

# Theology on the Web.org.uk

*Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible*

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



**PATREON**

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

**PayPal**

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

---

A table of contents for *The Expositor* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_expositor-series-1.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expositor-series-1.php)

that the Jews knew him as the persecutor, the murderer of Stephen (and therefore would believe his assurance that he had seen the living Christ).

After that definite commission Paul, in looking back to the first vision, perceived that the commission to the Gentiles was given even then, though he had not at the time recognized it.

Further, this shows probably that, in comparison to later visions, Paul's appreciation and memory of the first was more confused and blurred. That is only what must be regarded as natural. If some rare and exceptional men are so sensitive to that Divine nature which surrounds us and embraces us and breathes through us as to be occasionally able, in moments of special exaltation and heightened sensibility, to commune with it, that quality in them will be strengthened during their life, and they will become more able to stand before and to comprehend the Power which manifests itself to them.

W. M. RAMSAY.

## SCIENTIFIC LIGHTS ON RELIGIOUS PROBLEMS.

### IV.

#### OPTIMISM AND PESSIMISM.

THERE have been two extreme estimates of the present world—that of the Chinaman and that of the Indian. The Chinese view is rose-coloured. It regards Man as already among the celestials—in the enjoyment of social laws which are so perfect as to admit of neither repeal nor modification. The Indian view, on the other hand, is sombre, nay, it is dark. It looks upon this world as an absolute delusion—a series of dream-pictures or false appearances which lure the soul into temptation and debar it from its native rest.

These nations represent two sections of humanity—the

Optimist and the Pessimist. Every land on earth has reproduced the tendencies of the Chinaman and the Hindu. There are some to whom this world is the best possible world ; there are others to whom any form of life is a form of misery. And between these two views—the theory of a Leibnitz and the theory of a Schopenhauer—there is this in common, that they are equally paralysing to progress. He who looks upon the world as a sunlit hill of God, and he who looks upon the world as a hopeless vale of tears, are, if they are logical, bound to be unprogressive. Nothing can be progressive but hope ; either perfect light or blank despair must compel us to stand still. Neither China nor India has exhibited a movement from within. Their opposing tendencies have converged to the same result—stagnation. The man who feels himself to be at the top of the hill and the man who feels himself to be enclosed in the vale are alike under the influence of a mental paralysis. Both are impeded from going forward. The one is arrested by too much light ; the other is hindered by too much darkness. The cause of progress demands something intermediate. Neither Optimism nor Pessimism can make a civilization. Paul says, “ We are saved by hope.” He means “ by twilight ”—as distinguished from cloudlessness on the one hand and from raylessness on the other. To the building up of every kingdom—the kingdom of God included—there is required something different either from the sense of fulness or from the sense of emptiness—something which is best described as a bow in the cloud. We are led up, not by the sense of want, not by the sense of repletion, but by the sense of imperfection—the perception that we possess *one* half and that the other is not there. It is a perception, partially sad, partially comforting, wholly stimulative—more stimulative than would have been either the full possession or the absolute deprivation of the object.

The truth is, Optimism and Pessimism are alike and

equally founded on an unscientific view of the universe. They both assume that the formation of the world is already completed. In pronouncing it perfectly good and in pronouncing it wholly bad, they each take for granted that the structure is finished. Now, the conception of modern science is exactly the contrary. It is precisely the difference between the doctrine of Creation and the doctrine of Evolution. The Creationist says that the works were finished from the beginning; the Evolutionist says that they are not finished yet. To the one the temple is a completed structure; to the other it is only in the act of building. To the one the seventh day with its rest obliterates the six days of toil; to the other the six days of toil conceal the possibility of a seventh day of rest. In the one system, so far as Nature is concerned, God's attitude is only that of retrospect—there is a yesterday but no to-morrow; in the other God has both a yesterday and a to-morrow—something done and something yet to do. The God of Evolution is not, like the God of Creation, standing at the *end* of a process; He is engaged in the process. The Sabbath has not yet come; the final stone is wanting to the building. And the absence of the final stone makes a criticism of the whole impossible. The drama is proceeding; the chapters are being written; we cannot in the meantime expect to see perfection. It is not merely that so humble a being as Man is inadequate to grasp the whole; that is the old mode of putting it. But according to the new science the whole is not *there*. The Spirit of Nature has not completed its own environment. Nature itself is but a part of what it *will* be. It is not full-grown. It is a child—a child of promise, it may be—but none the less short of its ripest development. Even faith has no right to call itself already perfect.

If, then, we adopt the standpoint of modern science the question must take a new form. We shall no longer ask

whether this is the best possible or the worst possible world. The Cosmos is not completed, and therefore it cannot have reached either its best or its worst. But the form which the question will assume in our age of Evolution will be this, Are the stages of Nature good *after their kind*? The writer of Ecclesiastes says that God has made all things good "in their time." He means, "up to the *measure* of their time." Winter, for example, is not the fulness of the year; yet the provision which Nature makes for the wants of winter may be a beneficent adaptation—the most beneficent which the circumstances allow. This is the only Optimism which the process of Evolution admits of. When the process is finished we may look for more; but as long as it is incomplete the utmost which can be expected is that each stage of life shall be happy up to its measure.

Now, the question is, Is this the condition of *our* world? Have the stages of Evolution known to us been stages of beneficence proportionate to the capacity? Some say Yes, some No. But the point to which at present I wish to limit myself is one which does not involve a direct yes or no. I wish to ask whether the doctrine of Evolution has or has not added to the difficulty of an affirmative answer. There is a widespread impression abroad that this doctrine has thrown a dark shade over Nature. We have come to persuade ourselves that the beneficence of Nature was more apparent in the old régime than it is in the new. We look back to the ages of mechanical design as the halcyon days of theology—the days when God seemed more pitiful and Nature less severe. We talk as if the belief in Evolution had given a blow to our estimate of the Divine benevolence. We think of our forefathers as having lived under a sweet delusion—a delusion to which, if possible, we would fain return. We contemplate the skies under which we dwell as the revealers of a sterner message—a message which has

broken our trust in the Divine tenderness and turned the smile of the universe into a frown.

I venture to say that the reverse is true. There have always been difficulties in the problem of Divine providence both in the old system and in the new ; but in no case that I know of has the difficulty *originated* with the new. Evolution has taken its dark shades as an heirloom ; it has received them from the shadows of the past night. I do not believe it has added a single difficulty of its own. But be this as it may, it is quite certain that it has detracted from *previous* difficulties. The influence of the doctrine of Evolution in relation to the past has been the influence of a sunbeam upon a cloud ; it has helped to clear up much that was dark, to soften much that had the air of harshness. Take, for example, the great fact of Death. That remains in all systems. But in that of Evolution it is softened. Death is here not only a part of the *process*, but an inevitable part of the *progress*. The system of Evolution could not live unless from time to time one guest left the table to make room for another. In all systems Death is a *fact* ; here it is a benefit—a condition essential to the achievement of life's ideal. And then, here as nowhere else, Death has lost the character of Death ; it has revealed itself as change. In Evolution nothing ends ; things are simply transformed. Every end is a beginning. The forces which are spent by one object pass into another. It cannot be said of these forces that they have ceased to have a share in the work beneath the sun. In point of fact they pursue that work. The Force which existed in Alexander, in Caesar, in Napoleon, is at the present moment as operative as ever. That is the manner in which the doctrine of Evolution teaches us to think of the effect of Death, and it is a manner *peculiar* to Evolution. The previous systems magnified *Matter* and saw Death as a material decay. But to the Evolutionist there is nothing real but Force, and to

him Force is imperishable. Death is not a *decay* of Force; it is a mode of Force, a change of Force. Death does not diminish the sum of the world's energies. The amount of energy that exists in Nature now will not be affected by individual deaths; it will abide constant, invariable in quantity—the same yesterday and to-day and forever.

Let us take another point of illustration. Let us take the element of apparent waste in Nature. The common idea is that this appearance of waste in Nature has been mainly emphasized by the doctrine of Evolution. In truth it has been lessened by that doctrine. In all systems it has been a recognized fact that in the development of species only a few out of myriad seeds are utilized; the one has been taken for active service, and the many have been left. But the peculiarity of the system of Evolution is that it has *mitigated* the appearance of waste which the other systems reveal. It has mitigated this appearance by reason of its own theory. It tells us that the rejected seeds have not been in vain, that they have served a purpose ere they have passed away. It tells us that but for them the accepted seeds would not have been accepted. The survivors in the race owe their power of survival to the very seeds which they have beaten, for it is by the fight they have been made fit and it is by the struggle they have been made strong. Evolution denies all accident. Everything that has ever existed, whether it has been accepted or rejected in the race of development, has been included in the plan of Nature and has influenced that plan. According to the teaching of Evolution the myriad seeds which have been rejected have been as essential to the constituting of the present universe as the favoured ones which have been selected to carry on the process. The omission of any one of them from the original scheme of creation would have modified that scheme. So speaks the doctrine of Evolution. What do its words amount to? If they mean anything at

all, they can mean nothing less than this, that there is not and never has been any waste in Nature, that all physical forms have fulfilled a destiny, and that in relation to the universal organism no product of the world's forces has been a useless thing.

I will take a third illustration of the manner in which the doctrine of Evolution has softened the harshness of previous systems. It shall be from the field of animal life. Some years ago an eminent naturalist, who was also a clergyman and who had been bred in the old theology, sent out letters to some of his clerical brethren couched in the same terms. The words I need not record; but, as I was one of the privileged individuals, I can reproduce the substance. The writer of the epistle offered his blessing to any one who should relieve his mind of the agony it suffered from the impression of religious doubt created within him by certain facts of Nature. These facts can be summarized under two classes—the existence of organisms endowed with weapons of death, and the existence of organisms endowed with implements stimulative to lust. Here is an indictment against the God of Nature based on facts of the animal life! How are we to meet this indictment? We cannot gainsay the statement on which it is based. We cannot deny that there are creatures endowed with weapons of destruction; we cannot dispute that there are organisms which have implements whose function is lustful. Is there any escape from the imputation of an unrighteous act to the God of Nature, or from that agony of mind which to us as to the writer of the letter such a conclusion must bring?

Yes, there is such an escape; but, strangely enough, it comes through an aperture which is popularly regarded as the door into the prison. The escape comes through the doctrine of Evolution itself. The writer of the letter got his difficulties from the theory of *Creation*. According to the

theory of Creation these weapons of death and these implements of license were originally made by God. But Evolution steps forward and says that originally they were not made at all, and at no time were fashioned by *God*. It tells us that these instruments are an effect, not a cause. They are the result of previous tendencies in the animal nature—the tendency to live by preying and the tendency to propagate the species. If you want to find a ground of religious difficulty, it must be sought in the previous tendencies and not in the subsequent result. The so-called unrighteous instruments of the animal world are the effects of education—the education elicited by the environment. They have grown by the practising of an endowment previously existing, just as the power of hand and foot expands by exercise. The whole question is, What has been the nature of the exercise which has developed these instruments? If there is any indictment to be drawn up it must be there. The writer of the letter begins too late in his inquiry. A sword which has been sharpened may do much future mischief; and yet it may have been originally sharpened in a good cause. Let us go behind the instruments; let us appeal to the tendencies which gave them being. Let us take the two impulses from which these maligned structures have proceeded. Let us examine them calmly, dispassionately, without partiality and without prejudice. If they have been bad the instruments will not be sanctified by the fact that they have been only evolved, not created; if on the other hand they have been either good or indifferent the growth of these instruments will not impugn the righteousness of God.

First, then, the weapons of death have been formed and sharpened by the hereditary practice of preying. What is this practice? In what tendency of the animal nature does it originate? Does it come from a passion of wanton cruelty? No; it proceeds from an impulse which I can only

describe as anti-vegetarian. We hear a great deal in the animal world about "Nature red in tooth and claw." Yet we do not apply the quotation to the similar deeds of Man. Man preys upon the life of certain animals just as certain animals prey upon the life of their own kind. We kill and eat. We hook alive the fish of the sea. We hunt in the forest. We shoot birds of the air.<sup>1</sup> Why do we never speak of "*Man* red in tooth and claw"? Because, you say, we have found that the use of animal food is salutary. Exactly; and why should not the instinct of the lower creatures be allowed to come to the same conclusion! If animal food is salutary for the man why should it not be salutary for the animal itself! We refer the *human* act, not to cruel passion, but to rational judgment. Why should we not refer the *animal* act, not to cruel passion, but to *instinctive* judgment! No one would think it impious to say that some animals were intended to be food for Man. No one would think it impious to say that to ratify this purpose Man was allowed to sacrifice the life of these animals. Why not transfer the sentiment to the beast of prey! Why should *its* deed be any greater indication of ferocity than the carnage committed by Man! The latter is confessedly a more deliberate act than the former; if there is *any* "redness in tooth and claw" the balance would seem to lie on the *human* side. There is in my opinion no necessity whatever for imputing malevolent instincts to the lower creation. I admit the preying element both in the animal and in the human kingdom; I would only claim for the former, in the light of that affinity of species which Evolution discloses, the same interpretation of the facts which is by common consent accorded to the latter.

Again. The other class of tabooed implements possessed

<sup>1</sup> Doubtless these human sports were originally utilitarian acts limited to the search for food.

by certain organisms is the result of another hereditary tendency—the instinct for the propagation of species. What is this tendency? It is the most distinctive purpose which Nature reveals. There is nothing on earth for which Nature makes such provision as the reproduction of life. Other things seem to be subsidiary; this is her central aim. It is also, in the light of Evolution, a noble aim. The purpose of Nature revealed in Evolution is a *selective* process. It is not the multiplication of life haphazard; it is the choosing of types fitted to survive. As I said in one of the previous studies, Nature is engaged in carving the perfect form. It is for this end she amplifies the facilities for reproduction. It is for this end she gives every scope for sexual selection. She is working out the development of an individual form which shall represent all beauty and unite all power. Not to favour licentious passion does she seek the propagation of species. She seeks it, not for what it does, but for what it will bring. Throughout this physical process the goal to which she is working is a spiritual goal; she is aiming at the emergence of a life which shall be worthy to represent the universe. This is the end which sanctifies the means. It would have been a very different matter if the propagation of species had led nowhere. That would have indicated a lawless passion at the heart of the universe, would have constrained us to doubt the purity of the Spirit of Nature. But if, as Evolution affirms, the propagation of species is a search for higher things, if with each new diffusion of life the higher thing comes nearer, if every step of the process renders existence more noble, if the work is crowned before our sight by the emergence of a human soul, we feel that the seeming license has been on the lines of virtue, and that under the guise of passion Nature has been pursuing a path of rigid law.

From these combined considerations I think I am en-

titled to say that the phase of science current in our time has mitigated the religious difficulties which were read on the page of Nature by the followers of the old régime. It seems a strange conjunction—Evolution and Hope! These are stars which we should not expect to come together. We associate a bright view of the world with life's unscientific time—the age of youth. We speak of the *Optimism* of youth, the sanguineness of youth, the dreams of youth. We intend to convey the impresssion of intellectual pity. We express a judgment that the testimony of youth is of no value because it precedes all experience; we reject the morning roses just because they have been *gathered* in the morning. We call the testimony of the morning the voice of poetry, and we oppose it to the voice of science as the fanciful to the real. But has it ever struck us that the strongest support of Optimism is just the fact that it is greatest in youth! Whence does youth get its Optimism? It cannot be from personal knowledge, for its knowledge of life is to come; why should it tend to look up rather than down? I answer, The uplifted glance of youth comes from that very principle of Evolution which is supposed to be its counterpoise. It has no personal experience, but it has a vast ancestral experience. We must never forget that there is an ancestral memory. I come into the world an heir to personal experiences which were never mine; I wander by the side of a stream which has been long flowing. The bent which my youth receives is a hereditary bent. I have the blood of myriad human ancestors; I have the blood of myriad animal ancestors. All the testimonies of the past are within me. The generations of my fellow men are there; the wild beasts of the forest are there; the birds of the sky are there. The land in which I open my eyes is already ringing with echoes of vanished voices. Not without experience do I begin my earthly way.

But if in this beginning I tend to sing rather than to sigh,

if at the dawn of life's morning my accents are those of gladness rather than of gloom, how is this to be explained? Can it be otherwise accounted for than as the testimony of heredity to the balance of joy over grief? If you once concede the position that the age of youth is habitually the age of hope, you are driven into the other position that throughout the past ages hope has prevailed. Before you sneer at the Optimism of youth I would have you remember that the Optimism of manhood rests on no such solid basis. The songs of manhood are the result of its personal successes—of the sunshine I have individually experienced, of the triumphs I have individually won. But the songs of youth have no such origin; they are antecedent to personal fortune. And for that very reason they mean more, their testimony is more worth having. Theirs is the testimony of the past. They express the sum of common experience. If I am born with an instinct rather of joy than of grief I bring to the world a message from its yesterday; I prove that for one circle at least the gold dominates over the grey. If the inventory of present life should lead to the conclusion that the majority of the human race have shared in this experience—in other words, if the Optimism of youth be not only a phrase but a fact, we shall receive from the voice of a transmitted instinct the surest possible evidence for the predominance of happiness on the earth.

G. MATHESON.

### BAPTISM FOR THE DEAD.

(1 CORINTHIANS XV. 19.)

THE object of this note is to point out that "baptism for the dead" in a literal sense is not in itself an improbable custom nor even in the circumstances of those days wholly unjustifiable; that St. Paul's words are best explained by the existence of such a custom; and that a right apprehen-