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THE SECOND STANZA OF CROLY'S HYMN

THE only hymn by George Croly in our Church Hymnals is a great favourite and expresses the deep longing of the soul for a baptism of fire by the Holy Spirit. It begins:

Spirit of God, descend upon my heart;
Wean it from earth; through all its pulses move;
Stoop to my weakness, mighty as Thou art,
And make me love Thee as I ought to love.

And the closing stanza is superb:

Teach me to love Thee as Thine angels love,
One holy passion filling all my frame;
The baptism of the heaven-descended Dove,
My heart an altar, and Thy love the flame.

It is the second stanza that raises a very interesting question as to the doctrine of revelation. In it the poet seems to discount God's many ways of revealing Himself, and His methods of inspiration hallowed in the Scriptures, and by the experience of the saints. It is these very "saints, apostles, prophets, martyrs" who might hesitate to sing the second stanza with a modern congregation:

I ask no dream, no prophet-ecstasies,
No sudden rending of the veil of clay,
No angel-visitant, no opening skies;
But take the dimness of my soul away.

The hymn was written about 1855, a few years before George Croly's death. Born in 1780, son of a Dublin physician, he was educated at Trinity College, and after a curacy in the North of Ireland came to London, where he occupied himself with journalistic writing, poetry, tragedy, and romance, but without any distinguished success. In 1835 he received the living of St. Stevens, London. His poetical works were collected in 1830 but his best known poem is this hymn.

As a preacher he had a somewhat rude but vigorous eloquence which would have stood him better at the bar than in the pulpit. He had so little critical faculty that he identified Prometheus with Cain. He was an uncompromising conservative and his

denouncing of liberalism brought him crowds of hearers. Of the ten hymns he wrote for a book of Psalms and Hymns (1854), only one gained general favour.¹

In his day, Rationalism had not yet made the doctrine of angels obsolescent in the Church of England. The Christmas and Easter hymns of this period take them as seriously as do the Scriptures. One can judge how far we have travelled in dimness of soul by reading the article on Angels in the fourteenth edition of the *Encyclopædia Britannica*. That gives seventeen pages to *angling* and a little over one column to *angels*! Although written by two distinguished British theologians of Cardiff and Cambridge Universities, there is no mention of New Testament teaching whatever, and the Old Testament angelology is referred back to Zoroastrian superstition. Anti-supernaturalism has made the full circle, and in many quarters angels have become obsolete although we still sing about them at Christmas and Easter.

It is therefore more than curious that the second stanza of Croly's hymn is so explicit: "I ask no dream"—but perchance if we asked we would receive. Dreams were employed by God for revealing His will and to affect the spiritual life of the recipient. A Midianite's dream encouraged Gideon's host (Judges vii. 13), and Pilate's wife to plead for Jesus (Matt. xxvii. 19). We recall the visions of St. Augustine and Monnica, John Newton's dream about his soul's salvation and Izaak Walton's accurate account of the vision John Donne had in Paris.² Divine dreams came to Abimelech (Gen. xx. 3), to Jacob in exile (Gen. xxviii. 12), to Laban (Gen. xxxi. 24), to Joseph (Gen. xxxvii. 5, 9, 10, 20), to Pharaoh's servants (Gen. xl. 5), to Pharaoh himself (Gen. xli. 15, 25, 26), to Solomon (1 Kings iii. 5), to Nebuchadnezzar (Dan. ii. 1; iv. 1-2), to Daniel (vii. 1-2), to Joseph, the betrothed of Mary (Matt. i. 20), to the Magi (Matt. ii. 12), and to Paul by night (Acts xvi. 9 and again xviii. 9).

In the Bible there is no sharp distinction between dreams and visions. The one shades into the other both in the Old and the New Testament. The prophets speak plainly of their visions; Isaiah, Daniel, Ezekiel, Jeremiah, Obadiah, Nahum, Habakkuk and Zechariah as well as Zacharias, Peter, Ananias and Paul

¹ *Dictionary of National Biography*; and also W. C. Covert, *Handbook to the Hymnal* (Presbyterian Board, 1935). The hymn we speak of is *not* found in Croly's book and was therefore written by him after 1854.

² Augustine's *Confessions*, iii. 11, viii. 12; Walton's *Life of Dr. John Donne*, pp. 33-37.

in the New Testament. "Where there is no vision the people perish" (Prov. xxix. 18). The chosen race need a supernatural revelation to "take the dimness of their soul away". Even the greatest miracle of history, the Resurrection of our Lord, was confirmed by vision of angels (Luke xxiv. 23); while Peter's sermon at Pentecost tells of Joel's prophecy fulfilled in the seeing of visions and the dreaming of dreams. Peter himself had his threefold vision on the housetop at Joppa (Acts x. 10-16).

The Apostolic period of the history of the Church affords many examples. And no serious historian can doubt the reality of the visions of Raymund Lull¹ or of Francis of Assisi² nor their spiritual reality and influence on these saintly men and their vocation.

The ecstasies of the prophets, according to Scripture, were due to visions of God. By faith they saw the invisible, heard the inaudible and laid hold of the intangible. It was no futile ecstasy that seized Isaiah when he saw the Lord high and lifted up, nor when Paul saw the glorified Christ on the way to Damascus, nor when John on Patmos fell at His feet as dead. And who would not count it a benediction to see what Stephen saw in the midst of mortal pain?—

The martyr first, whose eagle eye
Could pierce beyond the grave,
Who saw his Master in the sky,
And called on Him to save.

"The sudden rending of the veil of clay" is something to covet, not to shun. "Now we see through a glass darkly." Paul was caught up into the third heaven (2 Cor. xii. 2). John's vision of the Risen Christ (Rev. i. 10-18) and Ezekiel's transport when he beheld what is described in his first chapter—whose imagination is not kindled into rapture by the mere reading! Blake's artistic soul experienced the rending of the veil of clay when he painted it. Ray Palmer longed for it in his hymn beginning, "Jesus, these eyes have never seen".

And as for "angel-visitant" and "opening skies"—we need only to ask the Shepherds of Bethlehem or Joan of Arc or Bernadette or recall the experiences of many a saint not only of the middle-ages but of a much later day.

¹ S. M. Zwemer, *Raymund Lull*, ch. iii.

² Paul Sabatier, *Life of St. Francis of Assisi*, pp. 433 ff.

William Blake lived a genuine Christian life in a world of visions from the time when he saw a tree on Peckham Rye "filled with angels, bright angelic wings bespangling every bough like stars". At his brother's death he saw the released spirit ascend through the ceiling, clapping its hands for joy. Sadhu Sundar Singh had ecstasies and visions: "When I am alone I feel surrounded with a wonderful atmosphere, something speaks to my heart. No words are spoken but I see all pictured . . . It is a waking not a dream state; I can think on it steadily."¹ And John Woolman, the Quaker, had outward vision of God as well as "Inner Light".² What a book of religious experience he wrote for us all!

It is not the absence of the angels but our absence-of-mind that may be the reason for our unbelief and coldness of heart.

The angels keep their ancient places:
Turn but a stone, and start a wing!
'Tis ye, 'tis your estranged faces,
That miss the many-splendoured thing.³

The poets, beginning with Shakespeare⁴ to Robert Browning and Tennyson, are on the side of the angels against modern scepticism. So are the great painters, architects and musicians. Without "angel-visitant or opening skies" their art would lose its best. And ordinary folk need angels badly; for in this global tragedy, if you have faith,

. . . upon thy so sore loss
Shall shine the traffic of Jacob's ladder,
Pitched between Heaven and Charing Cross.⁵

And as for theophanies, the eloquence of the Old Testament narrative suffices. Destructive criticism may explain away the meaning but it cannot destroy the record, and the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob is still our God who revealed Himself not only in theophanies, those mysterious foreshadowings of the Incarnation, but in the Son of His love "in whom dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily". The passages regarding the Angel of Jehovah (e.g., Gen. xvi. 7; xviii. 1-8) are not solved by anti-supernatural denials or subterfuges. It is difficult indeed to explain what took place when Moses saw God's glory

¹ B. H. Streeter and A. J. Appasamy, *The Sadhu*, p. 133.

² In his *Journal IV*, opening section, he tells what he experienced.

³ Francis Thompson, *The Kingdom of God*, 4th stanza.

⁴ *Hamlet*, Act. 4; *Macbeth*, Act 4.

⁵ Thompson, 5th stanza.

and talked with Him face to face (Ex. xxxiii. 10; Deut. v. 4; Num. vii. 89, etc.). But we accept the records that it *did* take place.

Liberal theology has little use for angels, visions, ecstasies or opening skies. "That such phenomena had a useful place in what we have called 'the ministry of error' need not be doubted. They do not verify any one religion. They are cradles for temporary use which the growing child will leave behind him. . . . As already suggested the general psychology of the Hebrews would provide *for the Hebrew mind* the idea of extraneous origin for many experiences which we should call normal."¹ Such an attitude toward the Scriptures ends in equating the revelations of pseudo-prophets, Mohammed, Buddha and Joseph Smith with those of Jesus Christ! Professor Whitehead compares the brooding of "Mohammed in the desert, the meditations of Buddha and of the Solitary Man on the Cross" as illustrating his statement, "Religion is what the individual does with his own solitariness".² Behind the three great theistic religions, writes Robinson, "there is a prophetic consciousness . . . the *modus operandi* of the conviction is subsidiary to it. The intermediary may be an angel as for Mohammed and for some of the later prophets of Israel such as Zechariah . . . the ecstatic state of Isaiah or the abnormalities of the prophet Ezekiel . . . the troubled dialogues of Jeremiah or the untroubled consciousness of the prophet of Nazareth". These differences, he infers, are secondary and can all be explained by the psychology of prophecy.³

The present trend in liberal commentaries and Encyclopædias is to reduce angels, visions, theophanies in the Bible narrative to mere psychological hallucinations having no objective reality. The angels of the Resurrection morning are reduced to an unknown young man robed in a white garment, perhaps Mark himself, who pointed the women away from the wrong tomb.⁴ This young man in the course of time became to the hysteric women and the eager apostles "the angel in bright apparel" of Matthew's gospel! Such a rationalisation is utterly foreign to the whole spirit of the narrative and rests on anti-supernaturalistic bias. "The supernatural element is present

¹ H. Wheeler Robinson, *Redemption and Revelation*, pp. 138, 145.

² *Religion in the Making*, pp. 16, 19, 20.

³ *Redemption and Revelation*, p. 164 and pp. 131-157 passim.

⁴ Frank Morison, *Who Moved the Stone?* pp. 254 ff. ; Kirsopp Lake, *The Resurrection of Jesus Christ*, pp. 250-253.

in all the narratives of these events and cannot be excluded without doing unwarrantable violence to the historical records."¹ In similar fashion these critics deal with the angels of the Advent, the angelic deliverances in the Acts, the teaching of Paul in his Epistles regarding angels and the teaching of Hebrews and the Revelation given to John.

Edward Langton's recent volume is an excellent study on the New Testament teaching and at the same time a reasoned reply to the modernist position. Every Christian who is convinced that our Lord Jesus really believed in the objective existence and ministrations of angels (and the evidence is overwhelming) has no difficulty in accepting the teaching of His Apostles and the O.T. Prophets in this matter. Jesus often speaks of the activity of angels at the end of the world (Mark xiii. 27; Matt. xxv. 31; Luke ix. 26). He says that angels rejoice over the salvation of sinners (Luke xv. 10) and that they carry the righteous at death to Abraham's bosom (Luke xvi. 22). Their number is indefinitely large (Matt. xxvi. 53). He told Nathanael that "ye shall see the heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man" (John i. 51). He Himself will come with His holy angels (Matt. xxv. 31). Angels ministered to Him in the desert and in the Garden.

If John i. 51 refers to the glorious advent of Jesus, we should lift up our eyes expectant and eager. For whatever may have been in George Croly's mind in his day (and in spite of all attempts to-day to destroy faith in visions, angels, ecstasies, rending skies and even in the Second Advent), we feel inclined to modify or omit the second stanza of this great hymn.

For these are days when by every effort we must defend the supernatural in the Scriptures. Professor William P. Montague of Columbia University, an outspoken liberal, says, "when once the nose of the camel of doubt is permitted to enter the tent of faith there is no assurance as to where the invasion will stop. If any of the miracles of the Bible are rejected, the others will become open to question".² And he welcomes that result; but we do not.

New York City.

SAMUEL M. ZWEMER.

¹ Edward Langton, *The Angel Teaching of the New Testament*, p. 41.

² *Liberal Theology: An Appraisal* (Scribners, New York, 1942), pp. 155-162. (A series of essays in defence of liberal Theology by a dozen representative writers.)