

PLATO AND THE TIMES HE LIVED IN

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Plato and the Times He Lived in by J. W. G. van Oordt

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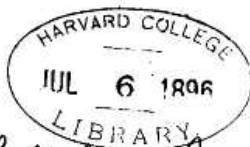
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PLATO AND THE TIMES HE LIVED IN.

§ I. INTRODUCTORY CHAPTER.

FOR the present state of civilisation of the European race we are mainly indebted to two nations, the Israelites and the Greeks. To call Christianity—the dominant religion among the European race—the outcome of Israelitic, or Jewish thought would be utterly at variance with the convictions of those professing the Christian faith; but its first apostles were Jews, and whatever divine revelation was believed by the Israelites to have been bestowed upon themselves, is incorporated with the sacred books of Christianity. Men of high standing who, in our days, do not believe in Christian revelation, still admit that the maintenance of Christian morality and of the practical effects of the spirit of Christianity is essential to the welfare of human society. Rarely has a higher praise been given to that spirit than by the late M. Taine in a volume published after his death.* As to the Jews, not only are those forming part of European society possessed of an influence on it unrivalled by that of any other section of the community, but it is a remarkable fact that, when in the 18th century a tendency began to prevail to break with the belief in Christian revelation, the best and worthiest representatives of this tendency took a Jew who had lived a century before them, Spinoza, as their guide.

It is hardly necessary to dwell on the fact that the Greeks have not less proved our educators in secular wisdom than

* *Le Régime Moderne*, vol. II p. 79 &c. and especially pp. 118—119.

their Semitic brethren in matters religious. But while we have the Jews, like the poor, always with us, hardly anything is seen of the Greeks, except in the immortal works of ancient Greece which have reached our times. From these works we know Greece as the great civilising power of the world for many a century, and the Greeks as a nation altogether unrivalled in mental capacity by any other of earlier or later ages. They had, however, to share the fate of all ruling races, and at a time when their influence was about to spread over a larger part of the world than they had ever dreamt of, two facts showed that the day of their decline had come. The one was that of their having to submit to a ruler who, although priding himself on being a genuine son of Greece, was in reality a foreigner. The other was that, with the great philosopher who had been compelled by fate to take charge of the education of the man called to rule the Greeks, the time began when learning and science were to take the place, in Greece, of that spontaneous productivity of the Grecian mind, which was characteristic of it when it was at its best.

The countries conquered by Alexander were mainly destined to become provinces of an Empire founded by a nation which was scarcely known to him and his contemporaries; and while Greek civilisation went hand in hand with Roman institutions in spreading over the Empire, it had lost its vitality and its productive force, the fruits of which, together with the maxims of administration and jurisprudence which were the main productions of the Roman mind, were to become the inheritance of the barbarous nations whose descendants are now ruling the world, until they have to make room for the inferior races whose days, unless the course of things be altered, are coming.

Plato, the subject of this study, has exercised by his philosophy an influence on Christian thought hardly inferior to that of Aristotle, and is not less a genuine Greek of the noblest type than the greatest of his contemporaries and

predecessors. Still even in his works the signs of the times that were coming are not wanting, and it is chiefly with a view to delineate his position as one of the last representatives of a great race bordering on its decline, that I have ventured upon this sketch.

§ II. THE AGE OF THE POETS.

"To children," says Aristophanes, "the schoolmaster makes things clear; to those who have reached manhood the poet." So it was in the days of his youth, and if any country owed its greatness to its poets, it certainly was Greece. When Herodotus tells his readers that they are indebted to Homer and Hesiod for their knowledge of the gods, there is a great deal of truth in what he says, although, for all that, the study of the mythology and the primitive religious ideas of the Greeks is a most important one, and absolutely necessary for a proper understanding of their history. The Greeks of the oldest days worshipped rivers and nymphs, trees, and perhaps snakes, as is usual with primitive nations; they worshipped Zeus and Hera, Athene and Apollo, whether or not in consequence of their acquaintance with Semitic ideas and usages; they looked up to the summit of Mount Olympus as to the abode of the heavenly gods, hidden from them by clouds except during the days when its divine inhabitants had gone to feast with the men of the glowing faces, living in the distant countries where the sun sets and rises. But how could they, without the Homeric poems, have had before their eyes that splendid picture of divine life on Olympus which even in our days enraptures the minds of those who get a glance at it? How could they, without the theogony and the genealogical poems standing in Hesiod's name, have seen the connection between the many existing myths and religious traditions, or that between the gods and their own hereditary rulers?

What the men of our days learn from Homer and Hesiod is the state of society in Greece at a time when it was much akin to that of primitive races, notwithstanding the fact that the existence of a comparatively high state of pre-Homeric civilisation can be, and is being, studied from ancient monuments; and likewise the moral and religious thoughts prevailing in the poets' days. The traditions of tribal life are still paramount in the Iliad and Odyssey, although, in the latter, the state of matters wears a slightly more modern aspect. There are subordinate chiefs and heads of tribes; all are called kings, although the king of the tribe or nation is superior to the other chiefs; and even he, when an expedition like that against Troy is undertaken, has to submit to a king paramount. The king of the tribe is in possession of a domain cut out of the tribal lands. On the shield of Achilles the king is seen holding his sceptre and standing in his domain, where the young men of his tribe, performing their duties towards their chief, assist in cutting corn, and where an ox is killed and prepared for their dinner by the official servants of royalty.*

Now among nations where tribal traditions prevail, there is a strong aristocratic tendency, and there is likewise ancestor-worship. Of this worship, however, although there is ample evidence of its existence in Greece and of its effects on the public mind, very little is found in the Homeric poems. This may be partly accounted for from the effects of historical events—which, however, as all our knowledge of them is based on poetical and popular traditions, it would be difficult to follow—and partly from the national spirit of the Greeks, who, looking up to Olympus as the residence of their Gods, saw in their kings not so much the descendants of the founders

* That *ἑταῖροι* are the young men of the tribe bound to assist the king in the cultivation of his domain, is evident both from the passage referred to and from an expression in the narrative of Nausicaa's dream in the Odyssey. *Θήτες* are free men compelled by poverty to work, as overseers or otherwise, on the estates of landed proprietors.

and primitive lawgivers of their tribes, as those on whom Zeus had bestowed the sceptre. The life, too, of kings surrounded by the great men of their tribes is like that of the Olympian gods; the main difference is that the gods were immortal, whereas men were doomed to die.

There is, perhaps, no passage in Homer which both shows more intuitive knowledge, on the part of the poet, of the motives by which man's conduct is governed, and at the same time gives a clearer insight into the relative position of Grecian kings in the Homeric times, than that about the quarrel between Achilles and Agamemnon. Achilles, of course, does his duty in calling, inspired as he was by Hera, the Grecian army together for the purpose of devising measures to avert Apollo's anger, and in asking a soothsayer to assist them; but by pledging himself to protect Calchas, should even Agamemnon be pointed out by him as the cause of the evil, he naturally gives offence to the king paramount, who now insists on his rights as such, and ultimately goes so far as to signify his intention to make Achilles pay for the loss inflicted on him by the soothsayer's announcement. Had not Athene intervened, bloodshed would have followed at once; but even without this the evils caused to the army by the conflict between the bravest of the Grecian chiefs and the king paramount were such as fully to justify Horace's words: "quidquid delirant reges plectuntur Achivi."

What, however, in Horace's eyes, was a moral lesson conveyed by Homer, was for the men in whose days the wrath of Achilles was the subject of the most recent song, the narrative of an event which no one thought strange. It might be an unfortunate accident that the quarrel had arisen, but the fault lay with both parties, and the fact that the army mainly relied, for its defence, on Achilles, counter-balanced Agamemnon's claim to be respected as holder of the sceptre bestowed on him by Zeus. But when Thersites, coming forward as the champion of the rights of the army at large, wants to have his say about the doings of its leader,