

THE HEBREW CONCEPTION OF ANIMALS.

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WHAT was the view taken of animals by the Jewish people, apart from the fundamental ideas implied by a Peace in Nature?

It was the habit of Hebrew writers to leave a good deal to the imagination: in general, they only cared to throw as much light on hidden subjects as was needful to regulate conduct. They gave precepts rather than speculations. There remain obscure points in their conception of animals, but we know how they did *not* conceive them: they did not look upon them as "things"; they did not feel towards them as towards automata.

After the Deluge, there was established "the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is upon the earth." Evidently you cannot make a covenant with "things."

That the Jews supposed the intelligence of animals to be not extremely different from the intelligence of man, is to be deduced from the story of Balaam, for it is said that God opened the mouth—not the mind—of the ass. The same story illustrates the ancient belief that animals see apparitions which are concealed from the eyes of man. The great interest to us, however, of this Scriptural narrative is its significance as a lesson in humanity. When the Lord opened the mouth of the ass, what did the ass say? She asks her master why he has smitten her three times. Balaam answers with a frankness which, at least, does him credit, because he was enraged with the ass for turning aside and not minding him, and he adds (still enraged, and, strange to say, nowise surprised at the animal's power of speech) that he only wishes he had a sword in his hand as he would then kill her outright. How like this is to the voice of modern brutality! The ass, continuing the conversa-

tion, rejoins in words which it would be a shame to disfigure by putting them into the idiom of the twentieth century: "Am I not thine ass upon which thou hast ridden ever since I was thine unto this day? Was I ever wont to do so unto thee?" Balaam, who has the merit, as I have noticed, of being candid, replies, "No, you never were." Then, for the first time, the prophet sees the angel standing in the path with a drawn sword in his hand,—an awe-inspiring vision. And what are the angel's first words to the terrified prophet who lies prostrate on his face? They are a reproof for his inhumanity. "Wherefore hast thou smitten thine ass these three times?" Then the angel tells how the poor beast which he has used thus has saved her master from certain death, for had she not turned from him he would have slain Balaam and saved her alive. "And Balaam said unto the angel of the Lord, 'I have sinned.'"

Balaam was not a Jew; but the nationality of the personages in the Bible and the origin or authorship of its several parts are not questions which affect the present inquiry. The point of importance is, that the Jews believed the Scriptures to contain divine truth.

With regard to animals having the gift of language, it appears from a remark made by Josephus that the Jews thought that all animals spoke before the Fall. In Christian folklore there is a superstition that animals can speak during Christmas night: an obvious reference to their return to an unfallen state.

The righteous man, says Solomon, regardeth the life of his beast; a proverb which is often misquoted, "merciful" being substituted for "righteous," by which the maxim loses half its force. The Hebrew Scriptures contain two definite injunctions of humanity to animals. One is the command not to plough with the ox and the ass yoked together,—in Palestine I have seen even the ass and the camel yoked together, but it is a cruel practice as their unequal steps cause inconvenience to both yoke-fellows and especially to the weakest. The other is the prohibition to muzzle the ox which treads out the corn: a simple humanitarian rule which it is truly surprising how any one, even after an early education in casuistry, could have interpreted as a metaphor. There are three other commands of great interest, because they show how important it was thought to preserve even the mind of man from growing callous. One is the order not to kill a cow or she-goat or ewe and her young both on the same day. The second is the analogous order not to seethe the kid in its mother's milk. The third refers

to birds-nesting: if by chance you find a bird's nest on a tree or on the ground and the mother bird is sitting on the eggs or on the fledglings, you are on no account to capture her when you take the eggs or the young birds (one would like birds-nesting to have been forbidden altogether, but I fear that the human boy in Syria had too much of the old Adam in him for any such law to have proved effectual). Let the mother go, says the writer in the Book of Deuteronomy, and if you must take something, take only the young ones. This command concludes in a very solemn way, for it ends with the promise (for what may seem a little act of unimportant sentiment) of blessing to man for honoring his own father and mother—that it will be well with him and that his days will be long in the land.

In the law relative to the observance of the Seventh Day, not only is no point insisted on more strongly than the repose of the animals of labor, but in one of the oldest versions of the fourth commandment the repose of animals is spoken of as if it were the chief object of the Sabbath: "Six days shalt thou do thy work and on the seventh day thou shalt rest *that* thine ox and thine ass may rest." (Exodus xxiii.)

Moreover, it is expressly stated of the Sabbath of the Lord the seventh year when no work was to be done, that all which the land produces of itself is to be left to the enjoyment of the beasts that are in the land.

The wisdom of animals is continually praised. "Go to the ant, thou sluggard; consider her ways and be wise: which having no guide, overseer, or ruler, provideth her meat in the summer and gathereth her food in the harvest." So said the Wisest of the Jews. I am tempted to quote here a passage from the writings of Giordano Bruno: "With what understanding the ant gnaws her grain of wheat lest it should sprout in her underground habitation! The fool says this is instinct, but we say it is a species of understanding." If Solomon did not make the same reflexion, it was only because that wonderful word "instinct" had not yet been invented.

We have seen that the Jews supposed animals to be given to men for use not for abuse, and the whole of Scripture tends to the conclusion that the Creator—who had called good all the creatures of his hand—regarded none as unworthy of his providence. This view is plainly endorsed by the saying of Christ that not a sparrow falls to the ground without the will of the Father, and by the say-

ing of Mahomet: "There is no beast that walks upon the earth but its provision is from God."

But there is something more. Every one knows that the Jews were allowed to kill and eat animals. The Jewish religion makes studiously few demands on human nature. "The ways of the Lord were pleasant ways." Since men craved for meat, or, in Biblical language, since they lusted after flesh, they were at liberty to eat those animals which, in an Eastern climate, could be eaten without danger to health. But on one condition: the body they might devour—what was the body? It was earth. The soul they might not touch. The mysterious thing called life must be rendered up to the Giver of it—to God. The man who did not do this when he killed a lamb, was a murderer. "The blood shall be imputed to him, he hath shed blood, and that man shall be cut off from among his people."

The inclination must be resisted to dispose of this mysterious ordinance as a mere sanitary measure. It was a sanitary measure but it was much besides. The Jews believed that every animal had a soul, a spirit, which was beyond human jurisdiction; with which they had no right to tamper. When we ask, however, what this soul, this spirit was, we find ourselves groping in the dark. Was it material, as the soul was thought to be by the Egyptians and by the earliest doctors of the Christian Church? Was it an immaterial, impersonal divine essence? Was its identity permanent or temporary? We can give no decisive answer, but we may assume with considerable certainty that life, spirit, whatever it was, appeared to the Jews to possess one nature whether in men or in animals.

When a Jew denied the immortality of the soul, he denied it both for man and for beast. "I saw in my heart," wrote the author of Ecclesiastes, "concerning the estate of men that God might manifest them and that they might see that they are beasts. For that which befalleth the sons of men befalleth beasts, even one thing befalleth them; as the one dieth so the other dieth; yea they have all one breath: so that a man hath no pre-eminence above a beast."

The mist which surrounds the Hebrew idea of the soul may proceed from the fact that they did not know themselves what they meant by it, or from the fact that they once knew what they meant by it so well as to render elucidation superfluous. If the teraphim represented the Lares or family dead, then the archaic Jewish idea of the soul was simple and definite. It is possible that in all

later times, two diametrically opposed opinions existed contemporaneously, as was the case with the Pharisees and Sadducees. The Jewish people did not feel the pressing need to dogmatise about the soul that other peoples have felt; they had one living soul which was immortal, and its name was Israel.

Still, through all ages, from the earliest times till now, the Jews have continued to hold sacred "the blood which is the life."

In India, where similar ordinances are enforced, there are hints of a suspicion which, probably, was not absent from the minds of Hebrew legislators: the haunting suspicion of a possible mixing-up of personality. Here we tread on the skirts of magic: a subject which belongs to starless nights.

We come back into the light of day when we glance at the relations, which, according to Jewish tradition, existed between animals and their Creator. We see a beautiful interchange of gratitude on the one side and watchful care on the other. As the ass of Balaam recognised the Angel, so do all animals—except man—at all times thus recognise their God. "But ask, now, the beasts and they shall teach thee, and the fowls of the air and they shall tell thee . . . who knoweth not of all these that the hand of the Lord hath wrought this? In whose hand is the soul of every living thing and the breath of all mankind."

I will only add to these words of Job, a few verses taken here and there from the Psalms which form a true anthem of our fellow-creatures of the earth and air:

"Beasts and all cattle, creeping things and flying fowl, let them praise the name of the Lord.

"He giveth to the beast his food and to the young ravens which cry.

"He sendeth the springs into the valleys which run among the hills;

"They give drink to every beast of the field, the wild asses quench their thirst.

"By them shall the fowls of heaven have their habitation which sing among the branches.

"The trees of the Lord are full of sap, the cedars of Lebanon which he hath planted,

"Where the birds make their nests; as for the stork, the fir-trees are her house.

"The great hills are a refuge for the wild goats and the rocks for the conies.

"Thou makest darkness and it is night wherein all the beasts of the forest do creep forth;

"The young lions roar after their prey and seek their meat from God;

"The sun ariseth, they gather themselves together and lay them down in their dens.

"Yea, the sparrow hath found an house and the swallow a nest for herself where she may lay her young.

"Even thine altars, O Lord of Hosts, my King and my God."