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of Atonement

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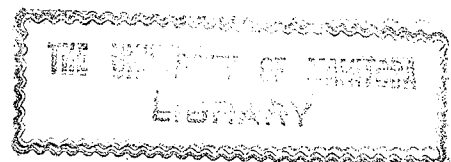
The Aeschylean View of Atonement

by

The Rev. E.K. Moffatt.

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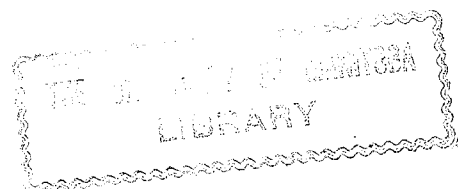
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The Aeschylean View of Atonement.

If Sophocles gave us more exquisite pictures of human suffering and Euripides more vivid delineations of human character than Aeschylus, the last may fairly be said to be pre-eminent for his clear portrayal of man's relation to God, found through pain. To Aeschylus suffering is part of an eternal law, which stamps its impress upon all his plays. This law entails suffering upon the sinner but also ensures ultimate redemption for the righteous. It is true that 'the sins of the fathers are visited upon the children' and that god-sent sufferings are frequently the lot of the innocent, but herein is that which redeems the law from fatalism. The vengeance of heaven is stayed by the faith, submission and piety of a righteous man. Free-will thus becomes an integral part of religion and development of character 'per ardua ad astra' is always possible.

Before, then, we consider how, in the dramas of Aeschylus, man can be reconciled to the gods, we must understand the ancient Greek view of sin and punishment. These terms loom large in Greek Tragedy. Sin, with all its devious consequences, is the root-basis of every argument. From the theatre-pulpit of each religious festival men were ever hearing denunciations



of sin and threats of awful retribution, were ever made to realize the tragedy of human life. In no single play is this overshadowed by aught else, much less omitted. Perhaps then, the silver thread of hope and happiness, which runs through the dark pattern of every drama, is more beautiful when discovered or more brilliant by force of contrast. If we first trace briefly the gloomy background we shall better emerge into the sunlight.

Almost every sin could be traced to *ἕβρις* which embraces self-indulgence and self-sufficiency, evils which have ever proved the downfall of mortal man. Its opposite is *σωφροσύνη* implying a pious (but not fanatic) asceticism through which human nature could enter the gates of happiness. Aeschylus and his successors recognised the truth that the soul is elevated through discipline. It is the 'supreme god' whom we see as

τὸν φρονεῖν βροτοῦς ὀδύ-  
 βαυτα, τὸν πᾶσιν μάθος  
 θεῖτα κυρίως ἔχειν

and a modicum of pain is necessary for all men, so that *σωφροσύνη* itself is redemptive in its nature. But the majority of characters in Aeschylus have not acquired, or do not keep, this virtue. As we have noted before, the plays have for their *raison d'être* the insolence of an impious mortal who tramples upon the decrees of heaven to satisfy a personal lust and pride - insolence involving vengeance for the law of *ἀπάραυτι πᾶθειν* is inexorable. 'Sin and sorrow, the old, old story' or 'Pride goeth before a fall' those are the themes for an audience to ponder. And if we translate *ἕβρις* as pride and consider it, in its wide sense, as the root of all evil, we may see why it is visited with so terrible a wrath from above. ~~—~~

In the Persians *Ἔβρις* is described as

.....the root of evil in every state  
 The source of sin, the very Fiend his foe,  
 The head of hell, the bough, the branch, the tree  
 From which do spring and sprout such fleshly seeds,  
 As nothing else but moan and mischief breeds.

and in Homer, Herodotus and Aristophanes, besides innumerable instances of this sense in the Tragedians, we find the word (and its cognates) frequently used to express man's wanton violation of Heaven's laws.

Xerxes brought himself and the Persian host to extremity of woe through vainglorious pride; through that form of pride which makes man wish to triumph, at any price, over a personal foe did Atreus sin horribly against Thyestes; the punitive expedition against Troy was just and justifiable but the undertaking was marred by the wanton sacrifice of Iphigenia and the wholesale destruction of the city, acts of impiety which entailed fearful woe upon the guilty; and finally, the cruel self-sufficient hero of Aeschylus' masterpiece is the incarnation of arrogant contempt for man-made or heaven-sent obstacles. In each case there is a mingled self-conceit and self-gratification that is abhorrent to Zeus, and when mortals 'do conceive thoughts not seemly for mortals' and act upon such, then punishment ensues.

For, since

'Boastfulness has thoughts higher than befit humanity' \*

it is the seed of a terrible harvest. It was after Agamemnon had killed the sacred stag of Artemis and insolently boasted that he was the better hunter that disaster tracked him down, -

'for his injurious pride

Filled for this house the cup of desolation

Fated himself to drain it to the dregs'.

We have been considering sin as a transgression of the bounds set for man by humble Piety; wherever he oversteps these limits man is guilty and will receive punishment. Now we must take into account the fact that the avalanche of woe descends not only upon the original *ἔβριότης* but upon his family even to the third generation. Most religious teaching emphasizes this. The horror of sin is its contagious nature. To a Greek this was a truism and in the foreground of Aeschylean drama we see this ancestral curse working with the inevitableness of Fate. The whole Trojan war, caused by sin and ending in illimitable woe, is an obvious illustration of this. Every misdeed may be the cause of anguish to people yet unborn. Certainly there is not palliation of the effect of *ἔβρις*; it is awful enough.

The question arises: 'How can it be said to be the fault of a man, when he is visited by a punishment inherited from a sinful parent or ancestor'? It is easily answered. It was not the fault of Orestes that his house had sinned but it was his mis-

\* Sept. cont. Theb. 407.

fortune to suffer for the evil past. It can only be a fault when the inheritor of a doom sins in person. Passage after passage of Aeschylus and Sophocles echo the compassion which the Greek heart felt for those who suffered for 'the sins of the fathers'. For such misfortune even the gods had a measure of pity. But when the heir to a curse identifies himself with the sins of his house by sin, then it is a fault. And each fault must be fully expiated.

'Blood for blood, and blow for blow -

Thou shalt reap as thou dost sow'.

The penalty is exacted to the uttermost farthing.

Thus we have seen how terrible are the issues of an act, or condition, of *ἔβρις*. Estrangement from God, dire woes for self and posterity, endless disquiet for the family (or nation) that is embroiled.

How shall such a curse be stayed? How shall its heir become reconciled to the gods? By what evidence of humility, by what sacrifice can there be at-one-ment between mortal and immortal? How, in fact, shall Heaven be satisfied?

When we look to Aeschylus to furnish an answer to these queries, we have not far to seek. There are two signal instances of atonement, one in the case of Orestes in the *Eumenides*, the other in the drama *Prometheus Vincetus*. From these we may learn the Aeschylean view of reconciliation. We shall not find any clear

teaching as to man's eternal happiness, his will merged in God's, his life unending bliss. The poet has painted no picture of an Elysium for the penitent and just. Yet something finer than this can be found - a glimmering of the spiritual truth that the soul may find its weal through discipline and submission. In an essay 'The Dramatist as Prophet' Dr. Westcott says "The truth is an old one, and yet perhaps it is not fully learnt yet. Aeschylus could see that worship and honour, loyal and wise obedience can convert into sources of endless good the awful and inexorable laws of the external world." If we see man shaking off the curse, standing upright, humble and obedient, prepared resignedly to undergo retributive punishment for others' sins, we see man grasping the remedy and on the threshold of reconciliation.

To take our first instance - Orestes has not voluntarily, consciously been guilty of the *Ergas* which proved so calamitous to his house. In his case the Furies bring their penalties against a righteous man. The inherited curse is not lightly shaken off. Under a sense of duty and in obedience to a god's command, he at once commits a crime against the home and becomes the human agent of a just vengeance. He has to bear some of the punishment of a matricide. But his whole conduct stops the blight. His submission in part saves him. When his pains and lustrations have done their part in cleansing his tainted soul and washing away his stains, he can cry to Athene for pardon justifying his plea with the words: 'No guilt of blood is on my soul nor is my hand unclean'.

He is declared innocent and the representatives of immortal vengeance are satisfied by his self-control and discipline and by peculiar honors paid to them. Not only is Orestes innocent; his suffering checks the evil; his right has been the instrument in defeating wrong; his vicarious pain is efficacious in purifying the sin-soiled family. Heaven has allowed the righteousness of a man to effect a permanent cure for the wound made by man's sin. There can now be perfect happiness. *Ἔβρις* is of the earth, earthy and separates man from god, quenching the light of his nature. On the other hand, *σωφροσύνη* kindles the divine spark in man because it leads him to acquiescence in divine law. Orestes is *σωφρων* amid a storm of trouble and so becomes reconciled. Moreover, he is a representative of two parties, the family and the state, between which a destructive reaction has been going on. He is able to mediate between them and his supererogatory woes satisfy all offended rights. The reconciliation is as complete as a theologian could make it, whose chief idea of sin was as a dishonor to the gods and whose highest view of happiness was security found by unquestioning obedience to mystical authority.

That Aeschylus is unique among the dramatists in striking this note of reconciliation is worthy of record. Euripides was so hopelessly out of touch with the religious creed of the generation before him that we should not expect to find God and Man at one in his plays. Sophocles, however, had something of the religious awe of his predecessor; his plays have much the same motif; he drew pictures of men and women visited by endless woes for their trespasses.

Yet does he ever reflect a sure ray of hope to illumine the dark road of suffering, one, at least, which may light mortals to union with the gods? For such a character as Jocasta no reconciliation would be possible with Aeschylus, but would he leave Deianira or the family of Oedipus (e.g.) as Sophocles left them - godforsaken? They had not committed acts of *ὕβρις*. Oedipus is rash, Deianira imprudent; their fate seems out of proportion with their conduct. Cretes is little nobler than they and secures peace and happiness. We are forced to the belief that the later poet cared less for religion than for art. He portrayed human character developed in suffering, while the great prophet of Hellas shewed how man was related to God and how he might attain oneness with God. He is called harsh, severe, cold, terrible in his creed but if he misses the beauty and tenderness of Sophocles, the prophet weaves a golden thread of hope into the sable pattern of his message and offers his disciples something higher than was conceived by any other dramatist. Gloomy he may have been, but full of faith in heaven. It was reserved for his successor to strike a note of real pessimism and to make man cry that 'the ways of the world were indeed piteous for mortals but a disgrace for the gods'.\*

The other case of atonement is that of Prometheus. Though much is conjecture, we can safely assume these points as being taught in the trilogy: that God himself had first to find reconciliation with man and (in a measure) conquer his pride, and that vicarious

\* Hyllus in Soph. Trach. 1271.

suffering is a means of quenching the wrath of heaven.

Mention has been made of the supreme faith which Aeschylus evinces in the divine ruling of the moral order of the world. Possibly his finest tribute to the supreme god of heaven is found in the first choral hymn of the Agamemnon.

"For Jove doth teach men wisdom, sternly wins  
 To Virtue by the tutoring of their sins:  
 Yea! drops of torturing recollection chill  
 The sleeper's heart; 'gainst man's rebellious will  
     Jove works the wise remorse:  
 Dread powers, on awful seats enthroned, compel  
     Our hearts with gracious force.\*

In all his plays he breathes reverence, yet in Prometheus Bound we hear Jove taunted, mocked, threatened. Why is this? Some scholars see in this irreverence little except the insolence of one who needed a long punishment to teach him humility. But, if this is the case, why is there reason to believe in eventual compromise, why is the beneficence of Prometheus as strongly drawn and the tyranny of Zeus so plainly intimated? Why, if we are to learn from the play merely the lessons derived from Prometheus' fate, does the poet take such care to enlist our sympathies with the tortured god? Perhaps the explanation is this: The god who is responsible for the laws which punish *εἰς* must himself through experience understand

\* Professor Blackie's translation.

the nature of it. Zeus, in this play, is more cruelly despotic and arrogant than a Greek could imagine a god to be, especially if that Greek be an Aeschylus. But Zeus, like mortals, had to realize, at the commencement of his reign, the law he established of *τῷ τῶν θεῶν μίθῳ*. It is a god who brings him to such a realization, but a god who is not superior, not sinless. Prometheus was keen to help the human race and through him Zeus is induced to rule men more compassionately; through his agency there is, as it were, a better understanding between heaven and earth. Jove is supreme and will ever rule but he has learnt his lesson and has been made to realize the obligations of his kinship - he cannot regard man as he did before. The King has been lifted to the demands of the crown.

With Prometheus we sympathize. Yet here is a god (not supreme but answerable to his Lord for his conduct) guilty of flagrant *ἔβρις*. He was clever, benevolent, strong; but he had learned that "before honor is humility"; he was proud and haughty. Not, as Lucifer, to ruin mankind, but to save them did he sin like Lucifer. Defiance of the will of Jove demanded a long expiation, for whatever Jove at one time had to learn, his will could not be opposed by man or god, and man can only be at one with Jove when he knows this and acts upon the knowledge. The whole world must bow before the law that enjoins humility. The sufferings of Prometheus for the violation of this law are but an antitype of the pain which

every mortal must undergo if the rule is disobeyed and before reconciliation can be complete.

The most striking message, however, proclaimed in this vivid picture of long-drawn suffering is that which tells us of the possibility of vicarious suffering. The god chained to a rock for man's sake is an answer to those who unduly emphasize the 'harsh severity' of the poet's creed.. It was not many centuries later that Greeks were using this very drama as proof of the prefiguration of the One who suffered even unto death, that man might live. The Son of Man upon a rock pointed forward to the Son of Man upon the Cross - one of the many prophecies which our Supreme Father sent to a pagan world. In the woes endured on that crag Aeschylus saw the vis medicatrix which was to heal the breach between Jove and his subjects. But though there would be healing there would not be complete satisfaction. Heaven demands that the scales be balanced before there is perfect forgiveness. The penalties which Orestes endured were sufficient. Prometheus suffered for Man but cannot himself obtain release from, or be at peace with Jove.

.....!unless some god endure  
 Vicarious thy tortures, and exchange  
 His sunny ether for the rayless homes  
 Of gloomy Hades and deep Tartarus!

and this is the prophetic utterance of the god 'who hath never known a lie'. Another god must experience bitter pain to save Prometheus, who underwent such agony to save men.

There are but two definite proofs to offer that Aeschylus had a fixed faith in ultimate atonement and these have been labored. Nevertheless the arrangement of his most mature and skilful trilogy seems to say to us that he followed the religious scheme of every true vates who has warned or exhorted his world - the scheme of Sin, Retribution, Reconciliation. It seems most likely that one who painted the issues of human trespass in such vivid form would in every case follow out his theme to its logical conclusion. Only the blindest, darkest creed would allow the heirs of sin to wallow hopeless in its murky pools. The religion of Aeschylus is not blind and dark. He trumpets forth the hideousness of Wrong; he bemoans the discord, variance, estrangement which sin creates between rulers and ruled. Yet I think there is enough to shew that he believed in the possibility of unity, harmony, reconciliation being found for every mortal who desired to find them, not counting the cost.

But this admission leads on to more. If every trilogy ended with a picture of the alienated restored, the out-cast received and released from the ban, then the main point of the poet's theological teaching was reserved for the finale.

This finale would not be the grand climax of dramatic interest, but it would represent the kernel of the prophet's teaching. If so, the central doctrine of Aeschylus and Christ are one. Take away the Atonement and you have a religion not only maimed, but useless to sin-laden humanity. Therefore it is not too much to say that the man who wrote the Oresteia and pictured the Caucasian martyrdom, believed that the supremacy of Jove implied the ultimate redemption of erring men and women. He was one of God's 'choice spirits' sent into the world to catch a glimpse of God's law and God's love and destined to proclaim to his fellow-men the message he might read in the vision.

*E.K.M.*

