

THE HOUSE OF MARY.

ANCIENT Jerusalem is not more hidden from the gaze of modern explorers than is the Jerusalem life of our Lord from the student of Scripture. In the one case it is only by excavating, and by sinking shafts through the *débris* of centuries, that we are enabled to go round about her walls and "tell the towers thereof," filling up the large blanks with mere guesses; while, in the other, it is only by looking through the silences and the chance sayings of Scripture, that any light can be thrown upon the home-life at Jerusalem. We do not read of any hospitalities offered to Him within the precincts of the Holy City—the "great suppers" are prepared in the provinces, or at homely Bethany; nor do we read of any "guest-chamber" save that in which the Master and the disciples kept watch for the dark to-morrow. There are, indeed, casual allusions which seem to imply that Jesus studiously avoided lodging within the walls of the city. St. John gives us a solitary statement, "And Jesus went out to the Mount of Olives" (Chap. viii. 1); and though there is nothing in these words but may refer to an isolated act, yet as the same expression is used in the preceding Verse (Chap. vii. 53), where it must refer to an act that was frequent and customary, we infer that the same meaning may be given to this Verse, with the implication

and on Genesis xxii. 2 he remarks: "God did not say to Abraham, Slay him, for it was not the will of the Holy and Blessed that he should slay him, but that he should take him up the mountain, and prepare an offering." Again, on Verse 12 he states that, according to Rabbi Abba, there was a further explanatory conversation in which God said to Abraham, "I will neither violate my covenant, nor change my saying. When I said to thee, Take him, I did not will to change my promise to thee; for I did not say, Offer him, but Bring him up hither. Thou broughtest him up here; now bring him down again." These rabbis understood the *verb* to refer to *going up* the mountain, and it is often so used. But whether right or wrong in this, they were surely right in considering almost any verbal irregularity more probable than the supposition that God could order Abraham to kill and burn his son, the child of promise, the declared heir of an unchangeable covenant; and that Divine authority should enjoin a heathen abomination as a test of faithful obedience.

that going out to the Mount of Olives was the general practice of Jesus. St. Luke lifts the matter out of conjecture, averring that such was his "wont" (Chap. xxii. 39; Chap. xxi. 37). From these passages it is evident that Jesus was accustomed at evening to withdraw from the city—probably for the sake of greater retirement and quiet—to the Mount of Olives, whatever that phrase may mean. In one place (St. Matt. xxvi. 30) "the Mount of Olives" means the sequestered Garden of Gethsemane; and probably in the other instances it refers to Bethany, to whose quiet home the homeless Son of Man was ever welcome. But the narrow means of Bethany would not accommodate the large following Jesus had; for, besides the Twelve, there are many unknown ones, and nameless women of Galilee, who have come up to Jerusalem. How large this following was we may gather from the fact that, after the Ascension, "the number of names together were about an hundred and twenty" (Acts i. 15); and this number, we may suppose, would only include the professed disciples of the new faith, not reckoning those who, while giving their sympathies, had not yet given their names, to the young Church.

And here the question arises, Where was the rendezvous of the new sect? the head-quarters of the world's first Crusaders? for some such central gathering-place would be more than a convenience, it would be a necessity. But here we are left in the dark, and all we can do is to grope our way amongst probabilities, led by the few scattered lights that shine out from the inspired page. Soon as the clearer day of Pentecost dawns, there is one house which rises into especial prominence. It is "the house of Mary, the mother of John" Mark; and as Mary is an aunt of Barnabas, and Mark an intimate friend of Peter, we have in these relationships certain lines of perspective that indicate the missing home and centre. As Mary was so related to Barnabas, who owned estates in Cyprus, it is not altogether an

assumption that she too was a person of position and fortune; and if so, then we are not surprised to find within her house the "linen cloth"<sup>1</sup> or costly sindon, which "a certain young man" left behind him in his flight (St. Mark xiv. 51), nor do we wonder that her house could offer an "upper room," large enough to serve as a meeting-place for the hundred and twenty disciples.<sup>2</sup>

But emerging from these guesses, there meets us an historic fact which not only forms the centre for a deeply interesting narrative, but which also may bridge over the chasm of silence we find in the sacred Record. When Peter was imprisoned by Herod, and miraculously delivered by the angel, as soon as "he came to himself"—for he had lost himself in the sudden wonder—he turned along a (to him) familiar street, and went directly to Mary's house. He knew not yet of the gathering of the Church, and the earnest prayers that had been rising from its chambers; yet he makes for its shelter in preference to all others. And, as we see the Apostle's footsteps turned naturally in this direction, while the Church has selected it as the place of special intercession for the imprisoned one, we need no further proof that "the house of Mary" was a prominent centre and rallying place for the disciples, certainly in the days following the Pentecost, and probably too in the days preceding it.

And here another question arises, Who were the disciples whose love and sorrow would not let them sleep, and who kept the first "watch-night" of the Church? Criticism has passed them by somewhat hurriedly and thoughtlessly, giving an opinion which we venture to suggest may be incorrect; for if the door of the narrative be opened, we think it will appear that this band of importunates was not a miscellaneous group, but a gathering, exclusively, of praying

<sup>1</sup> See *Expositor*, First Series, vol. i. p. 436.

<sup>2</sup> Farrar's "Life of St. Paul," vol. i. p. 320.

Christian *women*. In Acts xii. 5 we read that "prayer was made without ceasing of the Church"; but since the Church at this time numbered at least five thousand, probably more, the whole body of Believers could not possibly have been present at this unique gathering. And so in Verse 12 we find the expression changed. It is no longer "the Church," but "many" (*ikavoi*)—a word implying a large number, but still a minority of the whole. And what would be the likely state of the disciples, now that a bitter persecution has set in, and the bloody hand of Herod is pressed heavily against the pillars of the Church? Would not "the brethren" endeavour to save their lives by flight? Would not prudence as well as cowardice suggest a temporary hiding until the storm should have passed by? Neither the Old Testament nor the New approves of recklessness, of running in the face of danger, if the danger can be avoided without any sacrifice of principle. Did not David's harp play mournfully in Adullam's cave and on the hill Mizar? Did not Elijah fly before the wrath of Jezebel? And did not the Lord Himself pass out of the murderous throng at Nazareth and hide Himself away? He did not think it right to push forward the hour which would come only too soon. And would the "brethren" be wrong in following his example, winning many chances of future service by a temporary silence and seclusion? We may at least say that such a course would be both probable and natural; while the godly women of the Church would be in comparative security.

But coming to "the door of the gate," who was the damsel "named Rhoda"? The word damsel (*παιδίσκη*) sometimes means a young female slave, but there are several indications in the narrative that Rhoda was not a mere menial of the house. Her *coming* to the gate seems to imply that the act was perfectly voluntary on her part. Evidently she was one of the "many" disciples who were

gathered within, and one who was very familiar with Peter's voice; for, tremulous as it is with the recent agitation, Rhoda recognizes it, even though the door is not yet opened. And what means this haste, as in her "gladness" she forgets to open the gate, but runs back to break the tidings to those within? It is the haste and gladness of one who is almost delirious in her new-found joy. And does not this fact lead us to the same conclusion, that these midnight and morning watchers are a band of praying women? True we can scarcely judge of those ruder times by the rules of modern social life; but to say the least, it seems very unlikely that a young girl would go to the outer gate, to listen and to report—a task requiring considerable nerve, considering the circumstances of the hour—had any of the brethren been present.

St. Peter's language, however, gives us a clearer testimony. Breathless with the running,<sup>1</sup> and pale with the excitement of her message, Rhoda announces the fact that Peter has escaped from prison, and that he is standing "before the gate." The disciples, however, were "like them that dream"; they "wist not that it was true," until Rhoda's constant affirmations, and the still-continued knocking, convince them that it is something more than a happy illusion on the damsel's part. Then they too leave the inner chamber, and rush to the outer gate, for in Verse 16 the number of the pronoun is changed: "when *they* had opened the door, and saw him, *they* were astonished." And as they stand clustered by the gate, eagerly welcoming him who comes to them as one alive from the dead, Peter does not pass within, but "beckoning with the hand" to silence the tumult of questions, and to hush the exclamations of surprise, he tells "how the Lord had brought him out of the prison." And when he has completed the story he adds, "Go, shew these things unto James, and to the

<sup>1</sup> εἰσδραμοῦσα.

brethren," implying, of course, that neither James nor "the brethren"<sup>1</sup> are here now, amid this group of delighted listeners.

The only objection to this interpretation of the narrative is the fact that the adjectives and participles are masculine, instead of feminine. But even this is no insuperable objection, since amongst Greek writers the masculine is often used for the feminine, if the question of sex is not the material point.<sup>2</sup>

And so a deeper interest gathers about Mary's house. In the Gospels woman is prominent; now singing the Magnificat, and now "serving" at the feast; now lingering near the cross, and now preparing sweet spices for the embalming or listening to the first "All Hail" of the Easter morning. But in the "Acts," the Maries, the Joannas, and the Salomes seem to retire to a distance; we scarcely see them. In Mary's house we meet them once again; we see them keeping the mournful midnight watch; we hear their voices in tender earnest pleadings: and, as in the Gospels it was a Mary who told "the brethren" how an angel had rolled away the stone, and how Christ had arisen, so now in the "Acts" the Maries announce to James and to "the brethren" how another angel has swept down upon Jerusalem, how Rome's quaternions have again been baffled, and how the Lord "hath appeared unto Simon."

HENRY BURTON.

<sup>1</sup> Dean Alford intimates that by "the brethren" are simply meant "the kinsmen of the Lord"; overlooking the fact that these are called "his brethren," not "*the* brethren" (Acts i. 14).

<sup>2</sup> In Acts ix. 37 we have a similar use of the masculine for the feminine.