

The Image of Gold and the Feet of Clay.

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THE title of this paper may give an impression that it deals with prophecy, for the image of gold and silver with feet of iron or clay was seen in a vision by Nebuchadnezzar, and the vision was interpreted by the prophet Daniel as referring to the future history of the world. I am not here using the imagery with any reference to its significance to the prophet Daniel. The imagery seems to me capable of another application, which I do not suppose was present to the mind of the prophet. The imagery is capable of being applied to spiritual ideals. The image of precious metals standing on the common clay and iron feet may be taken as symbolizing the loftiest aspirations and holiest beliefs of sons of God ; these have had, and must have, their physical and historical basis. Eternal verities are revealed related to facts of objective experience. They are, indeed, made accessible by means of these feet of iron and clay—by means, *i.e.*, of the physical and historical foundations upon which they rest.

The idea is capable of being worked out in many directions which I cannot now enter upon. I must confine myself to one or two applications. There are two points I wish to emphasize at the outset. One is the *value* of the feet of clay. The objective, physical, historical aspect of eternal, spiritual truth should be respectfully studied and valued. To treat this aspect with indifference or contempt is presumptuous and foolish. The presumption may be unconscious, for it is those who care intensely for spiritual ideals who are most liable to fall into the error of belittling the feet of clay ; nevertheless, there is presumption in so doing. We find ourselves awakened to consciousness in a wonderful universe—a universe of which we form an infinitesimal part ; it behoves us to learn with all diligence what are the principles expressed, what is the order

observed in this marvellous cosmos ; and to assert *our* pre-conceptions or proclaim *our* ideals without modest and reverent search into the order which *is*, and has been for ages before we were born, is presumption.

If we attentively observe that universal order, we discover everywhere that the loftiest ethics and the noblest beliefs have their roots in physical facts. All science teaches us this—history, geology, physiology, anthropology, and more particularly biology. We cannot get away from the fact ; it is folly to ignore it ; for the scheme of things is truly more sublime than any idealism which the human mind can conceive. *God's* cosmos is a grander poem than *man's* imagination can produce.

But whilst studying origins and examining the feet of iron and clay we must never forget that the feet exist for the image of gold, that the meaning of the former must be interpreted by our knowledge of the latter ; and never must we fall into the error of interpreting man by his animal beginnings, or his spiritual and ethical attainments and aspirations by the rudimentary faculties in which they germinated. The significance of the embryo is only to be understood when we see its purpose fulfilled in the adult. Emerson has said that “the lesson of life is to believe what the years and the centuries say against the hours ; to resist the usurpation of particulars ; to penetrate to their catholic sense.” We are constantly tempted to do otherwise. Either we ignore and put aside the “common,” the “physical,” that which belongs to the years, to the temporary, or, if we turn attention to it, we are apt to materialize our ideals—to say to ourselves of physical facts : “These be thy gods which brought thee up out of the land of Egypt. This physical appetite, this aggressive instinct, this *sense*-craving, this fear of the unknown—these have produced our mirage of love and progress and religion.” And if we think thus, if we allow this delusion to undermine our spirituality, life loses its dignity, the lofty souls become sad, the lower natures cynical, and the lowest sensual. When under the influence of such a view of the universe Professor Romanes wrote :

"I am not ashamed to confess that with this virtual negation of God the universe to me has lost its soul of loveliness. . . . When at times I think, as think at times I must, of the appalling contrast between the hallowed glory of that creed which once was mine, and the lonely mystery of existence as now I find it—at such times I shall ever feel it impossible to avoid the sharpest pang of which my nature is susceptible" ("Thoughts of Religion," p. 28).

But this was not Romanes' final position. Towards the close of his life he wrote :

"The religious consciousness of Christendom is unquestionably the highest product. When I wrote the preceding treatise I did not sufficiently appreciate the immense importance of *human* nature, as distinguished from *physical* nature, in any inquiry touching theism. But since then I have seriously studied anthropology (including the science of comparative religions), psychology, and metaphysics, with the result of clearly seeing that human nature is the most important part of nature as a whole whereby to investigate the theory of theism" (p. 154).

In fact, Romanes lost sight of the image of gold altogether by interpreting ideals in terms of atoms ; he recovered it when he saw that the significance of the feet of clay could only be understood by studying that which was built up upon them.

To sum up, what I have claimed so far is simply this : (1) That in order to rightly appreciate our ideals at the apex of truth, we must value the lowly beginnings from which these ideals have sprung ; and (2) that we must always interpret these beginnings in the light of the later evolution—not the later by the earlier.

If we thoroughly grasp these two principles and apply them widely to all our experience, we shall find dark places illuminated, and order will appear in what seemed confusion ; moreover, our own course will be clearer when we seem torn between competing forces, and the feet of iron and clay threaten to kick down the very image for which they exist.

But I wish to make one special application of the principle to the tendencies of the present time.

It seems to me, looking back upon the history of the last hundred years, that whereas in the first half of the nineteenth century religion was very subjective in character, there has been through the last fifty years a strong tendency to objectivity.

The Methodist and Evangelical movements of religious thought produced saints of a very noble kind ; religion was very deep in minds of that type. But whilst religious principle governed conduct, there was also a rather rigid demarcation between the secular and the sacred. *One Book* was inspired, *one day* was holy, etc., and any attempt to obliterate the distinction, or to blend secular and sacred things, was regarded as lacking in reverence. Then followed the Tractarian movement and the movement for critical study of the Bible. Perhaps my right to bracket together the Tractarian movement with the critical investigation of Christian documents by such men as Strauss and Baur, etc., will be questioned, but I do thus bracket them. I seem to see a distinct kinship between the two, and between both these and the developments of physical science. The feet of iron and clay had been too much ignored. And I regard these movements as the outcome of a renewed sense of the value of historical and physical origins, and of the objective expression of spiritual truth. The Tractarians appealed to the Fathers, and insisted on the value of Church order and sacramental *forms* ; the critics urged the importance of examining the historical basis of our religious beliefs, and of the primitive forms out of which they have sprung. Men of science sought to discover the physical beginnings of human life. All alike stood for the value of the objective, the external, the historical. Their work has revolutionized our religious and intellectual and social life, and on the whole religion and society have immensely gained.

To quote again from the later writings of Professor George Romanes :

“ I took it for granted that Christianity was played out . . . though this was doubtless inexcusable, I still think that the rational standing of Christianity has materially improved since then. . . . Prior to the new [Biblical] science, there was really no rational basis in thoughtful minds either for the date of any one of the New Testament books, or, consequently, for the historical truth of any one of the events narrated in them. Gospels, Acts, and Epistles were all alike shrouded in this uncertainty. Hence the validity of the eighteenth-century scepticism. But now this kind of scepticism has been rendered obsolete and for ever impossible, while the certainty of enough

of St. Paul's writings for the practical purpose of displaying the belief of the Apostles has been established, as well as the certainty of the publication of the Synoptists within the first century. An enormous gain thus accrued to the objective evidences of Christianity" (pp. 155, 156).

"This kind of scepticism has been rendered obsolete and for ever impossible," he says. This was a sanguine assertion. Is scepticism ever *impossible*? I trow not.

It seems as if the pendulum which for half a century swung so strongly in the direction of recognition of objective facts and the value of careful analysis of the historical basis of beliefs, was now again swinging in the other direction, perhaps only to gain ultimately a position of balance and equilibrium.

There are those who would have us believe that it does not matter to them how their religion originated, that they are so convinced of the reality of spiritual truths that they can even surrender belief in the historical reality of Him Who "made them current coin," almost without regret. If, after earnest and loving search, a man thinks himself *compelled* to make this surrender as the offering of the heart's blood to Truth (which must for ever claim our supreme allegiance), one can only respect and sympathize with anyone who sincerely makes so profound a sacrifice, although entirely disagreeing with the conclusion reached. Frederic Myers *at one time* thought he must abandon belief in Christ's resurrection, and he said it cost him more than anything in his life. But if the surrender is made without sufficiently thorough investigation, if it is made without any pain, if there is no empty place left where the Friend of Man once stood to guide and strengthen and console, if the loss of belief in Christ Jesus involves none of the heart's blood, *then* the surrender has a very different character. It is not our task to judge others, but we must needs examine ourselves as to whether we realize the value of the objective and historical basis of our faith.

The ideals of Christendom have for two thousand years centred in one sacred Personality. It is the thought of Him which has strengthened millions to strive for the uplifting of the race; it is the love of Him which has empowered them to do nobly

and die magnificently ; it is belief in Him which has been the inspiration of life. Romanes writes :

“ If we estimate the greatness of a man by the influence which he has exerted on mankind, there can be no question, even from the secular point of view, that Christ is much the greatest man who has ever lived. . . . The revolution effected by Christianity in human life is immeasurable, and unparalleled by any other movement in history. . . . Consider what has all the science or all the philosophy of the world done for the thought of mankind to be compared with the one doctrine, ‘ God is Love ’? Whether or not true, conceive what belief in it has been to thousands of millions of our race—*i.e.*, its influence on human thought, and thence on human conduct ” (pp. 159, 160).

The spiritual truths which at the beginning of our era found expression in the Christian Church were not altogether new ideas. The conceptions of Divine Fatherhood, of incarnations of the Divine in humanity, of a Saviour dying and rising again, in some sense on behalf of the human race, have been embodied with various degrees of clearness in the myths and legends and sacred scriptures of pre-Christian races. What we have to explain is not so much how such ideas originated, *for if they embody* eternal truths it may well be that their origin lies too far back for us to discover it. Just as the eye exists for the pre-existent force called light, and is constituted to apprehend it, so the mind of man may be so constituted that certain eternal truths are intuitively apprehended ; it may be that man brings with him in his descent into matter a subliminal knowledge of certain pre-existing verities which thus become embodied in various religions.

The fact to be accounted for, and which the New Testament records claim to account for, is how these truths became the inspiration of new life in the first century of our era. The claim made in the Gospel is that the “ Life which is the ‘ light of men,’ the light which lighteneth *every* man ” who has been born into the world, then shone forth in much fuller, clearer effulgence in the Person of Jesus Christ, who in His own incarnate experience revealed the essential truths which man’s spiritual growth requires, and who thus became to mankind a Saviour by the potency of the Divine Spirit of which He was the pleroma—*i.e.*, the filled receptacle. Of this Spirit He was and is the medium.

The fact of mediumship, or of strength, wisdom, and grace being ministered to one person through another is a matter of common knowledge. The fact of such ministry is patent to all ; therefore there is nothing foreign to existing experience in the recognition that Jesus Christ was the Divinely ordained medium or mediator whose contact with the human race has been the quickening means of salvation—*i.e.*, wholeness, health, and enlightenment.

No other hypothesis except this adequately accounts for the founding of the Christian Church or for the new ethical standard, the new life of love which came to birth at the beginning of our era. Christianity has survived in spite of the crimes and defections of its so-called adherents, by virtue of this quickening Spirit in the souls of the true disciples of Jesus Christ ; and it seems to me that we are bound, as *trustees of Divine treasure*, to take pains to study the historical grounds of our belief in the Lord Jesus, not only for our own sake, but that we may pass on to others God's image of gold (*i.e.*, all the highest beauty of the Christian ideal) intact. If we neglect the facts of history, the physical basis of spiritual truth, the rational argument for Christian belief, and particularly if we fail to study the embodiment of these precious ideals as given to the world in the story of the earthly life of the MAN CHRIST JESUS we may find that, having allowed the feet of iron and clay to become covered by the dust of oblivion, future generations will lose sight also of the golden Image which they were intended to support. This, too, may become buried, and materialism may again smother (as it has so often done before) the aspirations of mankind—materialism not alone of intellectual belief, but that profounder materialism which doubts the image of God in the soul of man, and cynically regards human nature as nothing but dust and ashes.

Whilst preparing this paper I have been reading an article in *Modern Essays* by F. W. H. Myers, in which I have come across a paragraph bearing so forcibly on the ideas I have tried to express, that I will quote it here

“ If, as we must hold, the common sense of mankind will insist on feeling that the marvels of the New Testament history have as yet neither been

explained away nor explained, so also will it assuredly refuse to concur with the views, often expressed both in the theological and scientific camps, according to which these marvels are after all unimportant, the spiritual content of the Gospel is everything, and religion and science alike may be glad to get rid of the miracles as soon as possible. . . .

"It is indeed true that Christianity—understood in our own days, it may perhaps be asserted, more profoundly than ever before—has brought to us inestimable blessings which no possible view of the wonders narrated in the Gospels could now take away. It has given us a conception of the universe which most minds accept as at once the loftiest and the most intelligible to which the spirit of man has attained; it has taught us a temper—the temper as of a child towards an unseen Father—which alone, as we now feel, can bring peace to the heart.

"It is true, moreover, that the best men of all schools of thought are ever uniting more closely in the resolve to be practically Christians—to look on the labouring universe with this high appliance, to shape life after this pattern of self-sacrificing love, whatever the universe and life may really be. . . .

"So far will philosophy carry good and wise men. But even the best and the wisest men would prefer to rest their practical philosophy upon a basis of ascertained facts, and for these 'hard-headed artisans,' 'the sceptical inquirer,' the myriads of struggling souls to which Christianity has a message to bring—for such men facts are everything, and philosophy without facts is a sentimental dream" (pp. 223, 224).

He goes on to touch upon the importance of facts brought to light by psychical research in relation to their bearing on "traditions which reach us faintly from an ever-receding past." In relation to these facts I will merely quote what he has said in his book on "Human Personality" and pass on, for it is not my object to go into this matter here. He says, *à propos* of the discoveries which through psychical research he believed had been made :

"Has any world-scheme yet been suggested so profoundly corroborative of the very core of the Christian revelation? Jesus Christ brought life and immortality to light. . . . So far, then, as His unique message admitted of evidential support it is here supported. . . . I venture now on a bold saying, for I predict that, in consequence of the new evidence, all reasonable men a century hence will believe the resurrection of Christ; whereas, in default of the new evidence, no reasonable man a century hence would have believed it" ("Human Personality," ii., p. 288).

Without endorsing his "all" and his "no," which seem too sweeping, this passage, taken with the other, well illustrates my point—namely, the value of objective (scientific as well as

historical) evidence for the truth of our Christian faith. Many persons now ignore this ; they claimed to have passed beyond the need for the feet of clay.

I would not have it supposed, however, that whilst I lay stress on the importance for each one to acquaint himself, as opportunity offers, with the historical and scientific argument for the Christian belief, I intend to imply that I regard this as the most essential means of grasping the truth "as it is in Jesus," and as it should be in the heart of every disciple. By no means ; to be really imbued with the spirit of the New Testament is, as Frederic Myers has said in the article I have quoted, of far greater importance than to be instructed in Biblical criticism. And as a means towards communion with this spirit the study of the Gospels is of primary value. The study of the Gospels is within the reach of everyone, and no reading of books *about* the Gospels can be an adequate substitute for the study of the records themselves. A former Dean of Westminster has said :

"Take the picture of Christ as drawn by the vigorous hand which wrote our Second Gospel. Read it as a whole ; let the story grow upon you ; watch the powerful, sympathetic, original Character ; ask how the simple, illiterate author came by his story, if it were not that the story was a transcript of life."

Such study of the history of the incarnate life of Christ should be an effectual means by which we may be enabled to see that which "eye hath not seen," and to hear that which no merely *physical* ear can hear, even those things which God reveals by His Spirit in the high and holy place of the heart and conscience and will. My point is that, whilst a devotional use of Scripture in which imagination and affection have their share is very valuable, the intellectual study of Scripture is also important and ought not to be neglected.

Of course, the plea that there is no time for such study is always ready to suggest itself, and we all feel its force under the present unwholesome conditions of hurry to which we have accustomed ourselves ; but most persons find time somehow for

those pursuits which are considered of serious importance. The careful perusal of a few works written by those who are acknowledged to have made prolonged study of the New Testament and of the historical basis of our faith would not make an exorbitant demand on time.

The following books, for instance, would repay study, and would be read in a short space of time: "Luke the Physician," by Adolf Harnack; "The Acts of the Apostles," "The Date of the Acts," by the same author; "The Gospel and its Transmission," by Professor Burkitt.

But these are details; it is the principle rather than the way in which each should apply it that I have tried to present, and for which the image of gold with feet of clay has seemed to me a fitting symbol.

