

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 *Bibliotheca Sacra* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_bib-sacra_01.php

THE
BIBLIOTHECA SACRA.

ARTICLE I.

NATURAL BASIS OF OUR SPIRITUAL LANGUAGE.

BY REV. W. M. THOMSON, D.D., OF THE SYRIAN MISSION, AUTHOR OF "THE
LAND AND THE BOOK."

No. V.—PARABLES AND SIMILITUDES.

It has been said, wisely and well, that the character of a people is revealed by their proverbs. By them are reflected, as in a mirror, their manners and customs; and in them we find garnered up and preserved the results of their common experience, reduced to verbal formulas the most compact and available. Universally true, this is eminently applicable to Oriental tribes, both ancient and modern. A careful analysis of Arab proverbs, for example, will conduct the student into the very heart of their national life. They transport us, as by enchantment, into the open and boundless desert, where we see and hear and dwell amongst the people in their sack-cloth tents, with all their belongings and surroundings,—flocks and herds, asses and camels, the latter omnipresent, in numbers numberless. Everything in fact about the camp smells of the camel, or resounds with it. The very language, in its harsh gutturals, is an echo of the camel's prodigious growl. From their proverbial maxims we know also what virtues they admired, what vices they tolerated and practised. In a word, from this one source we learn with absolute certainty that Bedouin Arabs are, and always have

been, a more than semi-barbarous race of roaming robbers, intolerable in any civilized country, and utterly wild and incorrigible everywhere.

In like manner the Proverbs of Solomon disclose the condition, moral, social, and religious, of the inhabitants of Jerusalem, as it was when the wise king reigned there, with far greater minuteness than do all the pages of contemporaneous history; and their report is perfectly reliable, for proverbs neither flatter, conceal, nor exaggerate.

It is scarcely necessary to remark that many of the so-called proverbs of Solomon are in reality parables, while some of them are expanded into allegories. On the other hand, some of the New Testament parables are merely brief proverbs. In fact, both in Hebrew and Arabic, all such similitudes — be they brief or extended — bear the common name of *emthal* (proverbs), and what by one writer is called a parable, by another is said to be a proverb. We need not hesitate, therefore, to include them all in a single group, whether found in the Old or the New Testament; and our present study of them must be restricted to biblical "proverbs," not merely because they contribute most largely to the special theme of these Essays, but also because the general subject is much too extensive for our limited space.

That a large part of the "mysteries" of the kingdom of heaven has been revealed to man by means of parables and suggestive similitudes needs neither proof nor illustration. The Great Teacher himself, at one time in his public ministry, employed them so exclusively, that Matthew tells us that "without a parable spake he not unto them" (xiii. 34). Now it concerns the purpose of this Essay to notice at the outset, that the natural basis for each and every one of these parables already existed in this country, and in the form best adapted to the teacher's use. Jesus found no occasion to originate new external conditions, nor to have recourse to fictitious inventions. Those things in which he saw embedded the truths to be propounded and enforced lay in rich profusion all around him, and needed only an interpreter to

render them safe and eloquent expositors of the thoughts of God concerning his kingdom, the mode of its propagation in the world, and the manifold relations between himself and his people. In his hands they are made to reveal with startling distinctness not only man's new spiritual life, its origin and growth, inward and outward, but to symbolize the Christian himself in all his attributes and relations, — as a child of God, a servant, a pilgrim, a soldier, a merchant, a husbandman, a fisher, a builder, a temple, a member of Christ's body, the church, and many other aspects of like character.

In a field so wide as that covered by the parables of our Lord we can now select for remark only a few examples ; and those not chosen in order to illustrate the momentous truths taught by them, but rather to notice the verbal costume with which they are clothed. It must be left to the commentator and to the critic to develop the lessons of divine instruction which they contain. Our special study necessarily restricts us to inquiries relating to the contributions made by them to the spiritual language of God's kingdom, and the natural basis for them in this land of the Bible. This is the theme of our Article, and from it we may not turn aside. To find this basis we need only to read and study the same volume of nature that met the eye of Jesus of Nazareth at his own home. What he saw we can see, and with his interpretations to aid, can understand.

Teaching by parable, it may be said, is not peculiar to the Bible ; is not only possible in all lands, but has been actually employed by all civilized people. It is merely interpreting, or spiritualizing, resemblances, analogies, relations, qualities, etc., which everywhere exist in the wide world of nature. This is of course admitted. " There are, it may be," says Paul, " so many voices in the world, and none of them are without signification " (1 Cor. xiv. 10). What his argument led the Apostle to state hypothetically, we accept as true, if not literally, at least poetically. Nature has ten thousand tongues, and " publishes to every land, the work of an almighty hand." Many of them, alas ! are utterly dumb, or sadly palsied by

the confusion and ignorance that darken the moral world ; but still they are very real, and, rightly interpreted, they reveal to men realities of highest concernment. Many of them disclose and illustrate the wisdom, power, and loving-kindness of our Heavenly Father. Others embody latent prophecies of the future life, when this mortal shall have put on immortality ; and all at the bidding of the Great Interpreter become eloquent and impressive instructors in spiritual and heavenly wisdom. " For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood from the things that are made " (Rom. i. 20). This " material frame " has been compared very beautifully to an immense organ, with pipes, keys, and stops innumerable, but all silent until the Great Musician touches the wondrous instrument, and calls out the sleeping harmonies to ravish the listening ear of piety. There may be more of fancy than reality in such representations ; but this entire subject addresses the imagination rather than the intellect, at least, in the aspect of it we are now contemplating ; and man's emotional nature will not submit to the hard lines of mathematical propositions. A thousand things as real and potential as any in the universe utterly refuse to be weighed in any scales or measured by any artificial rule of man's devising. And it is just in this domain of " things that are made " that the Great Teacher found those resemblances and analogies which best reveal the deepest mysteries of his kingdom.

There is no need to dwell at large upon this topic, interesting and suggestive as it is ; but it does belong to our argument to show that although nature is many-sided everywhere, and many-voiced as well, yet is she most richly endowed with the teacher's best gifts in this home of revelation. This is most conspicuous in these parables of our Lord which we are considering, and is by them best illustrated. For instance, in nearly every country where mankind dwell, the mere agricultural act of sowing is common enough, but many of the incidents and circumstances which so enrich the parables of our Lord are found nowhere else

than in Palestine ; certainly not in such convenient association and striking combination. In icy Greenland, for example, *such* parables could not have been spoken at all. The verbal terms necessary to utter them are not, and cannot be, found in the language of the people ; and it is equally true that many of the conditions and incidents upon which depends the very essence of these spiritual lessons do not exist in, and could never have occurred to, the mind of a teacher dwelling upon the rolling prairies of America, or the bleak steppes of Southern Russia. The same holds good in reference to nearly all biblical parables. Their most perfect basis lies only in this land of the Bible ; and need we repeat that it is here not by accident, but through antecedent, providential arrangement.

Nor do the foregoing considerations cover the whole ground. It is not difficult to demonstrate that in a broad yet true sense a large part of the entire Bible is real parable for which Palestine is the underlying basis. Its formal histories and personal biographies, its sacrificial rites and ceremonies, its prophetic types, and numberless other things, revealing in many ways the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, have this element in them.

Regarded as mere isolated items of information, loosely put together, and without any connection with the divine scheme of revelation, they are comparatively insignificant. Many of them, indeed, would be trivial and insipid. It is this association that imparts value even to the technical parable. The sower, for instance, scattering seed on the roadside and the rock, among thorns and in good ground, is a very commonplace affair, witnessed continually in this country and elsewhere without suggesting one spiritual idea either to actor or observer. So also are the employment and the acts of the fisherman. One can scarcely ride along the coast between Beirût and Sidon without seeing the entire operation mentioned in the parable, — men drawing nets to the shore, separating the good into baskets and casting the worthless away. But this operation of itself conveys neither instruc-

tion nor admonition to the busy and merry workmen. Before these and similar things can become teachers of spiritual truths they must be translated by the Great Interpreter. In his hands, however, the hidden analogies come forth with startling emphasis. The seed, the sower, the soil, the way-side, the fowls, the stony places, the thorns, are all significant; and so in the associated parable, the tares, the enemy, the harvest, the reapers, — all these external things become clothed with new meanings of utmost moment. The acts and incidents were all there, witnessed continually by dwellers in Palestine; but they were dumb, as moral monitors, until the Master came and unsealed their lips. Then burst forth their many voices upon the astonished multitude, sending their searching lessons through tingling ears, to the inmost recesses of the heart. It is scarcely necessary to call attention to the fact that every clause, and nearly every word, of these Palestinian parables has been absorbed into our religious language. We are hardly aware that they are figurative at all, and wholly forget that they come to us from Palestine. Yet such is the fact. In this land were grouped together, in a manner quite peculiar, all the elements upon which depended the possibility of just *such* lessons of divine wisdom. This imparts special value to the minute study of this land. The Great Teacher himself has given "the interpretation" of a few of his own parables; and with this, as both key and warranty, we may safely search for the natural basis of all other parables and symbols in the book of divine revelation.

Does any one inquire whether or not the act of *sowing tares* by an enemy is ever witnessed at the present day? I can only reply that, after careful inquiry on the subject, I never heard of a well authenticated case of the kind, though natives will assure you that it is sometimes done. It is said to be quite common in India, nor is there anything improbable in the deed itself. The spirit of cowardly revenge which would prompt to the act is so prevalent that one is prepared in advance to admit the fact; and no doubt this deed of darkness was actually common in Christ's day, or he would not have

used it as the basis of a parable designed to teach not only that hypocrites would be found in the kingdom of heaven, but also in what way they should be dealt with. The latter lesson depends upon the fact that the resemblance of the tare to the wheat is so close that it would be hazardous to attempt their separation until the harvest. While growing in the field and until the stalk is well developed they could not be distinguished the one from the other; and even when sufficiently advanced to reveal their true nature, the roots of the two are generally so interlaced that the tares could not be rooted up without destroying the wheat also. In such cases both must grow together until the harvest; then it is easy enough to separate them, just as the matter is represented in the parable.

It does not belong to our task to give an exhaustive exposition of this or any of the parables; and therefore we drop the subject of tares, merely noticing that we are indebted to the wheat-fields of Galilee for this most instructive and solemn lesson, and for the terms in which it is taught us. Had there been no tares there, or had the evil passions of the Galileans been less malignant than we know they were, both from the Gospels and from the testimony of Josephus, there is no reason to suppose that our religious literature would have embodied just such instruction and admonition as this parable contains. Our Lord, we repeat, did not *create* a world with new conditions in order to obtain the materials for his divine lessons, nor did he *invent* incidents, like modern novelists, for this purpose. All that could be needed had been gathered into Palestine by his own antecedent wisdom, and he had merely to evoke Nature's many voices that slept in silence all around him amongst "the things that are made."

This he did on many occasions. Looking upon the little sparrows, five of whom were worth only two farthings, he bade them teach the great lesson of universal providence. "Not one of them is forgotten before God. Fear not, therefore, ye are of more value than many sparrows." "Consider

the ravens," said he, to the anxious and the doubtful, "that neither sow nor reap, which have neither storehouse nor barn, and God feedeth them. How much more are ye better than the fowls?"

The reason why these two species of bird should have been selected rather than any other to teach this important doctrine, may have been because they were everywhere present in Palestine all the year round, and both were despised as of no value, if not positively hated by the people as nuisances. It is as if Jesus had said: Look at these troublesome little sparrows, and these croaking, vagabond birds of ill-omen, that ever wander uneasily from place to place; even for these your Heavenly Father provides.

I have seen the trees, and even the bushes, around the head of Genessaret, near Capernaum, the home of our Lord, literally stuffed with nests of the field sparrow; and their incessant chatter swelled up like the roar of a wild-pigeon roost in the Mississippi valley. They were an intolerable nuisance to the poor peasant, settling on his wheat-fields, voracious as the locusts, and in numbers numberless. The only care of the former was how to get rid of them. But the Great Teacher, pointing perhaps to just such clouds of tiny sparrows, in this very locality, eighteen hundred years ago, assured his hearers that not one of them was forgotten before God. Generation after generation of anxious inquirers after what they should eat, and wherewithal they should be clothed, had witnessed these things without ever learning the lesson which Jesus now made them teach. And so they had seen the shores of their pretty lake, and the woods around Nazareth and Tabor, bespangled with lilies and tulips, and knew that though they neither toiled nor spun, yet Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of them. Well enough they knew all this, and had themselves cast the dry grass into their *tannurs* to bake their daily bread; but they had not so considered the matter as to draw the happy inference, that if God so clothed the grass which, to-day in the field, is to-morrow cast into the oven, how much more will he clothe you, O ye of little faith.

These are only samples of the way in which the Master moved about in his own world, and evoked from the sealed lips of birds and flowers the lessons that lay silent within them. He invented nothing new ; but found his text in things the most familiar and trivial which were scattered thickly along his pathway. Let it be noted also, that not only ravens and sparrows and lilies were at hand, ready to teach, but that they were found in close connection with incidents and customs which clothed their instruction with peculiar force and beauty. Thus those who were told to consider the lilies, had seen them growing and blooming amongst the tangled foldings of the low *bellan* thorn-bush, — then, as now, their favorite haunt ; and they had also seen, what I myself have often witnessed, the man who provided fuel for the bakers, with his mattock grubbing up these bushes, lilies and all, and carrying them away in great bundles for the oven. It is literally true, that to-day they are in the field, to-morrow in the oven. In a word, there is an unmistakable Palestinian air about all these teachings of our Lord. Nothing is forced or foreign ; nothing wanting. He who wrote no books, needed none other than the great volume of Nature which he had made, and from every page of which he could and did read out aloud to listening crowds the lessons of divine instruction which he himself had graven there.

Our business in this Essay is with biblical similitudes ; and to find them we must do as the beloved in the Song of Songs did, to gather lilies — go down into the gardens, or out into the country, to vary the search, and follow the flocks afield, and listen to the shepherd's pipe on the breezy hillside or by the shady fountain. Pastoral life in this happy clime had special charms in ancient times ; and I love to linger amidst its peaceful scenes and smiling scenery. We will take David for minstrel and the twenty-third Psalm for idyl. The sweet singer of Israel was shepherd and minstrel before he was king and conqueror, and how sweetly he sings of shepherd life and the lessons he learnt therefrom.

David was perfectly familiar with all the offices and duties of a good shepherd, and in few words indicates them in this short Psalm, blending most happily the natural with the spiritual. To provide against want, to guide to pastures green and tender, to protect from enemies, and to lead to still waters, where the flock may drink and rest in safety at sultry noon,— such is the ordinary daily duty of the shepherd. Then, passing from the material to the spiritual, he sings of blessings which mere sheep do not need, and no human shepherd can bestow: “He restoreth my soul; he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name’s sake.” The transition to human flocks, shepherd divine, heavenly food, and waters of salvation is perfectly natural; and then comes a reference retrospective to David’s own personal experience as a persecuted fugitive: “Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies; thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.”

Let us go back and gather some of the lilies from this garden of spiritual spicery. Though an outcast, surrounded by cruel enemies, and hunted like a partridge on the mountains, he was never forsaken by his Good Shepherd, nor left to perish by the hands of cruel enemies, or from hunger and thirst in the desert. The Lord always spread a table for him in the wilderness, opened fountains in the desert, and provided oil with which to refresh and comfort both head and heart. His *cup* ran over with water or wine, or, figuratively, with all they include and represent. The mention of the *cup* reminds us of the fact that, from the days of Joseph, at least, to the current hour, Oriental emirs and other men of means carry about with them a large cup of silver or gold, elaborately chased and adorned, out of which they alone drink. No doubt David had such a cup which the Good Shepherd ever filled to overflowing, even in the thirsty desert. And no one who has ever been ready to faint from thirst, like the panting hart, will forget to name the overflowing cup as among his choicest blessings. So also, will the exhausted fugitive, ready to stumble and fall on the dark

mountains, remember with gratitude the supporting staff that "comforted" him. This staff, generally a stout stick, several feet long, is now, as anciently, the inseparable companion of every genuine Oriental shepherd; and its manifold uses keep it always in hand. Standing on some elevated rock, watching his charge, he leans upon it, and finds it a support. In times of danger from wild beasts or wilder robbers, it is a formidable weapon. The *okkaz* (shepherd's crook) is not so often used at this day. It was a long staff shod with iron, and having a hooked top, now seen most frequently, at least in pictures, as the official staff of Oriental bishops — the head shepherds, presumptively, over spiritual flocks. These are some of the similitudes, Palestinian in air and origin, which are sown thickly in this sweet idyl; but there are others still remaining to be noticed. Thus this walking through the valley of the shadow of death is equally Palestinian in costume. Why valley? What is this shadow? And what suggested the whole complex imagery? The shadow, probably, refers to that deep darkness which often precedes or accompanies the quenching of the "visual ray" in the "article of death." Many have spoken of this rayless gloom at that supreme moment. Perhaps both these similitudes, the shadow and the valley, had been impressed on the imagination of the poet by circumstances in his personal experience. David had been a shepherd in early life, and subsequently a fugitive through Southern Palestine where the country is cut up by tremendous gorges, ending in the Dead Sea, whose frowning cliffs cast oppressive shadows over the narrow pathway at the bottom. Pursued by cruel enemies, he had fled for dear life into these dark ravines, and walked in fear and trembling through their appalling defiles. It is no reflection on his manhood that his stout heart sometimes quailed in the midst of such surroundings. The writer has tried it, and does not believe it possible for any one to breathe quite freely while traversing these frightful paths. A curious sensation of doubt and vague apprehension of one knows not what, creeps into the heart and makes one weak

and nervous. Let any one who doubts this make the experiment. Try it when twilight is fast deepening into pitchy night, and mocking echoes from every footfall people the viewless void with questionable shapes and ugly fancies; where ghastly bones of victims slain by robbers bestrew the pathway, and open tombs on either side add suggestive horrors to the scene; yes, verily, he who can walk through such defiles *alone*, as all must do through death's dark vale, and yet fear no evil, must be "something more, or a little less," than average mortals are. Perhaps, also, a sense of sinking into a bottomless abyss accompanies the oncoming of this "shadow" in the hour of dissolution. At all events the complex figure is most impressive, and all the more so because vague and indefinable. Happy he who can pass fearless through this valley with David's confidence to sustain, and the Good Shepherd's rod and staff to comfort him. The experience of the Psalmist has taught millions of ransomed believers to sing triumphant over the last enemy :

"Through the valley and shadow of death though I stray,
 Since thou art my guardian no evil I fear :
 Thy rod shall defend me, thy staff be my stay ;
 No harm can befall with my comforter near."

Our blessed Lord not only appropriates this name to himself, but largely expands its meaning and multiplies the offices and relations appertaining to shepherd life. No elaborate statement is needed to show that many beautiful thoughts, words, and phrases have been added to our religious language from this source. They constitute the staple of our sweetest infant hymns, and in numberless ways enrich our devotional literature. Notice, however, that it is not any and every kind of pastoral life that furnishes the basis of these spiritual analogies and beautiful similitudes. It is to the Oriental shepherd and his flock that we owe them. Only in a land like this, of burning sun and thirsty desert, and rough mountain and perilous precipices, and beasts of prey and lurking robbers, is found or needed the faithful shepherd, ready to lay down his life for the sheep; and here, too, are

the flocks, whose utter dependence and helplessness furnish the conditions and relations which suggest and explain the terms and ideas in question. Transfer them to England, Australia, or the United States and the analogies fail, or are too feeble and obscure to serve the purpose of thus enriching our scriptural nomenclature.

Should any one suspect that this matter is overdrawn, let him turn to the thirty-fourth chapter of Ezekiel. The prophet has not only enumerated every office and duty of the shepherd and every want of the flock in order to magnify the guilt and condemnation of the wicked shepherds who killed the fat ones, and clothed themselves with their wool, but he transferred the description bodily to the Great Shepherd, and thus spiritualized it to the minutest details. "The diseased have ye not strengthened, neither have ye healed that which was sick, neither have ye bound up that which was broken, neither have ye brought again that which was driven away, neither have ye sought that which was lost; but with force and with cruelty have ye ruled them and they became meat to all the beasts of the field. . . . My sheep wandered through all the mountains, and upon every high hill; yea, my flock was scattered upon all the face of the earth." Read the whole chapter, for it abounds throughout with allusions to the condition and wants of the flock, and the multitudinous relations, duties, and offices of the shepherd, not only interesting and instructive every way, but so peculiarly Palestinian in detail and in costume that it might have been copied of shepherd life by a close observer, on these very mountains, during the current year.

Much more we had in mind to say on this subject; not in the general, but limited to its bearing on our specific inquiry. Much ought to be added; but to do this would expand our Essay beyond all reasonable limits. We can only refer the reader to such passages as Isa. xl. 11; xlix. 9, 10; John x., and others like them, too numerous to be noted here. Pastoral life gives us such words as "sheep," "flock," "fold," "shepherd," "Lamb of God," and all terms associated with

them in sacrifice and song from Genesis to Revelation ; and the student who seeks in this field for the basis of our religious language cannot go astray, and will find more than he sought for or expected.

“Jesus my Shepherd is ;
 ’Twas he that loved my soul ;
 ’Twas he that washed me in his blood ;
 ’Twas he that made me whole ;
 ’Twas he that sought the lost,
 That found the wandering sheep ;
 ’Twas he that brought me to the fold ;
 ’Tis he that still doth keep.”

We have already briefly illustrated some of the similitudes found in the twenty-third Psalm, but there are others not less instructive and profitable in spiritual imagery. The grateful allusions of the Psalmist to water are natural and appropriate ; indeed, the absence of them in such an enumeration would have surprised an Oriental. Not so a European or American, dwelling where a superabundance of the element is a danger and a nuisance. The writer once asked the captain of a steamboat, near the junction of the Ohio and Mississippi, how wide the united stream might be. After a little reflection, he replied, “About thirty miles, including the overflow on either side,”—it was high flood in both rivers. Looking out over the dreary waste of muddy water, another captain exclaimed, rather profanely, “What on earth does the Almighty want of so much water !” Certainly no prophet or poet would have been inspired by the view to sing the praises of this element. But our own wanderings and experiences in this thirsty land have taught us to understand and fully appreciate the biblical phraseology derived from this source. Water is a necessary condition of life in every country ; but where there is a troublesome and even destructive superabundance of it, this fact is not so apparent. In such lands other things are considered more essential ; and clear skies, warm breezes, and bright sunshine inspire the poet’s song. In lands drenched with ceaseless rains water cannot suggest the same pleasant imagery that it does in a

country like Palestine, whose geographical position insures long summers and great heat, while the vast deserts on the south and east rob the atmosphere of much of its natural moisture. The climate is consequently exceptionally dry, and the danger is not from excess of water, but from deficiency. Hence not only the high estimate of its value, but also the many inventions and appliances to secure an adequate supply; for without this neither man nor beast can exist. It is also the visible cause of all fertility in field, orchard, and garden, and therefore justly regarded as the most precious gift of God, beautifying the earth with green pasture and gay flowers, clothing the fields with golden harvests, and loading the air with fragrant odors. In a sense semi-moral, it is the synonyme and verbal formula for purity, health, and happiness.

For all these reasons, and for others more specifically moral and spiritual, water has always been greatly prized and praised in Palestine; whether it falls quietly in soft dews of evening, or in gentle showers that refresh the fields, or descends in winter's long and copious rains; whether it be gathered into lakes, flow in brooks and rivers, burst in fountains from the rocks, or is treasured up in deep wells and artificial cisterns. Everywhere and always it is the same precious commodity, and, as was to be expected, it has been as fertile in the domain of language as in that of nature. It is the underlying basis of numberless words, names, figures, and phrases sown profusely over the entire field of divine revelation.

It deserves to be mentioned also in this connection that under the Mosaic economy, the regular and necessary supply of water, the sending of the early and latter rains, formed an integral part of the divine covenant with Israel. So long as they were loyal and faithful, this was guaranteed to them. The eyes of the Lord were to be ever upon the land, from the beginning of the year to the end of it, to give rain *in his season*. This latter clause is the very pivot of the promise in its temporal aspect, implying a constant providential in-

terference essentially supernatural. There are in Palestine several critical periods every year, when the failure of rain is ruinous ; and if then, instead of refreshing showers, there comes the hot sirocco, the hopes of the husbandman are blasted. The heaven overhead becomes brass, the earth beneath iron ; and the Lord makes the rain of the land powder and dust ; from heaven it shall come down upon thee, until thou be destroyed (Deut. xxviii. 24).

There is yet another reason why water has become the natural basis of so many phrases and significant symbols in our religious language. It was employed extensively and perpetually in the sacrificial and symbolical worship of the Hebrews. Without water it was impossible to perform aright the daily services of the sanctuary, for none could come into the presence of the Lord or offer acceptable worship in his holy temple unless he had duly observed the prescribed ablutions. We need not pause to remind every reader of the Bible that the references to these matters are simply innumerable. At the risk of being thought needlessly minute, and even tedious, we must call attention to another reason why so many religious terms have been derived from water and its various functions. With special, though not exclusive, reference to the cleansing and purifying efficacy of water, it is the material element in Christian baptism, and therefore the New Testament symbol of regeneration by the Spirit of God. Thus our Lord says to Nicodemus, "Except a man be born of *water*, and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God." And his last command to the apostles was, "Go ye, therefore, and teach all nations ; baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost." Peter, in the first Christian sermon, exhorted the people to "repent and be baptized for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost." And so we read, "According to his mercy he saved us, by the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Ghost" (Tit. iii. 5). And of the church it is said, "That he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word" (Eph. v. 26).

Nor is it in the New Testament that we first meet with this symbolical use of water. The laver for purification in the tabernacle, and the great sea made by Solomon for service in the temple, emblematically set forth the same lessons. Paul in fact teaches that all Israel were baptized unto Moses in the cloud and in the sea (1 Cor. x. 2). And Peter speaks of the ark "wherein few, that is eight souls, were saved by water. The like figure whereunto, even baptism, doth also now save us, (not the putting away of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God)" (1 Pet. iii. 20, 21). "Wash you, make you clean," urges Isaiah to the sinners of his day; and Ezekiel gives to the returned of Israel the blessed promise of the Lord, "I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and ye shall be clean; from all your filthiness, and from all your idols, will I cleanse you" (xxxvi. 25). And finally, Zechariah publishes the glad news that "in that day there shall be a fountain opened to the house of David and to the inhabitants of Jerusalem for sin and for uncleanness."

These and similar passages clearly indicate the natural basis of a vast number of thoughts, figures, and verbal formulas in our religious literature. Nor is this subject exhausted even yet. Remember that wonderful conversation with the woman of Samaria at the well. Listen to the words of Him who himself is the true Fountain. "Whosoever drinketh of this water shall thirst again; but whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life" (John iv. 13, 14). Or listen once more to the same Divine Teacher: "In the last day, that great day of the feast, Jesus stood and cried, saying, If any man thirst, let him come unto me and drink. He that believeth on me, as the scripture hath said, out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water. But this spake he of the Spirit, which they that believe on him should receive" (John vii. 37-39).

And long before that great day of the feast did Isaiah, the

prophet evangelical, lift up his voice and cry, "Ho, every one that thirsteth, come ye to the waters"; and the like voice is heard at the close of the Revelation of God, "The Spirit and the bride say, Come. And let him that heareth say, Come. And let him that is athirst come. And whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely" (Rev. xxii. 17). Alas! for the folly of man. "Be astonished, O ye heavens, at this, and be horribly afraid, be ye very desolate, saith the Lord. For my people have committed two evils; they have forsaken me the fountain of living waters, and hewed them out cisterns, broken cisterns, that can hold no water" (Jer. ii. 12, 13).

No comment or illustration is needed to show the bearing of such passages upon the general subject of these Essays; and we now turn to examples somewhat different, but not less appropriate and suggestive. Those now to be noticed are largely topographical, and yet they are closely connected with our present theme. There are scenes and scenery and historic situations in the Bible, embodying beatific visions and spiritual allegories, which have captivated the imagination and cheered the heart of the pious in all ages. We have space for only two of these topographic scenes. The first lies in the green meadows of Shittim, beneath the mountains of Moab, with Canaan's happy land in view, while Jordan rolls between. The mind irresistibly thinks of Moses on the top of Pisgah, with "the goodly tents of Jacob, the tabernacles of Israel spread forth as the valleys, as the gardens by the river's side," and just beyond the flood the Promised Land unrolls its glorious panorama to the most distant horizon. Without prompting from me, every child can sing:

"Sweet fields beyond the swelling flood
 Stand dressed in living green;
 So to the Jews old Canaan stood
 While Jordan rolled between.
 Could we but climb where Moses stood,
 And view the landscape o'er,
 Not Jordan's stream nor death's cold flood
 Could fright us from the shore."

Watts has rendered this scene and its symbolic thoughts

so familiar that minute illustration would be an impertinence on our part. Another poet has recently transferred the scenes and its lessons from the Hebrew camp and nation to the individual believer, blending very beautifully the historic facts with the spiritual adumbrations which they suggest. We quote so much as meets our present purpose; begging pardon of (to us) the unknown author for the liberty thus taken.

“ We sat in the door of our tent, in the cool of the day,
Towards the quiet meadow, where misty shadows lay;
And over the mountains of Moab afar,
We saw the first sweet gleam of the evening star.
The great and terrible land of wilderness and drought
Lay in the shadows behind us, for the Lord had brought us out.

.
Till we pitched our tent at last, the desert done,
Where we saw the hills of the Holy Land gleam in our sinking sun.

.
And One came up through the meadow, where the mists lay dim,
Till he stood by my friend in the starlight, and spoke to him.

.
‘ Arise, thou shalt come to the palace to rest thee forever ’;
And he pointed across the dark meadow and down to the river.

.
So they two went closer down to the river-side,
And stood in the heavy shadows by the black, wild tide.
But when the feet of the Lord were come to the waters dim,
They rose to stand, on either hand, and left a path for him.
So they two passed over quickly towards the goal;
But the wistful, longing gaze of the passing soul
Grew only more wrapt and joyful as he clasped the Master’s hand;
I think, or ever he was aware, they were come to the Holy Land.”

Who does not breathe the prayer, that when the wilderness of life, “ with its dust and its sand,” has been safely passed through, he, too, may thus cross over the Jordan of death, and, “ or ever aware,” come to the Canaan of eternal rest.

Our second example is even more strictly topographical than the meadows of Shittim, and brings us back to the holy city and to the temple of the Lord, from under whose threshold ran out the waters of that mystical river which

Ezekiel describes in the forty-seventh chapter of his prophecies. We ask special attention to this divine allegory; for no other passage in the entire Bible illustrates and confirms more beautifully the double purpose of these Essays — to find the natural basis of our spiritual language, and to show that this basis has been laid in Palestine by divine purpose and forethought.

It is, perhaps, not possible to construct an adequate definition of this vision; but by common consent it symbolizes the river of divine love and mercy in its largest and most comprehensive character and relations. Let us contemplate it first in its fountain-head. The prophet beheld the waters *issue out* from under the threshold of the temple. But this was not the true source; that was farther back, concealed from view in the very heart of the temple mount. Recent explorations have revealed the fact, suspected long ago, and no doubt well known to Ezekiel, that the entire platform on which the temple stood is completely honeycombed with cisterns, some of them of such enormous size as to be called seas. Here was the hidden source from whence these waters issued forth. And thus it is in the spiritual river. The true fountain head is hid in the bosom of the Father, who so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life (John iii. 16). Here is the boundless sea of love from which all the streams flow out and down to man. Without pausing to contemplate this shoreless ocean, we notice next, the exact place whence these waters began to appear. They came out from under the *altar*. Why so? Because there is no other spot in the universe of God, so far as we know, from whence the river of divine mercy could flow forth to sinful man. That could not be until immutable justice was satisfied by the sacrifice of the Lamb of God upon the altar. The ocean was there, in the bosom of the Father from all eternity; but it required the expiring cry of the Son, *It is finished*, to unseal the fountain, and set free the river of life.

Notice, next, the *direction* which it took. Not towards

some fertile and happy land to repose in a pure and quiet silvery lake ; but it made direct for the desert and the Dead Sea. The prophet drew on his memory for the entire topical costume of the vision. From the " pinnacle of the temple " he had often looked down the valley of the Kedron and out upon the desert that bounds the Dead Sea, and had perhaps frequently asked whether any power on earth could render that dismal desert fertile, or heal the bitter waters of that sea of death. The natural stream that issued from the temple must of necessity take that direction, and no other. Descending into the Kedron at the fountain of Mary, thence past Siloam to the well of Job, and from that in the ever-deepening gorge of Wady en-Nar (valley of fire) until it reached the sea. The prophet had further noticed that the stream, very small as it issued from the temple, was increased at the fountain of Mary, and grew still larger at Siloam, while below the well of Job it sometimes became a noisy mill stream, and beyond that it was swollen by other contributions, after long and heavy rains, to quite a river. The writer has himself witnessed these outgushings below Bir Eyûb, and was delighted to find the banks of the brook alive with old and young, in holiday dress, rejoicing at the occurrence, as a good omen that promised a fruitful year and abundant harvests. The prophet has apparently availed himself of these physical facts and phenomena to impart verisimilitude to his allegory. This mystical river was " to the ankles " at the first thousand cubits, " to the knees " at the second, " to the loins " at the third thousand, and at the fourth " the waters were risen, waters to swim in ; a river that could not be passed over." This, of course, corresponds to and illustrates the divinely chosen method in the extension of the kingdom of grace. At first very small, it enlarges ever as time rolls on. It is so historically and universally, and it thus grows also in every individual member of the kingdom. The Master has taught this in many ways, as in the parables of the leaven and the mustard seed, and elsewhere. We need not dwell on this elemental feature of the allegory, and therefore pass

to the *effects produced* by these waters from the sanctuary. When the prophet had returned to the bank of the river, "behold there were very many trees on the one side and the other"; and again, "on this side and on that, shall grow all trees for meat, whose leaf shall not fade, neither shall the fruit thereof be consumed; it shall bring forth new fruit according to his months, because their waters they issued out of the sanctuary; and the fruit thereof shall be for meat, and the leaf thereof for medicine." John saw this river in apocalyptic vision, many hundred years after Ezekiel: "And on either side of the river was the tree of life, which bare twelve manner of fruits, and yielded her fruit every month; and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations." The topographical indications of Ezekiel, however, impart special interest to his description. John says nothing about the desert, and the marvellous transfiguration of it into a paradise like unto the garden of Eden. Herein we find the most suggestive phenomena in the allegory, and the most beautiful. The effects are absolutely *supernatural*. Neither the rains from heaven, nor the ordinary brooks and fountains of the land, nor the bright sunshine, nor the toil of man, had ever been able to redeem that desert from its stubborn and frightful nakedness and sterility. But wherever these waters from the sanctuary came the transformation was immediate and miraculous. Notice here another phenomena, which strikingly illustrates the outgoing and onflowing of the river of divine love and mercy. The farther it penetrated the desert, and the more it sent forth to water the trees on either side, the deeper and broader it became. This is the very opposite of all *natural* streams that *run out into the Desert*. The writer has followed more than one of these brooks from their birth in powerful fountains among the hills to where they disappear entirely in sandy plains. The farther they go, the smaller they become. Their merry music ceases to cheer; vegetation becomes less and less along the banks, until finally the feeble runlet faints and fails altogether. Not so this divine river of the allegory; it grows as it flows, gets by giving, —

the more it gives, the more it has to give. Now, who needs to be told that it is thus in the kingdom of grace and love? "Freely ye have received, freely give." "Give and it shall be given unto you, good measure, pressed down and shaken together, and running over." This is the fundamental law laid down by the Master, everywhere and always obligatory. As well attempt to break the chain that binds the universe together, and all to God, as to set aside this law of the kingdom. Its very nature and issue is love, infinite, outflowing, and overflowing; and it must ever act like this mystical river, which, in obedience to its topographical surroundings, sets out at once on its mission of life to the desert and the sea of death.

And unto the Dead Sea it came, and therein wrought miracles of healing and transformation; for "everything that liveth, which moveth, whithersoever the rivers shall come, shall live; and there shall be a very great multitude of fish, because these waters shall come thither; for they shall be healed." To understand the greatness of the miracle, remember where and what that sea is. Down yonder, in its awful chasm, it smoulders like a huge caldron of bitumen and brimstone, so bitter that nothing that hath life can abide it; nor can the Jordan and other natural streams that flow into it mitigate its deadly poison. Tremendous type of an apostate and fallen world, dead in trespasses and sins! But even this shall be healed; and, greatest moral of all, around its heretofore desolate shores, from Engedi even unto Engelaim shall fishermen stand, — where none ever stood before; and there, where no fish were ever seen since the creation, shall men spread their nets, for "their fish shall be according to their kinds, as the fish of the great sea, exceeding many."

It may safely be left to the imagination and heart of the Christian to fill out the picture of gospel growth and final triumph set forth in this grand and all comprehending symbolism. Ezekiel must have seen, in prophetic vision, the Great Master with his apostolic band of fishermen around

the lake of Tiberias. The net and the fishermen, with all that they signify and symbolize, have passed through a thousand verbal formulas, into the bosom of the universal church; and this day they represent the innumerable company of men and women that stand around the great Dead Sea of fallen humanity and fish for precious souls. With the telescope of prophecy we can see farther now than was possible for Ezekiel; and the outlook over the desert and the sea is animating and assuring in the highest degree. Ten thousand workers are busy opening new channels for these waters from the sanctuary, and, wherever they come, trees of righteousness spring up innumerable on either side; and ere long every desert shall blossom as the rose, and the day of final triumph will not be far off, when the vast host of workers shall congregate around the shores of this symbolic sea, and sweep the whole lost race into the mighty nets of gospel grace.

We have but touched and glanced along the line of this magnificent allegory, exhausting no part of it, and leaving unsaid much that thereunto belongs. And yet it is our hope that no one can rise from the contemplation of it, even thus feebly sketched, without assurance full and steadfast, that the whole is supernatural and divine. And to bring the matter within the compass of our special argument, we farther assert that the basis in nature is no less of God, and by his special providence arranged and fitted up, than is the superstructure which the inspired prophet has built upon it. No other spot on this globe of ours can be found that furnishes all the necessary conditions — physical, moral, and spiritual — for *just such* a vision as this of Ezekiel. This river comes down from the mountain of the Lord's house; and we know that he is himself both temple and altar, priest and sacrifice, fountain-head and living stream; and all the phenomena of its flow and increase and operations in the desert and the sea, are in and by and through him — unto whom be ascribed all blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving, and honor and power and might, forever and ever. Amen.