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THE

BIBLIOTHECA SACRA.

ARTICLE I.

A STUDY IN BIBLICAL BIOGRAPHY.

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SCRIPTURES IN TURKISH.

PERHAPS no biographical sketch of all the Bible furnishes more real difficulty than that of Samson. We are baffled in our attempt rightly to understand the character presented. The strange romance of the story doubtless often charmed our childish imaginations. The marvellous and almost incredible strength of Samson, the startling and rapidly shifting scenes which form the setting of his exploits; the oddity of his acts and of his sayings, the tragic ending of his life—all combined to make a strong impression upon us.

But in our maturer years we have, not unlikely, been as much repelled by the defects in the moral character of the hero as we were once attracted by his prowess. And it may be that we have turned aside from the record, feeling that it is a riddle more difficult of solution than the one Samson proposed to the guests at his wedding-feast. We see, on the one hand, that Samson, in a more marked and conspicuous manner than was the case with most of the remarkable characters of Old Testament history, makes his appearance upon the stage of human life under God's especial and miraculous interposition and care. It is repeatedly asserted that the "Spirit of the Lord" came upon him. God answered his last prayer for vengeance on his enemies; and finally,

his name is found among those mentioned by the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews as men who, "through faith, subdued kingdoms, wrought righteousness, and obtained a good report."

On the other hand, the whole moral and social character of Samson seems erratic and defective. He marries a wife among a people who are his own and his people's enemies. He holds relations repeatedly with disreputable women. He hesitates not to utter what is false. Certainly, so far as the record goes, he seems very little of a saint. Nay, let us frankly say it, if judged by the principles of Christian character as taught in the New Testament, the character of Samson, so far as we can apprehend it from the narrative in the Book of Judges, utterly fails. Now, it may be, in relation to this and to other sketches of character given in the Biblical narrative, as is true in relation to some very briefly stated facts, and still more in relation to some imperfectly revealed teachings of the sacred word, that, while some knowledge is given us, we must wait for full and perfectly satisfying knowledge till we shall behold both human characters and all spiritual truth no longer as through a glass darkly, but face to face. If this be so, it is to be hoped that we can exercise the needed patience and the needed docility. The truth of God is an infinite sea, and will satisfy our souls, as they develop, to all eternity. Still, it is both our duty and our privilege to compare such a biographical sketch as that of Samson with other similar sketches in the Bible, and, by a study as careful and exhaustive as possible, to discover, if we may, the method and the principles of Biblical biography.

The first remark I would make, as applying to the case of Samson in particular, and to sketches of Biblical characters in general, is, that the sketch is *exceedingly fragmentary*.

We are told that Samson judged Israel twenty years. Yet all that is related of him might easily have transpired in a single year. But what of the life and acts of the divinely-appointed judge of the people of God during all those twenty

years? We have absolutely no annals of the events of those — it may be eventful — years. The entire Book of Judges is made up, indeed, not of any continuous historical narrative, but of graphic sketches of history and of biography: The story of Ehud; of Deborah and Barak; of Jael and Sisera; the story of Gideon; the story and parable of Jotham; the sad story of Jephthah and Jephthah's daughter; then this story of Samson, and the narrative of the almost entire extirpation of the tribe of Benjamin, with the account of the singular manner in which that dire calamity was averted. And then the beautiful story of Ruth, a story of the same period of history, fittingly supplements the longer record of the Book of Judges.

We should, indeed, hardly convey a correct impression, were we to imply that, in the matter of sketches of personal character, the Book of Judges is exceptionally fragmentary. As history its record is less continuous than most of the books of the Old Testament; but Biblical biography is everywhere fragmentary. Methuselah lived nine hundred and sixty-nine years. How much do we know of him? Even of Adam, after the first years, we know nothing. The record of the life of our great progenitor is, for eight centuries of it, a perfect blank. What the internal history of that life was — what relation Adam held to his posterity while he lived — is all unknown to us. So of Noah. There are a few salient facts of his life presented to us; while all the other events of those centuries of life lie unrevealed. The same is true of the patriarchs and of the prophets. We have no biography of them. The sacred pen gives us a glimpse, here and there, and that is all. Perhaps we shall study those characters in their completeness in eternity.

Another principle of Biblical biography is to exhibit what ever is shown at all of the character of good men *just as they were*, and especially so on the side of weakness, sin, and want. This principle is diametrically opposite to one of the most marked characteristics of all merely human biographical writing. We take up the memoir of a distinguished man, and we find, and we expect to find, the character and

the life-record set before us at its best—in a manner idealized, the coarsenesses smoothed off, the selfishness and the littleness cancelled, all the excellences magnified. How strikingly contrary to this is the frank, outspoken tone of all Biblical sketches of personal character. No concealing of faults, no magnifying of virtues or virtuous acts, no laudation here. On the contrary, the intensely human character, the frailty, the defects, the sin and guilt, are photographed with unflinching fidelity, sometimes with painful intensity. The stories of Abraham's prevarications concerning his wife are told with a detail scarcely less minute than that which tells us of an exercise of faith which has been the pattern for believers for almost four thousand years.

The narrative of Jacob's deceiving his father is most graphically told, and a singular prominence is given to his more than questionable contrivance for increasing his possessions while shepherd of Laban's flock. On the other hand, very little is told us of the ripening and sanctifying of character, which, as many a hint shows, became, after the return from Syria to Canaan, a character of humble piety—a reverential walking with God.

If we had not the wonderful confessions, yearnings, pleadings, the melting contrition, and the humble and holy rapture of David's Psalms to help us fill up the record of his life, we could hardly understand, after reading of his adultery and murder, his fits of unmanly fear, and his plans of cruel revenge, how he could be "a man after God's own heart"!

On the other hand, the character of Balaam is liable to impress the reader more favorably than the truth would warrant. There is no finer Hebrew poetry in all the Bible than the language of his prophecies concerning Israel. He steadfastly resists the most tempting offers to go contrary to the divine command; and yet we know he was accursed of God. The apostolic declaration concerning him is explicit, that "he loved the wages of unrighteousness." And in the sequel of the Old Testament narrative we are informed that the one who devised the infernal plan of seducing the Israelites

by means of the Moabite women was this same Balaam. But take up the account of Balaam, without this subsequent statement, and without the New Testament commentary on his character, and it is difficult to see that, underneath a great profession of doing as God bids him, he desires, with great desire, to please the king of Moab, and receive the honor and emoluments awaiting him; while his actual blessing of Israel is simply because the hand of God controls him against his will; so that he is but a mouth for uttering what God chooses, just as the kings of Assyria and Babylon were a sword in the hand of God to execute his judgments upon his guilty people, although they had not the least purpose to fulfil any command of God.

A careful examination of the story of Samson, comparing this with other biographical sketches in the Bible, makes evident the further important principle, that the favor of God is not forfeited by sins of ignorance, by any natural and spontaneous conformity to the customs of the time, even though acts committed in the course of such conformity would now, under the clearly enunciated and well understood principles of Christian morality, be seriously reprehensible; even though they would justly occasion excommunication from the Christian church, and would incur, in a high degree, the divine displeasure. That, in view of a clearer and more spiritual revelation of the moral law, and greater light on the individual conscience, an act may be innocent of serious moral blame at one time and in the case of one person, which would be flagrantly culpable at another time and in the case of another person, is a fundamental and most necessary principle for the right understanding of the merit or demerit of moral acts and moral character.

From the sketches of character in the Bible we may easily and unerringly infer that many of those things for which we are often disposed to blame and censure men do not at all forfeit the favor of God. Where no precept or principle of the Bible or clear decision of conscience — of *conscience*, observe, not of judgment or taste — is contravened, a con-

formity to the social customs of his time is not a moral offence for a good man, and does not forfeit the favor of God.

There is a broad and very stringent law of Christian and moral duty which makes it wrong for me to do a thing, the influence of which will naturally be harmful to others, because it is harmful; but a discussion of the principle herein involved would lead us far from the subject now in hand. By far the greater number of ecclesiastical censures and anathemas have always been for offences which do not forfeit the favor of God.

We must not fail to remark, however, in the fourth place, that from the fact of there being no expression of God's displeasure against manifest moral offences we cannot infer that such acts are not moral offences, and do not receive the divine condemnation. There is no distinct statement that the prevarications of Abraham, the deceptions of Jacob, the licentiousness of Samson, the rash vow of Jephthah, the drunkenness of Noah were condemned of God. But it would be very foolish, as well as wicked, to infer from this that God approved of any one of these things. Often the divine displeasure against such acts is easily inferred from the narrative itself, or its context, and sometimes, as notably in the case of Jacob, the divine displeasure is indelibly stamped upon the subsequent life of the individual and his race. The Bible everywhere supposes that men who read it have a moral sense, and also the honesty to exercise it; and that spirit of criticism which loves to find excuse for evil doing from the acts of good men is both very weak and very blameworthy. When we see black we are expected to discern that it is black, without being told that it is so.

Let us now endeavor to find what is the characteristic in moral character and conduct which receives the approval of God. What is it which, when present in character, is its preserving salt—the thing which makes all pure and acceptable in God's sight.

We have seen that God does not deny his approval to men

for many faults which they possess, nor even in the face of great sins which they commit. We see that the guilty, but repentant, David is accepted; that the erratic Samson is put in the list of men of faith by New Testament authority; while the poetic prophet Balaam, the man who declared he could not go one step to the right or left except as God bid him, was accursed and utterly rejected.

The one essential thing, the great lesson of Old Testament biography, is this: *The thing pleasing to God is the purpose, the habit of absolute obedience to God—the will surrendered to God's will.* Let us follow this clew through all the characters of Biblical biography, and we shall find it a silver line of light running all through the Bible.

Saul had many very amiable characteristics; but he was disobedient. His will was not subjected to God's will, and he was rejected. He had no purpose to do punctually what God bade. David's sin and guilt were great; but his penitence was profound, and his spirit of obedience was perfect. Abraham erred; but he bent his will to God's will. Throughout the history of the kings of Israel and Judah, the disobedient Jeroboams and Ahabs are in sharp contrast to the obedient, although personally imperfect, Hezekiahs and Josiahs.

The prominence given in the Bible to the habit and the spirit of obedience, even as compared with mere faith, is very noteworthy. The faith of Noah is less signal than that implicit obedience to God's command which, in the face of the scorn and contempt of his generation, pursued the steady path of work God had appointed for a hundred and twenty years. He might have believed, and yet failed to obey. His faith uncoupled with obedience, would but have opened his eyes to the impending destruction, while the eyes of others were closed, but would not have saved him. By faith, says the record in the Epistle to the Hebrews, he *prepared an ark*; he showed his faith by obedience. And of Abraham it is expressly said that, when called to leave his home and kindred, *he obeyed.* So in that most remarkable instance of his faith in the scene on Mount Moriah, the obedience is

more conspicuous than the faith, or, if you please, it is the faith translated into the act of obedience, where the odds were that he would believe, and then heart and hands faint and fail on the threshold of the act.

Knowing, as we do, that God upholds and will help, even to its final salvation, every believing soul, we have the assurance that all true faith will develop in obedience; but on the side of the will and the life of the believer himself the problem is to translate faith into an obedient life. Considered on the side of our own human will and responsibility, — and this most nearly concerns us, — if we weigh Christ's own declaration, that "he that endureth to the end shall be saved"; if we consider that the test he gave for the sincerity of the love, not merely the faith, of his own disciples was their obedience, — "If ye love me, keep my commandments," we may well doubt the quality of our faith till it has been tested — till it has shown itself fruitful in obedience. Faith, just because it is an internal and personal act, is incapable of being effectively tested except by the Omniscient; but the habit of punctual obedience to God, when such obedience squarely traverses our own wishes, our natural desires, tastes, and habits, interferes with our business, deranges our plans, and, in fine, makes it needful for us to reconstruct our whole manner of living, — such obedience fairly tests faith, as the fire tries silver. Christ put himself under the conditions of a man in his earthly life, made himself subject to the divine law; and the most conspicuous thing in that earthly life of his was his absolute and perfect obedience to God. How often he repeats it, that he is here on earth to do the Father's will. Obedience was the law of his human life. His trust was absolutely perfect, and his love both to God and man was spontaneous. It was the very breath of his life. His obedience it was that led him, in the face of a present and coming agony before which his human soul fainted, and his body sweat blood, when he cried out, "If it be possible, let this cup pass from me," to add, "Not my will, but thine, be done"; and then, in that supreme moment,

it was the fixed, set purpose of his soul to do the work appointed, though it rent his soul,—to *obey*, though obedience were death,—which completed the possibility and the fact of our salvation.

Man is as much a moral being, as much responsible for his life and character, and under as absolute obligation to obey the divine law, as if sin and the fall of the human race had not made an atonement necessary in order that he may be saved. And farther, the real test of the quality of his character must still lie in his obedience, even though, in order that he may begin to obey acceptably and successfully, he must, by an act of faith, accept the help offered him. We may not magnify faith itself, and stop on that as though our work were done, but go on from this point, build up from this foundation.

Let us emphasize this point still more plainly. God has made us moral beings, made us responsible for what we do and what we are, and has demanded our obedience. We are *now* in a state—whether you say it is by our own sin or our first parents' sin, whether you say we *cannot* obey, or certainly *shall not* obey without divine help—such that we need, and that God has graciously given, adequate help in sending us his Son to die for us, and that he has made it our first duty to believe on him. This act of faith, through God's grace, bridges the fearful chasm sin has made, and restores the lost capabilities. The law of man's moral being has not been changed. We are still to obey God. The moral character we are to build up is a character now, as before it would have been, of obedience to God. The initial step, the first act, is faith; but we are to add to our faith virtue, to virtue knowledge, temperance, and, in short, the whole solid structure of a complete moral character in obedience to God. Wilfulness, opposition in any form to God's will as revealed in his word or his providence, is disobedience, and can never be overbalanced by our faith. Nay, the proper result and development of true faith is in loyal obedience; else faith, however strong and assured it seems, is a delusion and a

snare. We must discipline ourselves to the habit of obedience; and even when the heart and hands reluctantly submit, the renewed will must insist on their submission, till obedience becomes, as it will become in the end, spontaneous. And this is the end toward which all true obedience tends, the blessed fruit it brings, that the law at last becomes a law in the heart, till love and obedience blend. We may reach heaven before we perfectly reach this state; but we shall reach it there.

It has often been remarked, and justly, that the Bible is a marvellous whole, composed of an almost infinite variety. In its pages mingle and blend the elements of veritable history, exalted poetry, prophetic utterance, proverbial apothegms, moral instruction, and the highest religious teaching. There is no narrative so lucid, no pathos of personal story so touching, no poetic beauty or sublimity so high, no grandeur of prophetic language so majestic, no moral and religious teaching so impressive and cogent as our Bible contains. All literature has been fed at this fountain, and truly nowhere has the stream risen higher than its source. The mind of the Spirit has expressed itself through human channels with surprising effect. Notwithstanding the inspiration, the mind of each writer is distinct and clear, as though both thought and style, material and manner, were his own. Now, out of this manifoldness of subject-matter, this many-sidedness of authorship, or rather of sacred writers under the divine guidance, we have one perfect book — a book absolutely adapted, as a divine revelation, to the wants of all men through all time. Now, have we not something like this in the human characters sketched in the Bible? Not only is it true that the Biblical record gives us but fragmentary sketches of character; it is also true that the characters, as they existed in their probationary life here, were, at best, but fragments. How imperfect was the knowledge of the patriarch Job! The Christian now who should grope as he did amid the discipline of God's providence would be pronounced very poorly skilled in reading God's purpose in

afflicting his children. How little any of the Old Testament saints knew of the whole plan of redemption through the one sacrifice of Christ. And in reference to the spirituality of God's law, as reaching to the heart, its emotions and thoughts, as we know it from the interpretation Christ put upon it, how poor and defective the knowledge, and how low the character of the saints of the olden time! They were but children in both knowledge and character. And more than this. Not only were they imperfect, but they were one-sided. Only certain elements of a complete character are visible in any one, not all in their completeness. The sternness of Elijah is tempered by the gentleness of Elisha. The rapt vision of Isaiah and the ruggedness of Ezekiel are toned down by the tenderness and the tears of Jeremiah. The reckless intrepidity of Peter and the unflinching boldness of Paul find their complement in the gentle and loving disciple who leaned on Jesus' breast, and who in his extreme old age would come into the assemblies of his spiritual children simply to bid them love one another. In the same Bible we have a character like Deborah, or like the fearless Jael, and we have the sweet simplicity and the daughterly affection and obedience of the Moabitess Ruth, the shrewd intelligence and womanly dignity of the Carmelitess Abigail, and the beautiful faith and fidelity of Hannah. But the characters all are but fragments of what human character was designed to be. Either knowledge is little, or judgment is defective, or conscience is dull, or balance is wanting, or there is no manly self-control.

If we could only blend and fuse the elements of character as we find them in those of whom we read, or in the characters of living men,—the strength of Samson with the wisdom of Solomon and the meekness of Moses and the moral power of Abraham,—what perfection of character would be the result! Who of us has not wished it possible to unite the excellences of our friends in one person? And it is just this imperfectness of all human character that makes even the best men unsafe models. With all our

egotism, who of us would be willing to have our own children grow up to be just like ourselves ?

But let us thank God that there is one perfect model of human character. When we study that, mark well its proper lineaments, and justly appreciate its true quality, how it attracts and wins our love and admiration, and still grows upon us as we live "looking unto Jesus," finding that for us to live is Christ, and knowing that to die and be with him will be gain! And then, when we are told that when he, our beloved, our pattern, our human Jesus, our perfect man, shall appear again, we shall be like him,—our imperfection made perfect, all wants supplied, all lacks filled out, all ugly excrescences taken away, and we no longer mere fragments of men, but whole men in Christ Jesus,—what conception do we gain of the power of the work of our blessed Redeemer! When human characters are made perfect,—when all that repels, even in good men, is removed, and the void filled in with the woof of refined and spiritual manhood,—then we shall understand more perfectly the significance of our Lord's work in restoring and perfecting human character; then we shall know what he means when he says, "If I be lifted up, I will draw all men unto me."