

The Fools of the Bible

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WHETHER it was because of its greater or because of its lesser rarity, the subject of folly commanded more attention in earlier ages than it does among ourselves. Alike by the poet, the moralist, and the philosopher, the theme was felt to be as important as it was attractive. Some set themselves to describe its chief manifestations in man—as in Brandt's *Ship of Fools*, which pithily describes many varieties, and points out the special humiliation or punishment appropriate to each kind. Others speculated as to the purpose which it serves in the world—for instance, Erasmus, who in his *Praise of Folly* ascribed to it many beneficent uses, and undertook to show that in many positions a man may find it to his advantage, and at all events may be the happier, for not being over-wise. And to the Literature of Folly the Bible had already made its large, while more profound and solemn, contributions. For the Bible has to some extent the character of a 'ship of fools'—having on board, and carrying to judgment, human and Divine, the most representative and striking of the members of the family. And certainly if we except the sinner, the saint, and the sufferer, there is no human type which it so closely scrutinizes as the fool, or in which it is so keenly interested.

In the idea of the fool, as it is met with in Scripture, the fundamental element seems to be that he is unable to look after his own interests—that if not his own enemy he is at least his own very inefficient servant and guardian. And when this, the practical outcome of his conduct, is

traced to its source, it is explained by the peculiar-working of a mind which does not do justice to facts, His is a mind to which realities are largely imaginations, and imaginations realities. The temple of its building is the fool's paradise. 'The fool walketh in darkness' (Ec 2¹⁴).

Starting now from such general conception, the Bible first gives us a tolerably minute portrait of the fool proper, a weakling in respect of intellect and will, This variety, which is specially prominent in Proverbs, may be cited as Solomon's fool. Next, it was observed that the title might be extended to include wicked men as such, on the ground that they too are guided by the fool's maxims; and from the specially clear perception of this in the Psalter, we may distinguish as the Psalmist's fool the evil-doer. Yet again, it had become clear to the prophetic mind, and was confirmed by our Lord, that godlessness is foolishness; whence we may distinguish as a third type Christ's fool-the irreligious man. These are the classes of fools seriously so-called, and in addition there is in the New Testament an ironical extension of the title to the Christian. This is St. Paul's fool.

I. *Solomon's Fool*.--In analysing the character of the weakling, or Solomon's fool; we find that stress is mainly laid upon four qualities. The first is the essential feature already referred to, which in his case takes the form of *disregard of the three natural blessings of life*. These are health, issuing in long life, a fair portion of this world's goods, and the respect of society; and

while wisdom heaps them with lavish hand upon her children, the fool cannot acquire or retain them (Pr 3¹⁶). Health and wealth he squanders, and his only promotion is from shame to shame (3³⁵).

With this essential characteristic, now, three other qualities are seen in experience to be inextricably associated. Perhaps the most conspicuous is want of the power of self-control. The fool is a larger child, governed by the impulse of the passing moment, and indisposed to make any sacrifice on behalf of the unseen, or to stake anything on the future. In many ways he shows his lack of self-restraint. He cannot rule his temper --'his wrath is presently known' (12¹⁶), or his tongue--' he must utter all his mind' (29¹¹), and he may even be pretty confidently identified' by multitude of words' (Ec 5³). Nor can he refrain from mixing himself up with what does not concern him--'every fool will be meddling' (Pr 20³). Of the accidental characteristics, the next and only less prominent quality is his self-conceit. Though he might have learned humility from his mistakes and failures, though he may have drawn upon him many a rebuff because of his empty speech and his volunteered advice, the experiences have not at all affected his self-esteem, or shaken his faith in his own judgment. 'The way of a fool is right in his own eyes' (Pr 12¹⁵). And lastly, and very pathetically, he is virtually *incorrigible*. If he be taken in hand early, it is taught, the earnest teacher may effect some improvement through sound instruction enforced by the rod, but if the season be neglected, his case becomes well-nigh desperate--'though thou shouldest bray a fool in a mortar among wheat with a pestle, yet will not his foolishness depart from him' (27²²).

What is most striking in the above portrait is the combination with unmistakable foolishness of certain qualities which we often place in another category. A violent temper rather impresses timid people as evidence of force of character, the multitude of words is often regarded with respect

by the uneducated as good proof of intellectual ability; and it is well to be reminded that both may have their root in foolishness, and that the Carlylean contempt for loquacity may properly be extended to unbridled anger.

2. The Psalmist's fool is distinguished by moral depravity rather than by weakness of mind and will. He is, in short, a wicked man, who quite probably is clever, rich, and powerful. 'I was

envious at the foolish,' it is said, 'when I saw the prosperity of the wicked' (Ps 73³)--clearly implying thereby that the two classes are identical. In the Book of the Proverbs, it is true, there is also a distinct consciousness that bad men come within the definition--'fools make a mock at sin' (14⁹), but in the Psalms sinners are the main body, the fools *par excellence*.

And probably no more important announcement was ever made in the region of conduct than that the wicked man as such is a fool. For the discovery dealt at wrong-doing the deadly blow of turning the laugh against it. The difficulty was to prove it true to the whole range of human experience. Many sins and vices, it was easy to show, had the character of folly-sins of the flesh, notably, into which the weakling-fool easily and naturally glides. But it was not so clear that other violations of morality, as lying, dishonesty, oppression, left the doers thereof with the worst of the bargain. Especially was it not clear until the definite announcement of a future life and a final retributive judgment. But even without the aid of the doctrine of immortality, the sages of the Old Testament undertook to show that the good man as such is wise, and that the bad man, however prosperous and honoured, is no better than a fool. And even when they had no proof to offer, as in Ecclesiastes, they had faith enough to believe it.

That wickedness is folly was maintained on two grounds. The argument of Ps 13 is that the prosperity of the wicked, though often great, is short-lived--'Thou didst set them in slippery places' (73¹⁸). Judgment might be delayed, but it would come at last-involving them and their house in ruin. But well-founded as this observation was in general, it was not borne out in every case; and so the writer of the Book of Job was impelled to undertake a more exhaustive examination of the subject in the form of a study of suffering innocence. What his main argument is has been

much disputed, but he at least suggests the thought that a good man, though suffering all the ills that flesh is heir to, nevertheless preserves and augments his best possession if he preserves his rectitude and his faith in God. And, conversely, it would hold that a bad man, however he might have prospered by intrigue and injustice, was at the bottom a failure and worthless. The book at least contains in germ the argument which is the

strongest against an evil life, apart from that supplied by immortality, and which the latter does not render superfluous—that goodness is wisdom, wickedness folly, because of the harvest to which they ripen in the soul.

3. *The Fool in the teaching of our Lord* is chiefly distinguished by want of spiritual insight, or 'the imprudent ordering of the life in regard to salvation' (Mt 7²⁶ 23¹⁷ 25², Lk 11⁴⁰ 12²⁰, 24²⁵).

The epithet is applied to those who have perverted views of religion, or who fail to understand essential features of the faith and life of the gospel.

And most appropriately of all does it apply to those who practically have no religion. Of the fools of the Old Testament he 'who saith in his heart there is no God' (Ps 141) seems to be fastened on by Jesus as most faithful to type.

In the twelfth chapter of Luke he is clothed with flesh and blood in the Parable of the Rich Fool (vv. 16-21). This man has not the qualities of the weakling, for he is shown to have understanding of his business, to grow rich, and to make provision for the future. Nor is anything said as to his being dishonest or profligate. His claim to the title rests upon the fact that his life was bounded by the things of sense and time, and that he took no account of God and of the event which brings into the nearer presence of God.

Is the irreligious man as such a fool? Many will admit something less than this—that he is at least deficient in one of the higher capacities of human nature, that he wants a finer sense, and that to that extent his character is impoverished or mutilated; yet for the much stronger language of our Lord we can discover a double ground. For, in the first place, if it be most distinctively the fool's way, as was seen, to shut the eyes to facts, it must be the height of foolishness to give no place in our thoughts, and to allow no influence upon our lives, to the Being who is the Alpha and the Omega of existence, the God of whom and by whom and to whom are all things. To ignore

God is to be supremely guilty of fleeing from the real to take refuge in an imaginary world. In the second place, irreligion means neglect of the only existing provision for securing our highest personal interests. Everywhere and always religion has given itself out as the vehicle of attainment and victory; and the achievement of the highest good that was foreshadowed and promised in lower religions is fulfilled in Christianity. It must be

admitted to be supremely desirable that we should be able to rise to the height of our destiny-by going on to the perfection of character and the possession of eternal life; and of this there is absolutely no prospect apart from the promises and conditions of God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. And if in common life the fool is promptly recognized by his inability to guide his worldly affairs, more appropriately must the title cleave to those who neither desire nor seek through union with God to gain the victory over the world's threefold evil of sin, sorrow, and death.

4. *Paul's Fool*, as has been said, is ironically so-called, and is nothing less than the Christian believer: The conception is most freely made use of in 1 Corinthians; and the explanation of its occurrence here, doubtless, is that in the Greek world the apostle's gospel was, as a rule, contemptuously dismissed as foolishness. 'The natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness unto him' (I CO 2¹⁴). In view of which St. Paul seems to say, 'Be it so, call us fools, judged by the world's standards there is ground for it; only we are not ashamed of our foolishness, which will yet prove to be more than all the wisdom of this world.' 'If any man among you seemeth to be wise in this world, let him become a fool, that he may be wise' (3¹⁸). Let us note the chief features of St. Paul's gospel which provoked this charge of foolishness in which he was enabled to glory.

To begin with, the Christian was liable to be regarded as a fool by educated Greeks because of his appeal to Revelation as the source of his knowledge. What passed for wisdom in the Greek world was the result of human observation and reflection, was laboriously evolved by reasoning processes from data of nature and experience; and it is easy to appreciate the impatience with which thinkers trained in such a school regarded the methods of those, whether Jew or Christian, who surmounted their difficulties and cleared up

their mysteries with the help of an alleged revealed Word of God. The cultured antique mind, accustomed to gropings and speculations, did not take kindly to a principle of undisguised authority in matters of highest thought-' not many wise men after the flesh' were called (1²⁶). But had their method, the apostle could retort, been so successful that they were entitled to take up this scornful attitude? As a fact they had discovered

little by reason, and that with small certainty, in regard to the deep things of existence which are most worth knowing. 'Where is the wise? where is the scribe? where is the disputer of this world? hath not God made foolish the wisdom of this world' ? (1²⁰) Man having failed in his quest (or truth, it was not strange that God should have Himself sent light into the world. 'After that in the wisdom of God the world by wisdom knew not God, it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe' (1²¹).

Still more, it would seem, was the contempt of educated hearers excited by the doctrine of the salvation of the world by the crucified Christ. 'Unto the Jews a stumbling-block,' it was 'unto the Greeks foolishness' (1²³). Had the apostle contented himself with saying that the greatest and wisest of all teachers had died the death of a martyr, it might have passed-the event had its well-known parallels; but to teach that a Jew as crucified, because He had endured a cruel and shameful death, was the Saviour fully furnished to cope with the sin and woe of the world, was to make an impossible demand on their credulity. But if it sounded foolish, it was not said without a reason given that could be tested. He and those for whom he spoke had realized in their own experience that the once crucified and now risen Christ had the power to save them from their sins and to build them up in holiness. He was 'unto them which are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God' (1²⁴). And St. Paul's appeal to experience has since been corroborated by the testimony of history. What once seemed a foolish dream has become an historical fact. The death of Christ, through which He passed to His throne, to become the acknowledged King of kings, is now seen to have been, as St. Paul taught, the most signal manifestation of the wisdom with which God exercises His govern-

ment, and realizes His purposes, among the sinful children of men.

It is probable also that, on the ground of his moral ideal with its elements of humility and self-abnegation, the Christian was deemed a fool by the representatives of antique culture. Those who being reviled, blessed; being persecuted, suffered it; being defamed, entreated; and who counted the goods of life but dung that they might win Christ, clearly were, from the Hellenic standpoint, 'fools for Christ's sake' (4¹⁰).

Such, then, has been the course of the controversy between revealed religion and the world: the first laboured to prove that the world was steeped in folly, and the world retorted the charge upon Christianity. That St. Paul, while he meets it smilingly, keenly felt the contemptuous rejection of the gospel by the thinkers and the learned, is more than evident; and it is well that he experienced the trial, as it prompted him to utter; the apostolic mind in regard to a conflict which may possibly be perennial. For, again, in the modern world Christianity is face to face with the, same questioning, doubting, self-confident spirit that worked in the Greek world, and again a great movement of thought tends to raise the question if Christianity is wisdom or foolishness. And assuredly the Christian, with his belief in a special revelation, a crucified Saviour, and a Christlike life, is either supremely wise or unspeakably foolish splendidly right or deplorably astray. That his faith is wisdom and not foolishness is certified him inwardly when he lives near his God, and is confirmed by knowledge of the lives and the deeds it has inspired. And he is persuaded that, whatever conflict and falling away might come to pass, the needs of mankind would draw them back to Christ, and that history would repeat the proof that 'the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and; the weakness of God is stronger than men' (1²⁵).

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