

be, but we know that we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is ; and that knowledge will find its adequate expression, as before, in a Name. And that Name written on him that overcometh will mark him not only as a citizen of the heavenly Jerusalem, but as the subject, nay, rather, as the heir of the Eternal King.

E. H. PLUMPTRE.

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*GIDEON'S FLEECE.*

THE story of Gideon's Fleece is one which will be read by different people in different ways. Some will probably regard it as one of those improbable stories of which so many are to be found in the Old Testament, which they despair of reducing to any sort of harmony with the facts of common life, and consequently reject as mere stories to be classed with the narrative of Balaam's ass and Joshua's bidding the sun to stand still ; the absence of which from the pages of the Old Testament would make it, they suppose, much more trustworthy as an historical record, or, at all events, less open to reasonable objection : others, probably, will endeavour to account for it as the expression of Gideon's own fancy, and imagine that the story relates not what actually took place, but what he thought took place : while others, representing a number gradually becoming less and less, will accept the narrative as a miraculous one, and derive so much spiritual meaning from it as they may be able to extract.

The tendency to allegorize Holy Writ is indicative of an unhealthy condition of mind, and has often been productive of pernicious results. It is derogatory to

the Holy Spirit to conceive that his chief concern in the production of the Sacred Scriptures has been that of setting conundrums. And, in fact, there is no limit to the degree to which the habit of allegorizing may not be carried if we once surrender ourselves to the principle. St. Paul, indeed, discovered in the history of Hagar and Sarah an implied prophecy of the two covenants, but he did so in such a way as to leave no doubt upon the mind about the reality of the history. When, however, allegory has the effect of diverting our attention from the actual fact to the supposed idea foreshadowed by the fact, its tendency becomes fatal to the existence of history, which is valuable only as a record of fact. No doubt all actual history must involve the expression and illustration of certain principles which, perhaps, at the time of its occurrence are less obvious than the outward features of the history itself. It is only after the lapse of ages that the veil of incident begins, as it were, by degrees to wear away and to make more and more apparent the principle underlying it. And then, in proportion as this becomes striking and forcible, we are conscious of the tendency to question almost whether the particular expression or illustration of the hidden principle ever took place. It is characteristic of certain minds to be more or less open respectively to the influence of ideas or facts. For example, the Hindoo mind can with difficulty apprehend the value of historic fact. It is almost wholly under the power of ideas, and it regards history as merely the vehicle of abstract ideas, which are of more importance than the history itself. It is curious to trace the existence of a like tendency in the cognate mind

of modern Germany, which has frequently been evidenced by the habit of resolving everything into myths. In striking contrast to the Indo-Germanic mind is the Semitic mind of the Jews. They, as a nation, were almost wholly under the power of the concrete. They valued facts for their own sake, and were slow to perceive the operation of underlying principles. Thus their historical records deal largely in incidents and dates and names, and thereby assert their claim the more imperatively on our attention as transcripts of veritable fact. It is not impossible that this very slowness in the Jewish mind to appreciate abstract principle may account for the particular aspect of certain portions of their history. Modern investigations have tended to shew that the plagues of Egypt had in them certainly an element of the natural, although the manner in which they have been recorded is such as to conceal this almost entirely, and to leave us hardly anything to contemplate but the arbitrary display of supernatural power and the exercise of a supernatural will. It is possible, however, that, without any sacrifice of historical accuracy, a very different narrative of them might have been produced by a mind of a different order, more under the influence of ideas; or, at all events, it is certain that the Mosaic history resembles more nearly a sculpture in high relief than it does a painting in perspective. The illustrations on the monuments of Egypt, among which the youthful mind of the great Lawgiver had been trained, are singularly suggestive of much of the Jewish history; for, in both, events are represented not so much as they appear to us now, but rather as they cannot

fail to appear when adapted to one rigid and inflexible method of viewing or depicting them. That the earliest efforts of mankind in this direction would be naturally governed by analogous principles is shewn by the sculptures of Assyria, in which truth was, without doubt, a primary object, though the artist, in his efforts to attain it, achieved results which, to our modern ideas, are anything but true. It is inevitable that an historian of the same early period should be characterized by features of a similar kind, and hence the life-like, though at the same time the rigid and inflexible, representations of the Mosaic and early Jewish history.

It is, however, characteristic also of Holy Writ, in a degree that far surpasses any other writings whatever, that the incidents of its history not only serve to illustrate underlying principles, but also serve to give the promise of yet higher illustration of them. For instance, the deliverance out of Egypt manifestly reflects the spiritual deliverance from sin; the wanderings in the desert and the delayed occupation of Canaan, the struggles after the attainment of spiritual freedom and holiness of life, and the like; and consequently they answer in a remarkable manner to the redemption of Christ and the discipline of life in the journey to the land of heavenly rest. Precisely therefore as we recognize the hand of God in the history of the Exodus, it will become impossible for us not to see in that history a promise of the Redemption of Christ. If we acknowledge both incidents as Divine, it is impossible not to discern a Divine intention in the relation between them. And hence arises what is known in common popular

language as the relation between type and antitype. It tends to an unreal contemplation of the facts of history to dwell too exclusively or prominently on this relation; but the relation is one that we cannot but acknowledge if we acknowledge the history. The history does not exist for the sake of this relation, but this relation is the necessary accident of the conditions of the history, and it is a relation that must have been contemplated and designed, so far as the expression of the Divine Mind was intended to be marked in the incidents of the history.

It is not, however, by any means all the incidents of Jewish history in which we can trace a similar relation to subsequent events that we find in the earlier and later incidents of the Exodus. Indeed, it is natural to suppose that the impress of the Divine Will would not be stamped with equal clearness on every part of the history. In many cases that history would be left to develop itself after the ordinary and natural principles which operate in human affairs. Nor is this inconsistent with what we believe to be the method of God's dealings with individual men. We faithfully recognize a controlling Providence in every part of our lives; but in certain marked deliverances and acts of special mercy we are constrained to confess that the finger of God has been conspicuously manifested. The same Almighty Power, therefore, which operated wondrously at the Exodus, may not have ceased to operate during the era of the Judges or the Kings, although the way in which it operated may have been less exceptional and less conspicuous. If, however, there were any occasions when the power of God was exerted

in an exceptional way, it is only reasonable to suppose that such occasions of his manifestation would be fraught with more significance than the incident of the moment might demand. The appearance of the captain of the Lord's host to Joshua would have a very direct and intelligible meaning to him; but if the vision was a real one and not an illusion, the record of it could not but be charged with many important principles and lessons, not for Joshua only, but for all mankind. The whole value of such narratives lies in the reality of the event recorded. There is absolutely no lesson conveyed by the vision to Joshua, or to Manoah, if the vision itself was an unreal one. Whereas, if it actually was an incident in the series of a continuous Divine revelation, the value of it becomes infinitely enhanced; and thus those critics who depreciate the narrative for its own sake, and regard it as unworthy of credit for its absurdities, virtually start where they should conclude, by assuming its falsehood. For if the narrative is not false, it ceases to be absurd; it becomes a veritable and trustworthy record of the way in which the Almighty was content to convey the knowledge of his will to man.

Now let us apply these principles to the story of Gideon's fleece. Of course, if the story is not true, if the incidents were not as they are recorded, if there was no remarkable phenomenon witnessed, however the story of it may be accounted for, then we need not trouble ourselves about the narrative; it is a narrative and nothing more, simply on a par with the many narratives, equally marvellous and equally untrue, that we meet with in Herodotus.

But if this is not so, if the sign for which Gideon asked was a real sign, if it really was a sign which God vouchsafed to give him for his own encouragement, then verily it could not be a sign without a signification, and it is open to us to ponder and investigate its signification. Certainly, if we decide beforehand that it is neither consistent with the Divine dignity nor the character of the Divine actions to take such a course, there is an end to everything with which the action may be fraught; but this in a professedly and ostensibly Divine Record is clearly to prejudge the case. If the record be not divine, it clearly can have no divine meaning; whatever meaning it may have must be dependent on its verity as a record. The question should rather be whether, supposing the record to be a true one, it is possible for us to discover any signification underlying the sign which may tend to confirm its truth. That it is the chosen method of Almighty God to teach by signs is unquestionably the doctrine of the Bible. "Therefore the Lord himself shall give you a sign," cried Isaiah to the rebellious and unbelieving Ahaz. "These signs are written that ye might believe," said St. John of the miracles of Jesus. The whole ministry of Scripture is a ministry of signs, and in some cases signs have been asked faithfully, and sometimes they have been asked in unbelief. It was characteristic of the Jewish mind, St. Paul tells us, to seek after signs, perhaps from the very circumstance that their ancient literature was so full of them; but the ministry of signs was one of which even our blessed Lord did not hesitate to avail Himself when Moses and Elias were seen in

glory on the mountain of vision, and the angel appeared unto Him from heaven, strengthening Him in the hour of his great agony. Within certain limits, therefore, chiefly determined by the inward animus of the seeker after them, it is plainly allowable to ask for signs. Gideon had already given proof of his faith in the mission of God by incurring danger and the reproach of his friends for the sake of obedience to the Divine command; he might not unnaturally ask for further recognition of his work. And that recognition was given him. If we are to believe that these things were written for our learning, we may fairly infer that similar recognition and encouragement will not be withheld when it is needful for us to have it, if the prayer that asks for it is the prayer of faith. It is essential to every good work that we should be fully persuaded of the Divine approval and co-operation. Certainly, if the work is good, we may know that it has the Divine approval; but in proportion as it is arduous, we naturally stand in need of more than this. We want the distinct consciousness of Divine co-operation, and oftentimes in the annals of those who have worked for God this has been vouchsafed. It was when Paul was a prisoner in the castle of Antonia that the Lord stood by him at night, and said, "Be of good cheer, Paul; for as thou hast testified of me in Jerusalem, so must thou bear witness also at Rome." And thus it was in the case of Gideon. When he was about to strike the critical blow for the deliverance of his country, he said unto God, "If thou wilt save Israel by my hand, as thou hast said, Behold, I will put a fleece of wool in the floor, and if the dew be on the fleece



only, and it be dry upon all the earth beside, then shall I know that thou wilt save Israel by my hand, as thou hast said." There is nothing on the face of the narrative to enable us to judge whether in Gideon's request belief or unbelief predominated. We can only suppose that the issue shews conclusively that it was the prayer of faith asking for the increase of faith, for otherwise we may infer that it would have been rejected. The only question is, how far we may conceive that, in granting the request of Gideon, it was the Divine intention to combine with the answer to it typical instruction for after ages. And this we can only decide by comparing the signs given with the known subsequent dealings of the Almighty. Then it will be sufficiently obvious that a clear correspondence will be traceable; although, of course, to decide how far this correspondence was comprehended within the limits of the Divine intention can only be a matter for the inference of faith. The first condition imposed by Gideon was analogous to the position of himself and his people. In all ages of the world might has been liable to pass for right. The seven years' oppression of the Midianites had doubtless the tendency to make Israel feel less confident in the national relation to God. As far as God was identified with good fortune, which is the special temptation with which good fortune always comes charged, it might have been thought that God was on the side of Midian,—that Israel was no nearer or dearer to him than Midian. If this were really so, then there was an end to all the special significance of the past dealings of God with Israel. They had

implied nothing and testified to nothing. Though Gideon may not have intended or thought of this, the very teaching of the sign he asked for was to shew that the gracious dew of the Divine election rested alone on Israel, whatever the outward features of the nation were. The strong arm of power was with Midian, and it was wielded to the oppression of God's people ; but that by no means belied his past dealings with them. To them " pertained the adoption, and the glory, and the covenants, and the giving of the law, and the service of God, and the promises." As regards all these special tokens of the Divine power all the earth around was destitute. As yet the dew had not fallen there. This is simply a matter of fact which cannot be controverted if we accept the Divine mission of Israel for the education of the world. And even if we do not accept that, it still remains a phenomenon of history for which we have to account, that the special characteristics of the history and literature of Israel are essentially distinct from those of the rest of mankind. Where at this early age, in the fifth century before the first Olympiad (776 B.C.) and the foundation of Rome, will you find in the annals of any people such simple trust in the providence of God, such childlike reliance on his power and his will, as are found in the story of Gideon? Nay, where is the people that have the annals to shew? We shall search in vain on the monuments of Egypt, or amid the brick records of Babylonia, for any like knowledge of God, even if we declare that knowledge false, as it is found in the records of Israel; so that as a matter of fact, while the dew of Divine

grace lay thick on Israel, the face of all the earth besides was dry. That such an application is, at all events, not unbiblical is seen at once by reference to the seventy-second Psalm, where it is especially said, with regard to the Son of David, that He shall come down like rain upon a *fleece* (the masculine form of the same word that is used here in Judges). The spiritual influence of the future king is declared by the Psalmist to be like that of rain or dew upon a fleece, or, as the Authorized Version has it, upon the mown grass. Whether or not, therefore, we decide that this was the meaning which God intended the sign to have, at all events it is one which is alike consistent with the language of Scripture and with the obvious facts of history.

It remains, however, to consider the second sign vouchsafed to Gideon. It was just possible that the moisture in the fleece was due to some accidental cause, and not intended as an answer to the prayer of Gideon. We, in reading the narrative, have clearly no room to think so; but if we put ourselves in the place of Gideon, we shall assuredly feel that the doubt was by no means an unnatural or an unreasonable one. Certainly, if there is any truth in the faith that lives in honest doubt, we must acknowledge that Gideon was justified in his hesitation, so far as it was really hesitation, and not rather faith, asking for the missing link of sufficient evidence. At all events, here again the issue justified him. Following the memorable example of Abraham when interceding for Sodom, he said unto God, "Let not thine anger be hot against me, and I will speak but this once: Let me prove, I pray thee, but this once

with the fleece; let it now be dry only upon the fleece, and upon all the ground let there be dew. And God did so that night: for it was dry upon the fleece only, and there was dew on all the ground." The second answer was conclusive: here at least there could be no room for accident. It is beyond the possibility of chance that such a result following a prayer so framed could be other than an answer to the prayer. Only concede the incidents, and the significance of them was unquestionable. The language in which they speak is as distinct and unambiguous in our days as it was three thousand years ago. And of their effect then the history gives the clearest evidence in the sequel, when, as the immediate consequence, it tells us that with three hundred men the multitudinous hosts of Midian were put to flight and smitten.

But was there nothing in the giving of this sign, and in the narrative which preserved the memory of it, which was intended, not only to confirm the faith of Gideon, but yet further to instruct the future generations of mankind? Was there not a lesson hidden there which Gideon could not learn, which time only could unfold, but which the course of history should make too plain to be lightly put aside? If the condition of Israel then was shadowed forth by the moisture in the fleece which had left the earth dry, what shall we say to the condition of Israel when the full purposes of God in his dealings with that nation had been declared, and they had rejected Him for whom alone their nation had been signally blest, and for whose advent it had been specially prepared? Here, again, without venturing

to penetrate too deeply into the secret counsels of the Most High, we cannot but acknowledge the patent historical fact that, while the rest of mankind and all the nations of the earth have actually and potentially entered into the promises and blessings of Israel and been enriched with the dews of Zion, Israel alone of all the nations has been excluded as an outcast. Whatever the true explanation of this fact may be, the fact itself is one of the most obvious in history. It is, of course, open to the philosophy of modern days to put its own interpretation upon these phenomena; but as long as they are what they are, and as long as the world lasts they can never be other than they are, it will also be open to believing criticism to point to their extraordinary significance and to draw its own conclusions from them. It does not seem to be an unfair application of the principles of allegory to ask whether it may not have been within the compass of the Holy Spirit's intention to shadow forth to the world, as in a glass, in these two incidents in the history of Gideon, the past and future history of the chosen people? At one time the sole possessors of the truth of God, they were the depositories of that truth, not for their own sake, but for the sake of the world; and when they had proved themselves unworthy of, and unfaithful to, their high trust, they were still to remain, in their past history and their present unbelief, a standing monument of witness to the truth of God, the significance of which could never pass away or become less, while all the world was in possession of their spiritual treasures and they themselves deprived of them.

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