

Blasphemy.

A STUDY IN THE EASTERN ATMOSPHERE OF THE NEW TESTAMENT.

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WHILE the name of Christ provided a new personality to be revered or to be spoken against, and the Christian life imposed new restraints upon the spirit of malediction, yet among the Christians of the N.T. blasphemy had for the most part the same significance that it had among other Oriental peoples. It included (1) whatever was irreverent, defiant, or offensive towards God; (2) the profanation of any sacred office, observance, or institution; and (3) the language of invective and denunciation that was called forth by any teaching or behaviour that seemed to be hostile to religion and morals.

In this last sense blasphemy was not confined to any official declaration of anathema or excommunication, but extended to the angry invective and coarse malediction in which the Jews indulged when it was declared to them that Jesus was the Messiah, and that the Kingdom of God was for the Gentiles also. The habit of blaspheming or of invoking divine punishment was so general, and so commended rather than condoned as an act of royalty to the faith, that the complete avoidance of it, and of the spirit that produced it, became one of the marks of the new creature in Christ Jesus.

The study of these Oriental conditions in N.T. times is interesting not only as showing what the teaching of the gospel had to contend against, but as explaining how those traditional views of the sanctity of institutions and of corporate union afterwards influenced the Church in the matter of laying its curse or interdict on individuals or nations, and in attempting to inflict actual punishment upon them.

The following considerations may be mentioned as explaining the intensity of feeling among Orientals with regard to blasphemy in its relationship to God, and the religious value of cursing as between man and man.

1. In the East religion is the chief fact of human life. When Moses put the emblem of the Divine presence in the centre of the resting-places and at the head of the movements of Israel in the wilderness, he gave pictorial ex-

pression to a universal religious feeling. This does not mean that there is a general desire towards spirituality and sainthood, but that religion gives to every man his position, and is the strongest bond of fellowship and the chief means of protection. An Oriental will scarcely ever for the sake of truth and justice give evidence in court against a fellow-believer and in favour of one of another faith.

2. God is God. He is never referred to as our idealized conception of power and righteousness. His existence is in no way dependent on our perceptive faculties, nor is His nature affected by what we believe, or do not believe, concerning Him. Any such speculation can arise only from a heart that in its foolishness hopes that God is not. While man's thought of God is nothing, it is, on the other hand, of the utmost importance to bear in mind what God thinks of us.

3. All who have come to know Him, and to belong to Him, by the teaching of one or more of His prophets, become thereby His people. Each one can say, 'Whose I am, and whom I serve,' and it is believed that He in return is not ashamed to be called their God. As they exist by His protection and bear His name, they must live for His glory. As the religion represents the entire people, the entire people must represent the religion. Any desertion from the aggregate of membership is so much lost to the witnessing and serving power of the community, and therefore to the glory of God. Hence the feeling of intense malignity towards apostasy and schism.

Such is the solidarity of the religious community in the East that on an occasion of murder or blood-feud, when the actual perpetrator of the crime cannot be found, another man of the same religion, though innocent of the crime and even unaware of its occurrence, is put to death as a substitute.

4. Again, among Orientals words of blessing and cursing are on the same level as alike tending to find fulfilment in actual life. Thus, when a

visitor leaves an Oriental home, his host's last words to the departing guest are, 'Give peace,' meaning thereby that he desires his goodwill or blessing to be given to any friend of his who may be met with by the way. Similarly, it is understood that a malediction or curse regarded as originating in righteous indignation and submitted to the will of the Judge of the whole earth will also be granted a suitable fulfilment.

5. Further, as an Oriental is never regarded as a unit, but as a member of some community, and as his opinion, standards, and actions are judged to be those of his class, it follows that the blasphemy, that is, the malediction or curse, is seldom directed against the individual as such, but against the religion that controls and directs both his life and the life of those to whom he belongs. Such everyday imprecations of the street are, 'May your house (circle of relatives) become a ruin,' 'A curse upon your religion, upon the religion of your father, upon the religion of your ancestors.' Such blasphemy or railing is in its most intense and aggravated form when it is aimed at the prophet or religious head of the community. In Turkey the offence of blaspheming the name of Muhammad, though now commuted to fine and imprisonment, involved death by execution, burning, or impaling.

This is expressed in the Arabic proverbial rhyme:

Il-şârimu maslûl, âla şhâtîm il-raslûl

('Drawn is the sword, for him who curses the prophet of the Lord').

An Oriental may listen submissively to the severest strictures on his personal conduct and accept such rebukes as paternal chastisement meant for his benefit, but he at once becomes resentful and malignant if his personal delinquencies are described as those of his people, and as the mark of his religious fraternity. He considers it to be his duty to repudiate such a charge instantly and with the utmost vigour, and he will call upon his fellow-religionists to unite with him in bringing counter-charges against the 'blasphemer.' Self-defence then becomes a public duty, a sacred championship.

When this deeply established custom is viewed in its various connexions with Oriental social and religious life, it becomes apparent how great a force was needed to uproot it, and put in its place the principle, 'Bless, and curse not' (Ro 12¹⁴).

In the N.T. the charge of blasphemy was brought

against Christ because, in declaring the forgiveness of sins and in speaking of His oneness with the Father, He seemed to be putting a man of flesh and blood in the place of God (Mt 9³ 26⁶⁵ Jn 10³³ 19⁷). Inferior in degree, but still an act of blasphemy, was irreverent speech towards parents (Mt 15⁴ Mk 7¹⁰), and against those in high office or rank (2 P 2¹¹). The spirit of loyal and reverent discipleship is pained to hear the blaspheming or upbraiding addressed to Christ on the cross by the Jews and by His companions in suffering (Mt 27³⁹, Lk 23³⁹).

After years of devoted service Paul remembers with bitter regret that he had once been a blasphemer of Christ (1 Ti 1¹³), and that he had tried by torture to compel others to blaspheme the name of their Lord (Ac 26¹¹). When the Jews of Antioch in Pisidia (13⁴⁵), and in Corinth (18⁸), poured contempt upon the name of Christ, Paul would hear his own words of 'blasphemy' given back to him in the terms of insult that are still thrown at Christ, namely, the bastard of Bethlehem, the hanged one, the liar, the deceiver, the magician. The vehemence of feeling that found relief in such railing sometimes led to delirious and precipitate action, as in the martyrdom of Stephen. The narrative describes the shouting crowd, the stopping of horrified ears, the simultaneous onset and the swift dragging of the offender outside the city to the place of stoning (7⁵⁷).

In the Epistles, Christian believers are exhorted so to walk that their conduct may give no provocation to those who are without, and that the word of God may not be blasphemed, or have a curse called down upon it by any inconsistency or lawlessness in the life of Christ's followers (Ro 14¹⁶, Ja 3^{9, 10}). The spirit of blaspheming, in its motive and expression, is condemned as an evil thing. It has its home in the unpurified human heart (Mt 15¹⁹, 1 Ti 6⁴), and its companions there are bitterness, wrath, anger, clamour, malice, shameful speaking, and whatever is ready to rejoice in the depreciation of others (Eph 4³¹, Col 3⁸). Its precise opposite is the spirit of Christian love which 'taketh no account of evil' (1 Co 13⁵).

In the English language blasphemy is confined to whatever is irreverent towards God, and in a second degree to the profanation or desecration of what is connected with religious worship. The word is not used in the further sense of

invoking divine punishment on those who offend with regard to other relationships. This may be due partly to the fact that when the gospel was brought to the West it established itself among a people who had not those Oriental traditions which gave religious sanction to malediction.

In the papacy of mediæval Europe, on the assumption that St. Peter's successor represented St. Peter, and St. Peter Christ, and Christ God, it was a legitimate inference that any king or prince who disobeyed the Pope had no further claim on the devout loyalty of his people. He had blasphemed and was under a curse. But though such anathematizing and excommunication might be attempted by high ecclesiastical authority, the invoking of divine punishment never found a

place in the common life of the West corresponding to the 'blasphemies' or imprecatory railings of Oriental custom.

The attempts at coercion in matters of belief that convulsed the Christian Church in Europe were largely due to the view that the Reformation was a schism, and that schism was an act of blasphemy against the Holy Church, the body of Christ. The union which the Eastern Church sought to secure by creed, and the Roman Church by authority, and the Protestant Church by the appeal to the Bible and to conscience, is still the master thought of the Christian Church, and the divisions and contentions which retard the progress of the Kingdom form the chief profanation of the name of Christ.

The Great Text Commentary.

THE GREAT TEXTS OF REVELATION.

REVELATION II. 7.

'To him that overcometh, to him will I give to eat of the tree of life that is in the Paradise of God.'—R.V.

THE SITUATION.

This is the promise made to the first of the Seven Churches of Asia, the Church in Ephesus. Ramsay and others discover a special appropriateness in each promise to its own Church, but it is difficult to make the appropriateness always evident. Here certainly there is the promise of food, the tree of life being a fruit tree, and the Ephesians are commended for their hatred of the doctrine of the Nicolaitans, who recommended the eating of food offered in sacrifice to idols. But the Nicolaitans occur also in the Epistle to Pergamum. More generally, Ramsay says that Ephesus had been falling from its original high level of enthusiasm, and for this the fruit of the tree of life is the one infallible cure. Boyd Carpenter brings these two suggestions together: (1) those who had not indulged in the licence of the Nicolaitans shall eat of the tree of life; and (2) the Ephesian Christians, who had lost the paradise of the first loving communion with God, are promised a restored paradise and participation in the tree of life.

THE LANGUAGE.

There is no serious difficulty with the wording.

1. *To him that overcometh.* It is a present participle—not 'has overcome,' or 'will overcome,' or even 'is overcoming,' but 'the conqueror,' the victorious member of the Church, as such, apart from all consideration of circumstances (Swete). The idea is characteristic of St. John; this word occurs once in the Gospel, six times in the First Epistle, sixteen times in the Apocalypse; and elsewhere only in Lk 11²², Ro 3⁴ 12²¹.

2. *To him.* The repetition (omitted in A.V.) is due to anacoluthon, that is, failure in carrying out the originally intended structure of the sentence; cf. 2¹⁷. 26 3¹². 21. The sentence is probably constructed after the Hebrew. Blass quotes a striking example from the Septuagint of Gn 28¹⁸.

3. *To eat of the tree* is lit. 'to eat from (ἐκ) the tree,' i.e. to eat of the fruit that comes from it. We have the same word in the *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*, Levi 18¹⁰. 11.

And he shall open the gates of paradise,
And shall remove the threatening sword against Adam.
And he shall give to the saints to eat from the tree of life,
And the spirit of holiness shall be on them.