

THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY.

VOL. IV.

FEBRUARY, 1924.

No. 2.

Some Difficulties in the Speech of Stephen, Acts 7.

PROF. W. ARNDT, St. Louis, Mo.

The interpretation of the magnificent speech — Bengel calls it *documentum Spiritus pretiosum* — delivered by Stephen before the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem encounters a number of difficulties which at first sight appear somewhat formidable and, accordingly, have been used by critics of the negative school to impugn the inerrancy and credibility of the sacred narrative. To show that these difficulties are by no means insuperable, and that the poison fangs of criticism are not so dreadful as their possessors would make them out to be, is the purpose of this discussion.

1. Stephen's speech was made to disprove the accusation that he had been speaking blasphemous words against the Temple, etc.; chap. 6, 13f. To a superficial reader much of what Stephen says will seem to be beside the mark, having apparently no bearing at all on the point at issue. On this account there have been some who have declared the speech to be fictitious, an invention of St. Luke. But a careful study will reveal the pertinence of all of Stephen's statements. His account of the history of Israel, terminating so abruptly with the reference to the building of the Temple by Solomon, was intended to show that God's revelation in the golden period of Israel's past was not given in the Temple, this structure having not yet been erected, but here and there, wherever the fathers were sojourning, and that hence the teaching of Stephen, when he pointed to the abrogation of the Temple-worship, was not blasphemous, as true religion was by no means dependent on the existence of the Temple and on residing in the land of Canaan. Thus the speech was an effective rebuttal of the charge of blasphemy raised against him.

2. Stephen begins his speech with stating that God appeared to Abram when he was in Mesopotamia, before he dwelt in Charran

Spiritual Death.

REV. WILLIAM H. GEHRKE, Wellsville, Mo.

II. By nature all men are spiritually dead.

St. Paul says: "*Ye . . . were dead in trespasses and sins.*" In Rom. 5, 15 Adam's sin is defined as a "trespass." A comparison of other passages in which this word occurs makes it evident that this term is always employed as a designation of actual sins, transgressions of the Law. In substance Paul says that the Ephesians had been spiritually dead because of their transgressions of the Law of God written upon the tables of their hearts.

The expression used for "*sin*" originally means a "missing of the mark, a failure to do what one ought." The term is best explained in Rom. 3, 23, where we read: "All have *sinned* and *come short* of the glory of God." However, this word, like our English term "*sin*," embraces all sins, actual and original.

Lest the Ephesians imagine that they had come to their former sad condition by sins committed after reaching the age of discretion, Paul further elucidates his indictment with the words: "*We . . . were by nature the children of wrath.*" Spiritual death antedates trespasses. *By nature* the Ephesians were dead. "*By nature*" "denotes something in their constitution, in their very being." As it is the nature of a leopard to have spots, so it was the nature of the Ephesians to be spiritually dead. This nature was not a trait which the Ephesians acquired late in life. It existed from the moment of the Ephesians' birth. Therefore the statement: "*We . . . were by nature the children of wrath,*" may be regarded as a paraphrase of David's words: "Behold, I was shapen in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me." Ps. 51, 5. By birth the Ephesians were spiritual corpses. They were born into the realm of death.

What is true of the Ephesians is true also of the Jews. Paul says: "*We were by nature the children of wrath.*" Paul not only includes himself, who was educated a Pharisee, but also the entire Jewish race. Those people are meant "to whom pertaineth the

adoption, and the glory, and the covenants, and the giving of the Law, and the service of God, and the promises; whose are the fathers, and of whom, as concerning the flesh, Christ came." Rom. 9, 4. 5. All Jews, even John the Baptist, who, in his mother's womb, was filled with the Holy Spirit, — all are by nature spiritually dead. Dr. Edersheim says: "The statement that, as in Adam all spiritually died, so in the Messiah all should be made alive, finds absolutely no parallel in Jewish writings. . . . The doctrine of hereditary guilt and sin, through the fall of Adam, and of the consequent entire and helpless corruption of our nature, is entirely unknown to rabbinical Judaism." (*Life and Times*, etc., Vol. I, 52.) Again he says: "So far as their opinions can be gathered from their writings, the great doctrines of Original Sin and of the sinfulness of our whole nature were not held by the ancient rabbis." (*Ib.*, p. 165.) Moreover, the Jews believed that *by nature* they were a superior people. The authority quoted above writes: "It would take too long to enumerate all the benefits supposed to be derived from descent from Abraham. Suffice here the almost fundamental principle: 'All Israel are the children of kings,' and its application even to common life, that, as 'the children of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, not even Solomon's feast could be too good for them.'" (*Ib.*, Vol. II, 172.) Paul, however, would not boast of his innate goodness. He says: "*We were by nature the children of wrath.*"

In order to place the universality of spiritual death by birth beyond the range of reasonable doubts, Paul continues: "We were by nature the children of wrath, *even as others*," even as the rest. Paul's language is sweeping. He makes the assertion that all nations, kindreds, peoples, and tongues are by nature spiritually dead. These words, "even as the rest," like the flaming sword, turn every way. They are true of all people who lived before Paul's day, who were living then, and who shall live to the end of time. God regards all men as spiritually dead by birth. Rom. 5, 12 the apostle says: "Wherefore as by one man sin entered into the world and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men for that all have sinned." However, it has not only pleased God to *regard* all men as by nature spiritually dead; by nature men *are* actually dead in sins. All men are descendants of Adam. God "hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth." Acts 17, 26. Now, Adam did not have the ability to give his offspring the life he had before the Fall. "Adam

... begat a son in his own likeness, after his image." Gen. 5, 3. Adam transmitted to his children a spiritually dead heart. "Like begets like" is a firmly established divine law. Every herb and fruit-tree yields fruit after its kind. A thornbush can bear only thorns. Adam could beget only spiritual corpses. What Paul says of the Ephesians, namely, that before their quickening they were "dead in trespasses and sins," must be predicated also of all mortals.

In the Sacred Volume this truth is made plain to us by painful repetitions. If we bear in mind that sin severs the silver cord connecting men with God, we must include, as evidence in support of our case against man, all passages which state that man is by birth a sinner. In addition to the familiar texts of the Catechism we have, *e. g.*, Is. 48, 8: "Thou wast called a transgressor from the womb." David writes: "The wicked are estranged from the womb; they go astray as soon as they be born, speaking lies." Ps. 58, 3. "How can he be clean that is born of a woman? Behold even to the moon, and it shineth not; yea, the stars are not pure in His sight," thus spake Job, chap. 25, 4, 5.

By nature all mortals are, as Paul says, *dead* in trespasses and sins. The connection shows that in this passage the term "dead" is employed, not in a figurative sense, but in the literal sense. Paul writes: "*God . . . hath quickened us together with Christ.*" Christ was not made alive figuratively. Friend and foe admitted that He was truly dead. As truly as Christ was physically dead, so truly are all men by nature dead in sins.

Furthermore, the word "dead" is a word incapable of comparison like the words "round," "perfect," "empty," "perpendicular." One man cannot be "deader" than another. In the story of the Good Samaritan, Jesus says that the thieves wounded the unhappy Jew "and departed, leaving him *half dead.*" Luke 10, 30. However, life was yet whole in this man just as it was in King Saul after he had fallen on his sword. 2 Sam. 1, 9. Jesus is here adapting His language to our mode of speaking in order to convey the idea to us that, humanly speaking, this man was nearer death than a hale and healthy person. But strictly speaking, there is no intermediary state between life and death. In the past some scientists clung to the theory that life may one day be produced in the laboratory. Thus far all efforts in generating life artificially have been colossal failures, and similar experiments, if repeated, will not be successful. Neither does the Bible know of a middle ground as regards spiritual life and spiritual death. There is no

semispiritual state. Men are either spiritually alive or spiritually dead. 'Tis true, Jesus said of the ruler's daughter: "The maid is not dead, but sleepeth." (See also John 11, 11.) Nevertheless, she was truly dead. The silver cord had been loosed. No remedies which man had wit enough to invent could restore life. With perhaps a glance at this use of the term "sleep" men are said in Eph. 5, 14 to be sleeping as regards spiritual things. Lest men imagine a state of spiritual torpor by nature to exist in certain individuals, Paul adds in the same breath: "Arise from the dead!"

"Ye . . . were dead in trespasses and sins." "We were by nature the children of wrath, . . . even as others." St. Paul does not mince words. He employs terms which cause the truth concerning man's spiritual state by nature to burst upon the minds of men. A cloud of divinely inspired witnesses adds unimpeachable testimony. Notwithstanding, opinions regarding the state of the heart by nature are divided. Some modern educators are pleased to consider the heart of a child a "blank tablet." Infants are said to be "unmoral," neither saints nor sinners.

Others, again, hold that man's soul is by nature connected with God, if not with a threefold cord, yet hanging, as it were, by a hair. "The Methodists, for instance, say in their *Articles of Religion*: 'Man is very far gone from original righteousness.' (Art. 7.) To this a Methodist writer makes the remark that 'how far is not stated. Obviously the meaning is that the image of God is not wholly destroyed.'" (Monson, *The Difference*, p. 32.) However, judging from church announcements appearing in the *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* the doctrine of spiritual death no longer interests our Methodist neighbors nor any of our very modern churches.

The Unitarians have propounded the following very remarkable doctrine: "Unitarians believe in the dignity of human nature, not in the total depravity or total disarrangement of man's being. Men are by nature children of God, not of Satan: objects of God's love, not His wrath. The doctrine of the fall of man in Adam and the failure of God's noblest work is a doctrine that does not honor or justify the Creator, but dishonors Him. We acknowledge that the nature of man has suffered from the sins and inherited evil propensities of past ages; but it has been elevated and blessed even more by the virtues and inherited good tendencies of those whose blood fills our veins. The path of man has not been a downward, but an upward one." (Quoted from a Unitarian tract.)

While the sect officially known as the Unitarian Church numbers but 473 congregations, 516 ministers, and 108,560 souls, this body, since the day of its separate existence, has exerted a tremendous influence on religious thought. "We are first an influence, secondly a movement, and thirdly an organization." The leaven of the Unitarians has permeated practically all other church-bodies. If all who have imbibed the above Unitarian negations would range themselves under the Unitarian standard, great would be the multitude. A dominating majority of religious *leaders* is at variance with the words of St. Paul: "*We were by nature the children of wrath.*"

Such speak a vision of their own heart and not out of the mouth of the Lord. If by nature a spark of spiritual life were now remaining in mortals, then Adam was not actually dead to God after the Fall. Moreover, he was still in Eden, the earth was still clothed in its pristine beauty, and Adam had a better historical knowledge of God than, for instance, the Indians of America. But Adam was indeed spiritually dead. So truly was he separated from the Fountain of Life that only the Woman's Seed could reestablish a connection. No more is needed by the vilest malefactor of modern times. There is no difference among men. By nature all are dead in sins.

After the Deluge God said: "Whoso sheddeth man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed; for in the image of God made He man." Gen. 9, 6. James writes (3, 19): "Therewith [the tongue] curse we men, which are made after the similitude of God." These passages contain a reference to the original state of man. Arbitrary exceptions from the statement that by nature all men are dead in sins must not be made unless Scripture makes a contrary assertion. Scripture does this Luke 1, 35. Gabriel said to the Virgin Mary: "*That Holy Thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God.*"

In perfect agreement with the immutable Word of God, Lutherans maintain: By nature all mortals are spiritually dead. The world is a spiritual charnel-house. The prophet Ezekiel says: "The hand of the Lord . . . set me down in the midst of the valley, which was full of bones, and caused me to pass by them round about; and, behold, there were very many in the open valley; and, lo, they were very dry." We might consider these words as a description of the world as the eye of God sees it — the world is full of spiritual corpses.

(To be continued.)