens with his intellect. There came a time when evolution had developed him sufficiently to enable him to see a little more than merely the rain that indirectly brought him food. Evolution's first endeavors aimed at tearing man away from thoughts of his belly, and its main endeavor at present is to tear him away from thoughts of ME. A preponderance of ME, or the autocratic rule of the belly, shut off the individual from the outside world, and prevent him from becoming conscious of the existence of a universe the mystery of which clamors for a solution.

Gradually and slowly, the distance between the human and the animal stage became larger and larger, until man's belly was no longer his sole concern. It was then that he lifted his gaze occasionally heavenward, and saw stars and nightdepths. These caused him to think.

His first explanations of the presence of the brilliant mysteries of the sky were naturally crude and childish. He began with associating the sun, the moon, and some of the brighter planets and stars with his departed heroes. The god who formerly dwelt on earth among ordinary human beings as a man endowed with miraculous powers lost a little of his ultra-materialistic nature. His dwelling-place was moved to the heavens, and his existence had become everlasting.

The identification of a hero with a star, or with the sun or the moon, often occurred centuries after some long-departed leader had become the subject of a myth or a tradition, and in time had acquired all the magical powers of a god. From his heavenly throne radiated his supernatural influence—for better or for worse. He was a god to be feared, and man tried hard to obtain his goodwill and his favors. He worshipped the god, and sacrificed to him. For in ancient days, more so than at present, a considerable deal of religious worship was prompted by desire and fear.

Thus we find the ancient Babylonians surveying a universe which was considerably larger than that of the primitive man. It included heavenly bodies, and even constellations. But it should not be imagined that they were astronomers. They lacked the intelligence to discover law and mathematics in the construction of our universe. They merely observed to the best of their ability, and proceeded to weave a web of imagination about the things that they saw. And although we may be inclined to scoff at their star-wor-

ship and at the appalling number of their deities, we must consider, as in the case of the pre-historic man, the source of their religion. Their observation of a part of the universe,—considerably larger than that of which the primitive man was aware,—and their inability to explain, resulted in their particular religion and worship.

But the mere fact that the stars caused the ancient Babylonians to think their child-like thoughts, constituted an important link in the chain of religious development. Long after the Sumerians and Akkadians saw their civilizations absorbed by Babylonian rule, history opened its doors to admit the Hebrews and their tribal deity, Jahveh, to the land of Palestine. The Hebrews were the people who were destined to solve the riddle of the universe on a higher level.

That they did not accomplish this immediately is amply proven by statements in the Bible itself. In fact, it would appear that the Hebrews were mentally living in a very much smaller universe than the Babylonians did. Materialistic and polytheistic as the Babylonian religion was, it at least penetrated into the depths of the universe. The same cannot be said about early Hebrew religion. The Jahveh whom the Hebrews took to the Promised Land was extremely limited in nature, and reflected an equally limited intellect of his worshippers. He belonged to a primitive people, nomadic people no doubt, whose universe did not travel beyond clouds and mountain tops, and among whose objects of worship must be counted trees, stones and walls. And it is unnecessary to repeat what others have pointed out so often, that the original Jahveh was a faithful picture of the selfish, cruel, warlike and vindictive Hebrew himself.

But the redeeming feature of ancient Hebrew religion was that it acknowledged but a single deity. Unfortunately, however, too much religious capital has been made of the fact, and the Hebrews have been raised by us to a false level of intellectual and spiritual development, which has hardly been attained by ourselves. The fact that they worshipped a single deity has tempted us to believe that they were monotheists. But they were no such thing. Absolute monotheists are hard to find even in these days. And if we have difficulty in trying to acknowledge the existence of a single and an only deity, what may we expect of the ancient Hebrews whose intelligence in comparison with ours places them on a level with babes?

The fact of the matter is that Jahveh had his contemporaries. The Hebrew acknowledged the existence of other gods who pro-

tected and favored their respective peoples in the same excellent manner that Jahveh protected and favored them. His deity's domain was far from being universal. Its boundaries changed with the movements of the tribes. Wherever the Hebrews were, there also was Jahveh. But he was not to be found anywhere else. Foreign gods ruled beyond the borders of the Hebrew Possessions, and it was advisable for the traveler in a foreign country to acquaint himself with the particular method of approaching its deity or deities.

Although Jahveh's nature, therefore, at the outset was very limited, it expanded by leaps and bounds until it had become universal in the days of Paul. To read the Bible, paying particular attention to the Prophets, is to see Jahveh and religion grow. This growth was brought about principally through contract with foreign people. After their conquest of Canaan the Hebrew shepherds learned to be agriculturists, and incidentally were tempted to worship agricultural deities of the Canaanites. This worship, however, in the course of time was transmitted to Jahveh, the nomadic god of the mountains, the clouds and the storm, whose power thereby became more universal.

But the greatest factor in the development of Hebrew religion was Babylonian mythology. Although this influence at first had the appearance of being an evil one, on account of the Hebrews dividing their worship between Jahveh and Babylonian star-gods, it finally extended Jahveh's domain beyond the clouds and mountain summits to the stars. This final result was undoubtedly brought about principally through the Prophets who vehemently denounced their people's idolatry, and urged them to return to the old worship of Jahveh. When the Hebrews resumed the worship of Jahveh, however, their deity of necessity was given the rule over the larger universe with which Babylonian star-worship had acquainted them.

It is but a small step in religious development from the worship of a deity who is sole ruler over earth, clouds and stars to the worship of an omnipresent deity. The deity of Paul, who was the deity of gentile and barbarian alike reflected an intellect that had learned to travel away from self and to explore the immensity of the universe. As that intellect was not a spontaneous creation but a product of slow and gradual development, so likewise was the God of Paul the final result of a slow and gradual development which kept pace with that of the brain.

(To be Continued)