Note on Ex. xx. 5^b; Deut. v. 9^b.

REV. DEAN A. WALKER, PH.D.

SOUTH WEST HARBOR, ME.

"For I the Lord thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children, and upon the third and upon the fourth generation of them that hate me; and showing mercy unto thousands of them that love me and keep my commandments." — Ex. 20^{5b}, Deut. 5^{9b}.

WHEN as a child I learned the Ten Commandments, I could with difficulty suppress the feeling that he was an unjust God who would visit upon innocent children the punishment of their fathers' sins. It was a relief, however, to read that his mercy extended to *thousands* of those that loved him, and I was willing to believe that whatever God did must be right. Nevertheless, a lurking sense of unfairness remained, and called for some explanation that would justify the ways of God to men.

As I grew older, I found in the doctrine of heredity some partial satisfaction. This seemed to soften the severity of God's dealings by presenting them as the uniform working out of a law through which the greatest good of the greatest number is accomplished. Yet this was not altogether satisfactory, for it occurred to me that heredity is a modern doctrine, and however well its working may accord with the teachings of the Second Commandment, I doubted if it could have been in the mind of Moses when he wrote the commandments. Further study of the Bible led to the conclusion that the Hebrew writers put more stress upon environment and training than upon heredity as determining the character of a man. Twins of such diverse characters as Jacob and Esau, and generous sons of moody and jealous fathers, such as Jonathan was to Saul, were confusing to the attempt at finding such a doctrine, even had the Hebrews been of a more scientific mind than they were. In the absence of any recognition of secondary causes, a law of heredity such as we entertain was not likely to find a footing in their philosophy. Jeremiah expressly rebukes the disposition of his age to formulate such a theory as impugning the justice of God, "Say no more, The fathers have

eaten sour grapes and the children's teeth are set on edge" (Jer. 31^{29}); and his contemporary Ezekiel, in direct opposition apparently to the spirit of the Second Commandment, declares no less emphatically that "the son shall not bear the iniquity of the father" (Ezek. 18^{20}).

Again, if the commandment had reference to heredity, why were the penalties limited in their descent to four generations, and why were the mercies of God distributed on a different plan? The law of heredity shows no such partiality as between good and evil traits, and does not so limit the range of its action.

The true explanation of the moral aspects and of the verbal form of the commandment is to be looked for, not in some ultra-Calvinistic defence of God's dealings with men, nor in a theory of heredity at that time unthought of, but in the social usages of the age when the Ten Commandments were formulated. As in the Augustinian theology the imperial Roman government furnished the analogies by which to describe the sovereignty of God, so the justice of God was pictured in primitive times in terms of human penology. Read in this light, the Second Commandment is seen to be as fine an example of anthropomorphism as can be found in the Old Testament.

If we ask, then, why God is represented as "visiting the iniquities of the fathers upon the children," and why "upon the third and upon the fourth generation," and no further, it is because that was the way in which, and the extent to which, human rulers in those days visited the wrong-doings of their subjects. As illustrations of this, consider the case of Achan (Josh. $7^{24.25}$), Saul's slaughter of the priests at Nob (1 Sam. 22^{19}), the punishment of the conspirators by Darius (Dan. 6^{24}), the proposed massacre of the Jews by Haman, and the counter-massacre of the Persians by Mordecai (Esther 3^{13}, 8^{11}). Still more to the point is the destruction of the house of Omri, in fulfilment of Elijah's curse upon Ahab, in which four generations perished to a man, with the exception of the infant Joash, providentially spared to perpetuate the royal line of Judah.

Three principal reasons may be assigned for this customary inclusion of the entire family in the punishment of the offender. First, it was done to make the example more terrible to other possible transgressors. This was perhaps the strongest motive in the punishment of Daniel's enemies.

Second, in ancient times, the family was the unit of society, even the slaves and the live-stock being sometimes included. Both these reasons were probably present in the case of Achan. The supposition that his children were accessory to his sin, as justifying their

share in the penalty, is both unproved and unnecessary. They were destroyed for the same reason as the live-stock and the inanimate property, — as members of Achan's household.

The third reason, in many cases more powerful than the other two, was connected with the law of blood revenge, itself a recognition of the family as the social unit. Where this law prevailed, it was of the utmost importance that he who put a man to death for reasons that might not satisfy his kinsfolk, should remove at the same time every one on whom would directly devolve the duty of avenging the dead. Even the infant in arms, if spared, might grow up to assume the duty of avenging a remote ancestor; for the spirit of revenge was handed down from generation to generation, and every member of the family learned from earliest childhood the story of the outrage, and was taught to a nicety how the debits and credits stood on the ledger of the blood-feud. Hence the necessity of destroying with the father the son also, and even the grandson and the great-grandson. Hadad was but a child when he was carried by his attendants in flight to Egypt on David's slaughter of the royal house of Edom, and he lived to become a thorn in the flesh to David's son, Solomon (1 Kings 11^{14-17}). It was a fatal oversight of Athaliah that spared the infant Joash to become the rallying point of the conspiracy that six years later put her to the sword (2 Kings 11). "Unto the fourth generation" practically assured the punitive agent from any consequences of the blood-feud, for rarely could the fifth generation have been born at the death of the principal offender. The extermination of the fourth generation therefore would end the family line, and with it all danger of retaliation.

But with acts of mercy it was otherwise. Blessings tend to prolong the family line, not to end it. Hence it would be impossible to assign a limit to their natural distribution. For while oriental penology would seek out every last and least member of the offender's family to put him to death, oriental favor, visited first and primarily upon the favored individual, Chimham or Mordecai, as the case might be, would through him be disseminated collaterally and lineally to an extent limited only by the generosity of the recipient, and the size and longevity of his family; hence unto indefinite thousands of those *belonging to* the favored one.

For this *belonging to* is what the Hebrew literally reads: "Visiting the iniquities . . . upon the fourth generation *belonging to* the haters of me, and showing mercy," not as the English versions read, "unto thousands of them that love me," but unto thousands (case abso-

lute) *belonging to* (Heb. ל) the lovers of me and the keepers of my commandments.

In a word, we have in the Second Commandment a picture of the Supreme Being visiting his displeasure and his favor upon his enemies and his friends respectively, in exactly the same way as would an oriental potentate of the times in which this commandment was written. Such a picture could not have been drawn by the same hand that penned the eighteenth chapter of Ezekiel, for by that time the individual, not the family, was coming to be regarded as the social unit in penology.