

Theology on the *Web.org.uk*

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

PayPal

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *Scripture* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_scripture-01.php

compenetration to the child of Isaiah vii, I am following Billot in the *Études*; obviously some things are said of the child which can only refer to Christ. I have treated this particular point at some length in a little book, *Back to Christ* (Paulist Press, New York, 1919), which is now out of print, but I should be prepared to lend it for a while to the C.B.A. Lending Library if any wished to consult it.

C. LATTEY, S.J.

Please explain the following words addressed to Judas by our Lord: "It were better for him, if that man had not been born" (Mt. xxvi, 24). Did not the Rabbis use the same phrase quite often?

To understand the meaning of these words of Mt. (and also Mk. xiv, 21; Lk. xxii, 22) it is helpful first to consider the character of Judas. Why did he offer to betray our Lord? How was he satisfied and the Sanhedrin glad when they weighed out to him the thirty pieces? In a word, was Judas a bad man or a good man?

The answer to the nature of Judas's character must be based on the Gospel evidence. This shows in him:

(a) *Want of faith*: Jn. vi, 71, where Judas "who was about to betray him" is contrasted with St. Peter who as spokesman of the Apostles has just confessed the divinity of Christ (vv. 69-70).

(b) *Avarice*: Jn. xii, 6, "But because he was a thief and having the purse carried the things that were put therein." Here the Greek *bastazo* (carry) seems to have its second meaning "to carry off," i.e. to steal. Cf. Westminster Version.

(c) *The Devil*: Lk. xxii, 3; Jn. xiii, 27, "And after the morsel, Satan entered into him," "taking more complete possession of one who had already yielded himself to him" (St. Aug.). That is why St. John again and again calls him "the son of perdition," i.e. the son destined to eternal loss, in complete contrast with the saving influence of our Lord. Of the three influences on Judas this part played by the Devil is undoubtedly the most important, though we are unable to describe it precisely or chronicle all its manifestations.

Any estimate of Judas's character must have regard to these facts narrated in the Gospel. In the course of centuries attempts have been made (and are still made) to exonerate Judas, and hence to regard our Lord's words to him at the Last Supper as an example of oriental hyperbole. In the early Christian centuries the Cainite Gnostics circulated a *Gospel of Judas Iscariot* in which Judas's betrayal was seen as a hastening of the atoning death of our Lord, and therefore Judas is worthy of our gratitude. Origen (third century) suggested (*In Mat. Tract. XXXV*) that Judas hanged himself in order to seek Christ in the next world and there to seek pardon for his crime. Klausner thought that Judas

wanted to safeguard the Law of Moses against the claims of a false Messias. Paulus suggested that Judas wished no harm to our Lord. What he wanted was to force our Lord into a crisis in which the Messias would reveal himself in some glorious manner. And every year or two some writer continues to try to exonerate Judas. But all attempts to exonerate Judas from the crime of treachery are an explaining away of the Gospel evidence ; they are based not on the Gospel facts but on some other grounds.

Now with regard to the text quoted in the question (Mt. xvi, 24) Strack-Billerbeck (*Kommentar zum N.T. aus Talmud usw.*) can find only one or two instances where Jewish writers used similar expressions.

(a) In the Mishna Tractate called *Chagiga* (re the great feasts of pilgrimage at Jerusalem) we read ii, 1 : " It would be better for that man who spends his time meditating on the following four things if he had never come into the world, viz : what is above (in Heaven) and what is below (under the earth) ; what was before the world was created and what is to come. And it would be better for that man who respects not the honour of his Creator, if he had not come into the world." This judgment is as severe as the Jews were wont to make. True it is not synonymous with eternal punishment in Hell ; but the precise nature of the after life (Heaven, Hell and Purgatory) became known only with the revelation of Christ, and we are not then warranted in searching for mention of Heaven or Hell as sanctions for good and evil among the writings of the Jews.

(b) The Tractate *Berakhoth* (concerning Blessings and Prayers) 17a similarly insists on the necessity of practising religion and not letting it become an idle fancy : Raba (died 352) said : " It were better for the man who culpably fails to carry out the commandments if he had never been created."

(c) Lastly, R. Jochanan (died 279) : " It were better for the man who knows, but who does not practise the Torah, if he had never come into the world."

The expression, then, does not appear to have been common in the time of our Lord ; but wherever found it denotes a severe judgment. The " Woe " on the lips of our Lord is not a curse, but it marks a groaning in spirit and a warning to Judas. " It is a last attempt by our Lord to get Judas to change his mind ; or at least to retire before the Eucharist is instituted " (Pirrot). In the light of the revelation of the doctrine of Heaven and Hell it is difficult to see how this, the saddest sentence uttered by our Lord, does not contain at least a warning of Hell for Judas. It could hardly be said of anyone that it were better if he had not been born, if ultimately he was to be united with Christ in Heaven. " Far better is it not to exist at all, than to exist in evil " (St. Jerome).

The evidence, then, seems to be clear enough that the expression used by our Lord, threatened at least an evil man with an evil end.

It is not for us to judge the ultimate fate of any man—even of Judas. That is to say, we cannot say whether the threat of eternal damnation was in fact carried out. "The punishment is foretold, that him whom shame had not conquered, the denunciation of punishment might correct" (St. Jerome). It may be relevant to compare the words used in the Roman *Pontificale* in the process of Excommunication: "We judge him condemned to eternal fire with Satan and his angels and all the reprobate, so long as he will not burst the fetters of the demon, do penance and satisfy the Church; we deliver him to Satan to mortify his body, that his soul may be saved on the day of judgment."

D. J. LEAHY.

BOOK REVIEWS

The Westminster Historical Atlas to the Bible. Edited by G. E. Wright and F. L. Filson, with an introductory article by W. F. Albright. S.C.M. Press. 1946.

In the science of archaeology, particularly Biblical archaeology, the Americans hold a prominent position and no one will grudge them full credit for the fine work done by them in recent years. It is, perhaps, not so well realized that the effect of archaeological discovery during the last twenty years has been the transformation of the map of the ancient east. Some of this was already visible before the war, but, as Professor Albright says in introducing this work: "It was not until 1939 that the present writer felt that the time had come to begin the preparation of real syntheses of Near-Eastern history and civilization." A result of this work of synthesis has been the production of a new Biblical atlas. Plates II and III give a good idea of the advantages to be seen. Plate II shows such places as Ugarit and Mari, important centres of civilization, but unknown to us until recently. The selection of maps for the Old Testament has been judiciously made. But certain details call for comment. Plate VI gives us the distribution of the tribes during the period of the Judges, but shows the ideal not the actual boundaries of the tribes. Asher for example is shown as occupying a long strip of Phoenicia as allotted to the tribe in the book of Joshua. But this territory was never in fact possessed by Asher. Surely the map should indicate also the *actual* area occupied by the tribes, so far