

*FROM STARLIGHT TO SUNLIGHT.*

2 PETER i. 16-20.

WHEN we remember who wrote it, the breadth and grandeur of this passage are simply wonderful. Where did the rude unlettered fisherman of Galilee learn a wisdom so large, or acquire a style so stately and imposing? Had St. Paul written these verses we should have felt no surprise; for he was both a scholar and an orator who rose without effort into the most impassioned eloquence: but that St. Peter should have written them is a striking and convincing proof of the power of the Holy Ghost to raise men out of and above themselves, to widen the horizons of their thought, to brace and train their intellectual faculties, to enlarge the lines of their character on every side. The verses, indeed, are so crowded with noble conceptions, and these conceptions are expressed in phrases so stately and picturesque, that we cannot hope, in our brief limits, to bring out a tithe of their meaning and beauty, but must be content to indicate their main sequence of thought.

The main object of the Apostle I take to be this: He aims to set forth four divers manners in

which, at sundry times, the truth of God, or some faint preparatory adumbrations of that truth, have been presented to the minds of men; first the *mythical* mode; then, the *miraculous*; then, the *prophetic*; and, last of all, the *spiritual* mode. While setting forth these modes of revelation, he also compares them one with another, and estimates their several values, hinting that they are the successive steps of a single Divine process, and that this process culminates in the inward revelation of Christ to the individual heart. Roughly put, put in the terms of a metaphor which the Apostle himself employs but does not carry through, we may say that the value of the *mythical* mode is as *star-light*, that of the *miraculous* mode as *meteor-light*, that of the *prophetic* mode as *lamp-light*, and that of the *spiritual* mode as *sun-light*. Let us, then, glance at each of these four methods of revelation.

I. THE MYTHICAL MODE.—“*We did not follow cunningly devised fables* when we made known to you the power and advent of our Lord Jesus Christ, *but we had been admitted to be eye-witnesses* of his Majesty.” The Greek noun which is translated “fables” in this sentence, means literally “myths”; and the Greek phrase translated “admitted to be eye-witnesses” is the technical phrase for initiation into the “mysteries.” So that the sense of the verse is, “In declaring the power and advent of the Lord Jesus, we were not as those who are familiar only with the popular myths, which are deemed sufficient for the multitude; we were, rather, as the favoured few who are admitted to the secret mysteries, who are permitted to know the truths that underlie the

fables and stories which fill the popular imagination." What, then, were these "myths," and what the "mysteries"?

The myths, in their origin, were simply poetical conceptions of the processes and phenomena of Nature. Thus, for instance, the sun sinks, or seems to sink, every night into the sea; in the fervid East, moreover, it dries up the streams. But "sun," and "sea," and "streams" had, in the infancy of the world, masculine and feminine names, as, indeed, they still have in most of the languages spoken by men. These masculine and feminine names were soon turned into proper personal names by the vivid imagination of men to whom the world was fresh and wonderful; and hence, instead of saying, "The sun sinks into the sea," they said, "The Sun-God sinks into the lap of the Sea-Goddess, and rests until their child, the Dawn, wakes him from his slumbers." Instead of saying, "The sun dries up the stream," they told a pretty story of a certain River Nymph, whom the Sun-God dearly loved, and who would give him no peace till he came to her in all the glory of his heavenly pomp, beholding which she was forthwith consumed. All the great and many of the lesser processes of Nature were thus mythicized, turned into poems and stories—the succession of day and night, the dependence of men and cattle on the shining of the sun, on the fruits of the earth, on the sweet fresh water of the mountain streams. And, when once these myths had sunk into the popular mind, and the universe was full of gods and goddesses, water nymphs and dryads of the wood, new stories were invented on the basis already laid

down, stories which often expressed no natural sequence, but only the quaint or lovely fancies of the orator and the poet.

Still, under all these freaks of fancy, under all these fair poetic shapes, there lay concealed the germs of many religious truths; as, for example, these: that the Powers which ruled in heaven cared for the earth and blessed it; that God, or the gods, might take human form and dwell among men; and that there was a fair spiritual world, larger, brighter, happier than the world of sense, into which even man might pass and rise. As years and centuries elapsed, these truths were forgotten out of mind, as were many of the ethical maxims deduced from them. In order that they might not altogether perish from the memory and life of man, certain "mysteries" were founded and ordained. No secret known to thousands, imparted to thousands century after century, has been kept like that of the ancient mysteries of Asia, Egypt, Greece, and Rome. But though even the profoundest classical scholar will confess that he knows hardly anything that is definite and exact about them, we know at least this, that they were originally designed to teach the truths on which the popular mythology was based. To be "admitted," that is, to be initiated, into these mysteries, was an honour granted to comparatively few of the millions of antiquity; and it was granted only after they had passed through a probation which either was, or was affirmed to be, terrible to any but men of a brave and constant spirit. Their good faith was thus put to a severe preliminary test; tremendous oaths binding them to secrecy were administered to them;

to divulge a mystery, or to intrude upon it uncalled, were offences punishable with death. In the later and more corrupt ages of heathenism it is to be feared that these mysteries were often simply a cloak for the most lawless orgies ; but to the very end it is believed that there was some show of disclosing truths hidden from the uninitiated, truths of natural science, truths also of religion and morality. For myself, I am disposed to think, though I can claim no special knowledge of this topic, that the ancient mysteries preserved some "broken rays" of that great primitive Religious Tradition, anterior and exterior to the Hebrew faith, of which we get some glimpses in the little we know of such men as Melchizedek, Jethro, Job, and Balaam.

Now, says St. Peter, when we made known to you the power and advent of our Lord Jesus Christ, we were telling you no pretty popular myth, no fable of a Divine person who came down and dwelt with men, such as you have often heard from your priests or rhapsodists, such as you may still hear from your heathen neighbours. We had been initiated into the very mysteries of truth ; we had mastered their secrets, that we might divulge them to you. We spake of that which we ourselves had seen, and handled, and felt, of the Word of Life. All that the myths hinted at, all that the mysteries revealed, was fulfilled in Jesus Christ ; for in Him God came down to men in very deed, lived among them, died for them, and, at his death, was translated to heaven, to shine there as Morning Star and Sun of Righteousness for ever. His "advent" was no fable, but the eternal fact which underlies all the fables that speak

of gods who tabernacled with men. His "power" to save and bless is no poetic parable of the renewing fructifying energy of sun and showers, but the truth which underlies all poetic conceptions of a benignant and fruitful heaven. We have been "admitted" to the mysteries; and, after our probation, we stood as in an inner shrine, the favoured "eye-witnesses" of the "majesty" of Christ. The heathen "myths" were only as stars which broke into the dark heaven of human thought, making it bright and gay, yet shedding no light by which men could see to choose their path or to do the work of life: but the "mysteries" that we speak are as the sun which announces a new day, in whose light all paths grow clear and all work may be done.

2. THE MIRACULOUS MODE.—From the mythical St. Peter passes to the miraculous method of Revelation. *Where* was that inner temple, that sacred and oracular shrine, in which, after their initiation, the apostles were admitted to the mysteries and stood to be eye-witnesses of the unclouded majesty of the Incarnate God? It was on "the holy mount," on which the Lord Jesus was transfigured before their eyes. "For he received honour and glory from God the Father, when a voice was borne to him from the excellent glory, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. And this voice we heard borne to him from heaven, when we were with him in the holy mount." St. Peter had not forgotten that great scene even when the hour of his departure was at hand. The glory which descended from heaven to surround the person of his Master like a tent, like a sacred tent or tabernacle, and the great voice

which issued from the glory and pronounced the man Christ Jesus to be the beloved Son of God,—these were signs and splendours which neither the frailties of age nor the threatenings of death could erase from his memory. He felt that he had not only been admitted to the shrine, but admitted to it at the very moment in which the God had descended, to reveal Himself in streaming intolerable lustre. Heaven was all about him when, at the sound of the voice from the excellent glory, he fell to the earth and lay as one dead. He had been an eye-witness of the very arcana of that great mystery of godliness, God manifest in the flesh.

But why does the Apostle select *this* scene in our Lord's life—the Transfiguration—before all others? Why does he dwell on this moment of ecstasy, as, in some sense, the supreme moment of his long manifold experience? Simply, I suppose, because at that moment, in that scene, all that was most marvellous, all that was most miraculous, in the Lord Jesus Christ was shewn forth in its most marvellous forms. The “advent” of Christ was a miracle; every word and deed that disclosed his Divine “power” was a miracle: but the miraculous element of his “advent and power” culminated in his Transfiguration. Peter had seen nothing so wonderful and splendid as that excellent glory; he had heard nothing so wonderful and terrible as that voice from heaven; and, therefore, as the very acme and crown of the miraculous method of Revelation, he cites the Transfiguration on the holy mount.

For in this way also, in this miraculous way, God speaks to men, and Heaven comes down to earth.

Miracles are not necessarily infractions of law, nor are they evasions of law; they are rather *unfamiliar illustrations of familiar and radical facts*. Like the irruption of rare meteors into the heaven whose constellations we have long known, they are designed to stimulate our languid attention, to shew us what the Divine laws are, and that they are constantly at work for our welfare. In a word, miracles are *the comets* of the sacred history; and doubtless there is a law which governs their occurrence and recurrence, though, as yet, we may have failed to discover it.

To our untutored minds it often seems that no evidence of truth is so weighty and impressive as that of miracles. We often think that could we but see one blind eye opened by the mere touch of Christ, or one dead body raised by his mere word, we should at once be convinced of his "advent" and "power." But St. Peter, although in some respects far less instructed than we are, was by no means of our mind. He had both seen and wrought miracles, and he was aware how slight and transient was the moral effect they produced. Like the other writers of the Bible, he lays comparatively little stress on them: to him, as to them, miracles are not worthy to be compared to any moral virtue or any spiritual power. Just as St. Paul argues that the miraculous gifts are as nothing to the love which may glow in the bosom of the least gifted of men, so St. Peter affirms that miracles, even in their most splendid and dazzling form, are as nothing to "the word" of truth which is in all our hands. St. Paul knew a more excellent and desirable way of life than the exercise of the most rare and stupendous miracu-



ious powers ; and St. Peter knew a sounder basis for faith than that of signs and wonders. He had seen our Lord Jesus Christ receive honour and glory from God the Father in the holy mount ; he had been dazzled and carried out of himself by visions and voices from heaven : but, nevertheless, even when his memory and heart are throbbing with recollections of that sublime scene, he says, "We have something surer still" in "the prophetic word." Marvels are like meteors, most brilliant and astonishing while they last ; but their force is soon spent, their light soon extinguished : we cannot see to walk by them, nor to do our work. And his own experience furnishes the most expressive commentary on his words : for while he was on the holy mount, amid the full blaze of miraculous glory, "he wist not what he said," and was for putting Moses and Elijah on a level with his Master ; and when he came down from the mount, he wist not what he had been taught, and was for bringing his Master down to the level of ordinary manhood, counselling Him to pay the Temple-tax, from which, as the beloved Son of God, He surely was exempt. It was not the miracles of Christ by which he came to know Christ, but the word of Christ as interpreted by the Spirit of Christ. Miracles might arrest and astonish us ; but only the word of truth, in our hearts and in our lives, can really save and renew us.

3. THE PROPHEPIC MODE.—After describing the honour and glory done to Christ, and the voice which came to Him from the glory that shone around Him on the holy mount, the Apostle adds : "But we have something surer still—the prophetic

word, whereunto ye do well that ye give heed, as unto a lamp shining in a dark place ; knowing this above all, that no prophecy of Scripture is a private interpretation ; for prophecy was never at any time borne by will of man ; but, borne along by the Holy Ghost, holy men spake from God."

Now, here, we must be on our guard against a common misconception. We too often conceive of "prophecy," as though it meant only "prediction." It never means prediction merely in the Bible. The Hebrew word for "prophet" simply means one who announces or declares, not one who foretells that which will come to pass. "The word of prophecy" is a term that includes all the moral teaching of the Bible, as well as its predictive utterances ; nay, it points rather to the moral than to the predictive element of Holy Writ. And this body of moral teaching, broken only occasionally by predictions—the whole Bible indeed, in so far as it was known to him, the Apostle affirms to be a safer guide to faith than even the most astonishing and splendid miracles. Why does he call it "something surer still" ?

First, because it is "as a lamp shining in a dark place." Now, as we all know, we can find our way even on the darkest night, if only we have "a lamp to our feet ;" and, moreover, we can see to do any necessary work, if only we have a lamp shining over our head. In plain words, the Apostle's argument is, that miracles are not guides, or not safe guides ; but that, on the contrary, we are under a guidance that is both good and safe when we follow the moral rules of the written Word. Is not this argument a sound argument ? Our Lord's miracles, indeed, are

full of the wisest and tenderest instruction ; but should we have learned their true meaning save for the words He spake ? Miracles are “ wonders ” that arrest our attention ; but, when our attention has been arrested, we still need to have it engaged and instructed. Miracles are “ signs ” that God, or that some teacher sent by God, is with us ; but, when we have seen the sign and feel that God is with us, we still need to learn what God would have us do. “ Miracles,” said John Foster, “ are as the tolling of the great bell of the universe before the sermon begins ; ” but the mere tolling of the bell does not tell us what the sermon is to be about, nor is it of much use to call us away from our work into the church unless, when we get there, some lesson of heavenly wisdom be taught us. When the Apostles stood on the holy mount, they were eye-witnesses of the honour and glory which Christ received from God the Father ; and, no doubt, the miracle taught them that the Son of Man was also the Son of God ; but the very voice which pronounced Him God’s beloved Son also bade them “ *hear him.* ” If He had not spoken to them, the miracle would but have raised their hopes to defeat them. What they wanted, what we all want, is not to see wonders that daze us, and to be rapt in ecstatic visions and splendours, but a little light on the dark and troubled path we have to tread, a lamp that will burn steadfastly and helpfully over the work we have to do. The stars are infinitely more sublime, meteors infinitely more superb and dazzling ; but the lamp shining in a dark place is infinitely closer to our practical needs. Plain rules of life that commend themselves to our

conscience, in obedience to which we rise above our baser selves and become better happier men ; these, with some bright hope in the future to attract and draw us on, to assure us that, if we do God's will, we shall enter into God's rest—these rules, and this hope, are worth far more to us in the conduct of our daily life than all the signs and wonders ever wrought. *These* are as the lamp by which we can walk and work ; miracles are but as the distant stars or occasional flashing comets. And this lamp of rules for daily conduct is given us in the prophetic Word.

The Divine Word has another claim on our regard and preference. For this "lamp," which shines so helpfully on the activities of human life, has been lit and is fed by God Himself. "No prophecy of Scripture is a private interpretation." That is to say, the prophetic Word is not a mere logical deduction from the facts of life and Nature ; nor is it a mere guess at things to come, based on a knowledge of what has taken place in the past. A prophet was not simply a man who, after studying a multitude of various facts, discovered the law which was common to them all, or inferred a maxim on which men would do well to act. Nor was he simply a man who, having studied the ethical forces which were at work in his age, arrived at a probable conjecture as to the results that would flow from them and give its form and pressure to the succeeding age. There was something higher than human wisdom in his utterances, something safer than the prognostics of human reason ; for prophecy never came only from the will of man, but holy men, borne

along by the Holy Ghost, as the ship is borne before the wind, spake the words that were given them from God. Their prophecies were not their private interpretations of the moral facts and enigmas of human life; they were the authoritative interpretations of God Himself. There is a Divine wisdom, therefore, an infallible wisdom; there is a Divine power, an almighty power, in the inspired Word, even when it is most human and imperfect in outward form. And it is this Divine wisdom and power which make that Word a sure and certain guide to our feet. The lamp itself may be only an earthen vessel, unskilfully moulded by the hand of man; but "the treasured splendour" of its light, and the oil that feeds the light, are the gift of God.

In thus affirming that the prophetic Word is not a private interpretation of the problems of life, but an inspired and Divine solution of them, the holy Apostle had, I think, a double contrast in his mind—a contrast with miracles, and a contrast with oracles. That, beyond all doubt, the Word came *from God*, gave it its superiority over miracles; for miracles, or apparent miracles, are not necessarily from Him. By what occult arts they gained their power we cannot tell; but in the Sacred History we often meet with men who wielded an extraordinary, and perhaps a supernatural, power. Miracles were wrought, or are said to have been wrought, by magicians, by thaumaturgists, by men informed by an evil and unclean spirit; and, therefore, miracles were not a sufficient, though they are an inevitable, authentication of any message that professed to come from Heaven. But the Word of

prophecy never at any time came from the mere will of man : *that* was always an inspiration from God ; and therefore the Word was "something surer" than the miracles, which at least *might not* come from God, but might be either wrought, or counterfeited, by wicked men for a wicked end.

This was one contrast in the Apostle's mind : and the other was, that the prophecies of Scripture were superior to the oracles uttered by the ministrants of heathen shrines. When these oracles were consulted, they gave "private interpretations." The priest or pythoness, for instance, if asked which of two kings would succeed in a certain war, based his reply on what he knew of the strength and valour of the contending armies, the skill of their leaders, the value of the alliances they could command ; and took care, moreover, to couch his reply in ambiguous terms, capable of being interpreted in a double sense. When Cræsus, King of Lydia, for example, consulted the Oracle at Delphi as to whether he should venture on war with Cyrus the Persian, the pythoness assured him that, if he went to war, "he would destroy a mighty empire," but quite omitted to warn him that that empire would be his own.<sup>1</sup> So far as we can judge, indeed, all these oracular responses were either private inductions from known facts, shrewd guesses which had no higher source than the experience and craft of the ministrant, or lying flatteries purchased by heavy bribes. But the prophetic Word was no private induction merely, no shrewd guess ; it came not from the will or wit of man ; it was informed by the breath, the Spirit, of

<sup>1</sup> Herodotus, Book i. Chap. 33.

God. "Words of so sweet breath composed," words inspired by the pure wise Spirit of God, were infinitely above the politic conjectures and laborious inferences of the ministrants at the shrines of Delphi and Dodona. To such words as *these* men would do well to give heed in all their perplexities, as unto a lamp that burned and shone in a dark place, a place whose darkness was only made visible by the flickering and misleading rays of human wit.

4. But, finally, THE SPIRITUAL MODE of Revelation is even safer and better than the prophetic mode, as much better as sunlight is better than lamplight. We do well to turn from "the ineffectual fires" of starry myths, and from the miracles which blaze for a moment like the swift meteors that rush across the sky, to the serviceable light of the lamp, which is closer to us than the stars and of a more steadfast flame than the meteors. So long as we are in "a dark place" we cannot safely dispense with the lamp of the written and prophetic Word. But we need not stay for ever in the dark. We need the lamp only "until the day dawn, and the morning star arise in our hearts."

But what is this morning star that brings a new day into our hearts? "*I am the bright and morning star,*" replies the Lord Jesus. The heavenly day dawns upon us when we receive *Him* into our hearts, when, by his Spirit, He comes and takes up his abode within us. It is this individual and spiritual appropriation of the Lord Jesus Christ—in virtue of which we can say with St. Paul, "Christ in me, the hope of glory"—which of all modes of revelation is the most penetrating, convincing, and complete. We need no

myths or parables, no miracles, no, nor even the prophetic Word itself, when once this day has dawned upon us. When Christ is once with us, and in us, what further proof can we require of his "advent" or of his "power" to quicken and redeem? With Christ shining in the heaven of our thoughts and affections, penetrating all our motives, passions, energies, with his lucid rays, what need we any other light, any other proof of his "glory"? With Christ to teach us what He would have us do, we can dispense with all other teachers, all other aids. Myths! We have been initiated into the very mysteries of the Faith, and are joyful eye-witnesses of his Majesty. Miracles! He has wrought the great miracle upon us, bringing a clean thing out of an unclean, opening our blind eyes, unstopping our deaf ears, quickening us from our death in trespasses and sins. Laws and hopes! When once we have personally laid hold on Christ, we are a law unto ourselves, and move in the freedom of a glad obedience to his will; we have a hope already fulfilling itself in us, and yet opening up into widening vistas of light—the hope of eternal life and service and peace. Because He who is the Truth dwells in us, all truth is credible to us and needs no witness. Because the Holy One of God dwells in us, we follow after whatsoever things are pure and honourable and good. Because He who is Love dwells in us, we believe the love God hath for us, and respond with love to his great love for us. The morning star has risen in our hearts; the day has dawned; the darkness is over and gone, and, with the darkness, all our need of the lamps and stars which once made night tolerable to us.



This is the climax of the Apostle's sequence of thought, the point to which he rises, in which he rests. Alas! how far are we from resting in it, even when we have once gained it. We touch it at times indeed. At times we feel that, through the grace and Spirit of Christ, we need no other than this inward proof that truth is true, or that love is lovable. The truth within us recognizes and welcomes the Truth without us; the love within us responds to the Love above us. We are conscious of a Spirit in us that will guide us into all truth and perfect us in charity. But this bright day soon clouds over, and, once more, we find ourselves in a dark place, needing a guidance beyond our own, and a strength to which we have not attained. Thank God, the lamp still burns in the dark place. And if, so often as we walk in darkness, we use this lamp, if by the light of the prophetic Word we go on our way, picking out step after step, the day will soon return, and the Sun of Righteousness once more arise and shine on our darkened and dejected hearts.

S. COX.

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THE FIRST CHAPTER  
OF THE EPISTLE TO THE HEBREWS.

VERSE 5.

THE inspired writer, having affirmed in the preceding verse that *Jesus has been exalted higher than the angels, and so much higher as he has inherited a more excellent name than they*, proceeds to substantiate his assertion. This he does, not in a severely logical way, with formal syllogisms bristling in a row, but still with profound spiritual sagacity. He