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Moffatt, Edward Knowler  
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of Atonement

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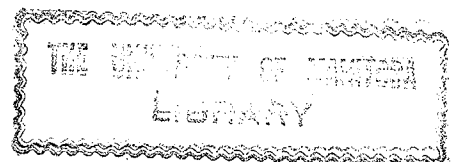
The Aeschylean View of Atonement

by

The Rev. E.K. Moffatt.

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May 1915.

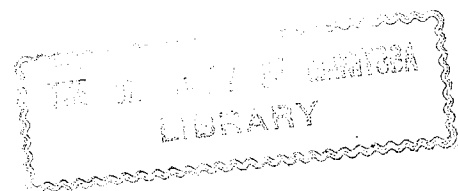


The Aeschylean View of Atonement.

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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 *ἔβρις* 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 *ἔβρις* 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. ~~—~~

Punishment ensues.

celve thoughts not seemly for mortals, and act upon such, then  
gratification that is abhorrent to Zeus, and when mortals do con-  
-obstacles. In each case there is a mingled self-conceit and self-  
is the incarnation of arrogant contempt for man-made or heaven-sent  
finely, the ornate self-sufficient heroism of Aeschylus, masterpiece  
city, acts of impiety which entailed fearful retribution upon the guilty; and  
wenton sacrifice of Iphigenia and the wholesale destruction of the  
Troy was just and justifiable but the undertaking was warranted by the  
Athens sin horribly against the gods; the punitive expedition against  
makes men wish to triumph, at any price, over a personal foe did  
of war through vainglorious pride; through that form of pride which  
heroes brought himself and the Persian host to extremity  
frequently used to express man's wanton violation of Heaven's laws.  
of this sense in the tragedians, we find the word (and its cognates)  
and in Homer, Herodotus and Aristophanes, besides innumerable instances  
as nothing else but man and mischief breeds.  
from which do spring and sprout such fleshly seeds,  
The head of hell, the bough, the branch, the tree  
The source of sin, the very fount his see,  
.....the root of evil in every state

In the Persians is described as *6/3 p.c.s*

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.