

THE TWIN PARABLES.

MATTHEW XIII. 44-46.

REMEMBERING that Christianity has been in the world nearly nineteen centuries, and that its Scriptures have been here and in the hands of its disciples almost as long; remembering also the zeal and ability which have been brought to bear on their interpretation, it seems, to say the least, extremely strange that so little progress has been made in the appreciation of the meaning of the first Christian writers, or in the development of their ideas. Generally speaking, it might almost be said that no progress has been made at all. The broad lines of interpretation which were accepted in the fourth, or even in the second, century of the Christian era, are the same as are accepted now, and the prevailing aim of commentators and expositors seems to be to keep up the traditional interpretations and to guard against any departures from them. For example, let any one take up the various commentaries on St. Paul's Epistles and compare them with each other, noticing their points of difference and their points of agreement, and what will he find? He will find—unless I am greatly mistaken—that, while differing from each other on small and practically unimportant, and certainly unessential, points, in such matters as the scope, and meaning, and fundamental doctrines of an Epistle they all agree with a unanimity which is either marvellous or simply tame. Or, take the Parables of our Lord. The agreement in the exegesis of these is of the same kind. Some divergence of opinion may be found as to their arrangement, their divisions, or as to the implication of this or that particular phrase; but beyond these the divergence seldom goes. Like the interpretation of the Epistles of St. Paul, theirs also has become traditional, and it is rare, extremely rare, that any attempt is made to strike

out a new line of interpretation, or to see in them what has not been seen before. I have before me some half-dozen or more of books dealing expressly with the Parables of our Lord; but having read one, and carefully examined the others, I find it difficult to account for the printing of more than one; and when the interpretations they contain are compared with those handed down from antiquity, the lines of interpretation laid down by the first accepted commentators are found to be implicitly followed by the rest.

That there is any law or necessity compelling this I am not aware. For the great names of the Ancient Church, as well as for those of the Modern, I have the profoundest respect. Tradition, too, has its uses; and traditional opinions, whether in matters of speculative theology or of exegesis, are often of great service; but that they should be always accepted or followed is questionable. It seems to me, indeed, that there are good reasons why they should always be regarded with more or less distrust. Those who formed them certainly lived nearer to the time when the Christian Scriptures were written; but that by no means places their opinions as to their meaning outside the sphere of criticism, or entitles them to be regarded as infallible. They were fallible men, as we are, and not less liable to be led astray. And besides, to many of them Christianity was a new thing, and it will be difficult to prove that their previous habits of thought, or intellectual training gave them any advantages in the interpretation of Scripture over ourselves. The appeal to the historical Christian consciousness, so much in favour with some theologians, is useless, inasmuch as the court to which appeal is made may as easily be wrong as right, and in many instances is now acknowledged to have been wrong. At all events, it is well now and again to subject the words of Scripture and their received interpretation to a free examination, to test the truth of the one and to probe the real meaning of the other. And this is

what I now propose to do with respect to our Lord's Parables of the Hid Treasure and the Pearl of Great Price, or, as I prefer to call it, of the Pearl Seeker or Merchant.

The usual and accepted opinion respecting these Parables is that they have one and the same meaning. Archbishop Trench tells us, that all that may be said about the one may be said about the other.¹ In this he is simply following those who interpreted the parables before him, and he is himself followed in it by those who have written upon them since. But in order that this interpretation may be distinctly before us, I will take the liberty of transcribing the words of one or two authors. First, let us take the words of Archbishop Trench, whose work, though not without serious faults, has not yet been surpassed.

“They,” he remarks, referring to the two parables in question, “were spoken, not to the multitude, not to those ‘without,’ but in the house, and to the more immediate disciples. These are addressed as having lighted on the hid treasure, having found the pearl of great price; and are now warned of the surpassing worth of these, and that, for their sakes, all things which would hinder them from making these securely their own, are to be joyfully renounced. The second parable does not merely repeat what the first has said, but repeats it with a difference. They are each the complement of the other: so that under one or other, as finders either of the pearl or of the hid treasure, may be ranged all who become partakers of the rich blessings of the Gospel of Christ. For these, it may be, are persons who feel that there must be some absolute good for man, in the possession of which he shall be blessed, and find the satisfaction of his longings; and who are, therefore, seeking everywhere and inquiring for this good. Such are likened to the merchant that has distinctly set before himself the purpose of seeking and obtaining goodly pearls. They are the fewer in number, but, at the same time, perhaps, the noblest converts to the truth. Again, there are others who do not discover that there is an aim, and

a purpose for man's life, or that there is a truth for him at all, until the truth as it is in Jesus is revealed to them. Such are likened to the finder of the hid treasure, who stumbled upon it unawares, neither expecting nor looking for it. While the others felt that there was a good, and were looking for it, the discovery of the good itself is the first thing that reveals to these that there is such at all; whose joy, therefore, as greater—being the joy of an unlooked-for treasure—is expressed; that of the others, not.”¹

Professor Bruce's interpretation, though it lacks the fulness, breadth, and many-sidedness of the Archbishop's, is in essentials the same.

“These two parables,” he says, “constitute together but one text, and teach the same general lesson, namely, the incomparable worth of the kingdom of God. . . . It is a treasure of such value that all other possessions may reasonably be given in exchange for it; a pearl of such excellence that he who sells all his property in order to obtain it may not justly be accounted a fool.”

Passing “from the common to the distinctive lessons of the two parables,” after entering a “caveat against the assumption that these must necessarily be intended to teach distinct doctrines concerning the things of the kingdom,” and suggesting that the difference between them is possibly “*picturesque* rather than *doctrinal*,” he remarks that:—

“It seems legitimate to emphasize, as all expositors have done, the fact that in the one parable the material good which is the emblem of the *summum bonum* is found by accident, while in the other it is obtained as the result of a methodic persistent search.”²

As the third and last example, I will cite the opinion of Dr. Dods, his being, as far as I am aware, the last work

¹ *Notes*, pp. 118, 119.

² *The Parabolic Teaching of Christ*, pp. 68, 82.

published which deals with the parables. His opinion is this:—

“These two parables have one and the same object. They are meant to exhibit the incomparable value of the kingdom of heaven. They exhibit this value, not by attempting to describe the kingdom or its various advantages, but by depicting the eagerness with which he who finds it and recognises its value, parts with all to make it his own. This eagerness is not dependent on the previous expectations or views or condition of the finder of the kingdom, but is alike displayed whether the finder is lifted by his discovery out of acknowledged poverty, or has his hands already filled with goodly pearls; whether he has no outlook and hope at all, or is eagerly seeking for perfect happiness. The one parable illustrates the eagerness of a poor man who lights upon the treasure apparently by accident; the other illustrates the eagerness of a rich man whose finding of the pearl of price is the result of carefully studied and long sustained search.”¹

Archbishop Trench also notices the interpretation which makes the merchant seeking goodly pearls, Christ Himself, and the Church of the elect the pearl of great price; and that which makes the pearl, as in the common explanation, the kingdom of heaven, and Christ again the merchant. These, however, as well as Salmeron's idea respecting the parable of the Hid Treasure, he passes, remarking that the first “strangely reverses the whole matter,” and that the second is “yet more ingenious.” I do not think that either of them is in all particulars correct, but there seems to me to be as much truth in either of them as there is in the one he has adopted.

But to return to the interpretations cited above. One thing to be observed is that they all agree that the “two parables have one and the same object,” “teach the same general lesson,” and embody the same truth. Professor

¹ *The Parables of our Lord*, p. 91.

Bruce warns us against the assumption that they must necessarily be intended to teach distinct doctrines, and would have us bear in mind that the difference between them may possibly be "*picturesque* rather than *doctrinal!*" Archbishop Trench tells us that the second, the parable of the "Pearl of Great Price," "not merely repeats what the first has said, but repeats it with a difference"; but the difference is not one that touches the central meaning of the parable. It is one, assuming that his interpretation of the parable is correct, which affects only the seekers of the pearl. Now the question which is here suggested, and the one which seems to me to be in need of discussion is, *Have* these two parables "one and the same object"? Or, to put the matter differently, do they both inculcate the same lesson, or embody the same truth? It seems to me that the simple fact that they occur so closely together in the sacred text ought to awaken the suspicion that they do not. In the Hebrew Scriptures we frequently meet with two or more versions of one and the same story in close juxtaposition. In the poetical books of the Old Testament, also, the same truth is, in accordance with the principles of Hebrew prosody, often repeated in a different member of the same sentence. But in the New Testament this mode of writing is entirely dropped. The writers there have adopted what, for the sake of contrast, I may perhaps be allowed to call the Greek style of composition instead of the Hebraic. Each writer tells his story in a straightforward manner and without repetitions. The same story, or the same truth, may be repeated by a different writer, but it is rarely, if ever, repeated by the same. This alone, as I have said, seems sufficient to raise the suspicion that the two parables are *not* intended to teach the same truth, and that there is a possibility that the difference between them is not merely "*picturesque*," but "*doctrinal*." And when the actual words of the parable are examined, this suspicion mounts up

to a certainty. The first of the parables runs, "The kingdom of heaven is like unto treasure hid in a field." The common explanation of this is unquestionably correct, and the treasure is certainly the representative of the kingdom of heaven. Now if the two parables were identical in doctrine or in meaning, or if the usual interpretation were correct, we should read in the second parable—The kingdom of heaven is like unto a pearl of great price; but as a matter of fact we read, not that the kingdom of heaven is like unto a pearl, but that it is "like unto a merchantman seeking goodly pearls," or if we adopt the Revised Version, "the kingdom of heaven is like unto a man that is a merchant, seeking goodly pearls." So that the contrast is complete. In the one case, the kingdom of heaven is like unto treasure hid in the ground; but in the other it is like unto a man engaged in a persistent methodical quest. This is so manifestly the case, that the marvel is that it has been so long ignored.

Another point to which reference may here be made need not detain us long. Commentators are almost, if not entirely, unanimous in regarding the parables as indicating two classes of men; one comprised of those who find the truth accidentally, the other of those who find it after careful and anxious search. De Wette, for instance, remarking on the second of the parables, and comparing it with the first, says:—"Derselbe Gedanke mit dem Unterschiede, dass hier das selbständige Streben nach dem Reiche Gottes, dort die Empfänglichkeit für dasselbe ins Auge gefasst ist." With Meyer the characteristic difference is, "dass hier dem Finden des Messiasheils das Suchen nach Heil überhaupt vorangeht; dort ward es ungesucht entdeckt, also ohne vorheriges Streben angeboten."¹ And similarly others. But if the interpretation given above be correct, and I hope in the sequel to shew that it is, all that has been said

¹ *In loc.*

about the various finders of, and seekers for the truth, however true it may be apart from the second of our parables, is, when given as the explanation of that parable, out of place; any such contrast as is usually seen in them the two parables do not contain. If there is any contrast in them as to modes of search, it is not between those adopted by men; it is a contrast rather between the absence of search on the part of men, and the persistent and zealous search which is always made by the kingdom of heaven to find and secure men.

Archbishop Trench remarks that each of these parables is the complement of the other. The remark, I believe, is true, though not exactly in the sense in which he means it. This will come out more clearly if we consider the parables and their meaning apart.

With the usual interpretation of the parable of the Hid Treasure, not much fault can be found. Still there are one or two points which have been overlooked, and which require, as it seems to me, to be distinctly brought out, in order that the relation between the two parables may be clearly seen. The kingdom of heaven is unquestionably represented by the hid treasure; but the aim of the parable is not only to shew that all things must be joyfully surrendered in order to obtain possession of it; but as well to shew (1) that the kingdom of heaven is usually found accidentally, and while a man is occupied with other matters: and (2) that when it is found and known to be what it is, there is such an affinity between it and the soul, and the latter has such a profound joy kindled within it, that the desire of obtaining the kingdom overcomes all other desires, and impels him who makes the discovery to sacrifice all things else in order to satisfy the imperative and irrepressible longings awakened within him. And again, while it is quite true that the kingdom of heaven is like unto treasure hid in a field, inasmuch as it is hid from the majority of men just as

effectually as treasure which has been put under the ground, it is requisite to bear in mind that the mode or manner of concealment is very dissimilar. The treasure is hid intentionally, the kingdom of heaven is not. And further, while that which conceals the treasure in the field is not any defect of vision in men, but something which is placed over or upon the treasure itself, that which conceals the kingdom of heaven from them is their defective vision, a veil that is not upon the kingdom of heaven, but over their hearts; or to use the words of St. Paul, "the god of this world hath blinded their minds, lest the light of the glorious gospel of Christ should shine unto them." It may also be remarked that in the discovery of the hid treasure, it is the treasure itself which is unearthed; whereas in the discovery of the kingdom of heaven, it is, if I may so say, the mind of the discoverer which is unearthed; the veil that was over his heart is taken away. And, once more, while the act by which the discovery is made is in both cases accidental, that by which the kingdom of heaven is made visible, is not causal but simply instrumental. The causes which have given him vision of the "powers of the unseen world," are outside his control. His discovery of them implies a long process of education unconsciously carried on in the silent recesses of his mind, and is due simply and solely to the free and perhaps unconscious action of the grace of God; for though there is a spirit in man, it is the inspiration of the Almighty or the continual action of the Divine Spirit upon the spirit of man that giveth him understanding. In other words the discovery of the kingdom of heaven is preceded by an altogether subjective process over which man has little, and probably no control.¹

¹ It may also be remarked that the place or sphere where the discovery is made is not the Church or the Scriptures, but amid the cares of daily life. It is while pursuing his daily occupation that the man in the parable finds the treasure.

To the ordinary explanation of the second of our parables I must object *in toto*. For it, we have only the traditional practice unsupported by a single fact; while, against it, we have the plain words of the parable itself. On the other hand, against the interpretation proposed there are simply tradition and the unsupported assertions of writers who though of great ability and deserving of all respect, are not always to be implicitly followed; while, in favour of it, there is the plain and indisputable meaning of our Lord's words.

To take the objections first. Traditional usage, though often of great service, is here of no weight, as it is in manifest contradiction to the text. Referring to an interpretation which, though it differs in several and important particulars from the one here proposed, has nevertheless seized in a measure the fundamental truth of the parable, Archbishop Trench simply remarks that "it strangely reverses the whole matter."¹ To this I can only reply, that taking what is the obvious reading of our Lord's words, "the whole matter," plainly needs to be reversed. Professor Bruce's caveat against assuming that the two parables must of necessity teach different lessons is out of place. The question is not one of necessity, but of fact; not whether they must or ought, but whether they do. De Wette's assertion, "Very incorrect is it here to compare the kingdom of God with the merchant, as that which corresponds to the kingdom of God is the pearl," contains no reason whatever either for the rejection of the one explanation, or for the acceptance of the other. The passages he cites (Matt. xiii. 52, and Gen. ix. 5) refer merely to the supposed Hebraism in the phrase *ἄνθρωπος ἐμπόρων*, and have no bearing on the meaning of the parable. Meyer² and others reject Wächtler's explanation, because it is not identical with that of the parable of the Hid Treasure. This, I need hardly say, is not a sufficient ground for its

¹ *Notes*, p. 131.

² *Evangel. d. Matth.*, p. 317.

rejection. It may, however, be objected to on other grounds. According to Wächtler the merchant stands for Christ, and the pearl for the invisible Church. But, as a matter of fact, the merchant does not stand for Christ, but for the kingdom of heaven; and, as we shall presently see, the pearl does not stand for the invisible Church.

Turning now to the arguments in favour of the explanation proposed, I must candidly admit that I know of but one; but that one is of such weight as to seem to me to be all-sufficient. Let any one take the words of our Lord and read them with an unprejudiced mind, and I do not see how he can possibly escape the conclusion that their meaning is that the kingdom of heaven is like not unto a pearl, but unto a man that is a merchant seeking pearls. Of corroborative arguments, however, there are several.

The first I may mention is that, interpreted in this way, our second parable, among other things, becomes the true "complement" of our first. The first parable shews us a man unconsciously led to find the kingdom of heaven as if by accident; and not only as coming upon it as if by accident, but as so prepared when he does come upon it as to be able to understand and appreciate its worth, and to be filled with such joy at its discovery that, in order to make it his own, he joyfully sacrifices all that he has. The second parable affords an explanation of this, and shews how it is possible for a being so blind and ignorant and selfish and unholy to be in possession of so clear a vision and so true an affection; or how it comes to pass that, unknown to himself and when he least expects it, and almost without any co-operation on his part, he is made to pass from darkness into light. For, as I have already hinted, here at least, is to be understood by the kingdom of heaven not a system of inoperative laws nor a merely dead rule or government, but what is usually understood by the "kingdom of grace," *i.e.* all the means and agencies which God is continually

employing for the education and redemption of men. Such, I take it, is the true and fundamental significance of the phrase "the kingdom of heaven is like unto a merchant-man seeking goodly pearls." Like the merchant's, the quest of the kingdom is zealous, methodical, unremitting. Its agencies and ministries so work upon and within man, so lead him on and on from stage to stage of spiritual preparation, that at last all that is requisite for its discovery and his own joyous submission to its rule is some trivial or unintentional act whereby the remaining veil that is over his heart is rent in twain, and the ever-shining light of the kingdom of heaven breaks in upon him with all its attractions and charms.

This mode of interpretation, too, is in perfect harmony with the great Evangelical truth, that God is seeking men, and that if He did not seek them, they would not and could not seek Him. In fact this parable of the Merchant, or of the Pearl of Great Price as it is usually called, is a beautiful parable of grace, touching one of the greatest mysteries of human life and of the kingdom of heaven, and illustrating that great saying of St. Paul's, "By grace are ye saved, through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God," and those words of our Lord's, "I am not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance," "the Son of man is come to seek and to save that which was lost." The only other of his parables which has a precisely similar significance is the one recorded in Matthew xviii. 12-14.

That the "goodly pearls," which the merchant-man in the parable is said to be seeking, must therefore stand for human souls is an argument which ought not to be urged against this line of interpretation, inasmuch as it is not one that can be legitimately advanced. Nor will any one advance it who bears in mind the teaching of Scripture, and especially of our Lord, respecting the value of men. He Himself as the representative of the kingdom of heaven,

came to find them and what more beautiful figure can be applied to them, than that of "goodly pearls?" When "found," they are as much treasures of the kingdom as pearls were in a king's treasury, or to use a common phrase, they are the jewels in the King of the kingdom of heaven's crown.

Nor ought it to be objected that "the pearl of great price," must necessarily stand for some great and magnificent soul, of a nobler type than others and capable of rendering the kingdom of heaven greater service. That there are such souls, a St. Paul, an Augustine, a Luther, there can be no doubt. Nor can it be doubted that, when such an one is found, the kingdom of heaven is filled with joy. As the pearl-seeker seeks all manner of pearls and ignores none however small, so the kingdom of heaven seeks all manner of souls. And just as the pearl-seeker is filled with joy when he discovers a pearl of great price, because he knows that it will do him greater service, so in the kingdom of heaven. If there is joy there when any sinner is converted, how much more will there be when one is found or converted who will prove the means of its own enrichment by winning others from the world and leading them to its fold?

One phrase in the parable seems undoubtedly to tell against this interpretation. I refer to the words, "and sold all that he had." Yet it does not seem to me to furnish the ground for an insuperable objection. A rigorously literal interpretation would require the kingdom of heaven to sell all that it had; but any such interpretation is inadmissible; for to whom could the kingdom of heaven sell? Or what is there more precious than itself? Looking at the matter from what seems to me a more sensible point of view, there is an interpretation which suits both the merchant-man and the kingdom. In order to secure the "pearl of great price," the merchant-man naturally makes a greater effort than he

does to secure others ; and in like manner when the kingdom of heaven finds a great and capable soul, knowing its value and the glory which may accrue to it from its conversion, it puts forth mightier efforts. And that such is the case, that in those who are capable of doing greater service in the cause of the kingdom of heaven there are greater wrestlings, and resistances of a more strenuous nature, there is ample evidence. To mention no others, the conversions of those already named, St. Paul, Augustine, and Luther, are cases in point.

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ESAU AND JACOB.

GENESIS XXVII.

IN this Chapter the history of the Brothers is resumed and continued ; and a crisis is reached in which the transference of the Birthright must be plainly and authoritatively allowed or disallowed.

Isaac was ill and to all appearance in extremity. This may be assumed from his own words, and still more from those of Esau (ver. 41), *The days of mourning for my father are at hand* ; and from those of Rebekah, *Why should I be deprived also of you both in one day ?* (ver. 45). And his feebleness is intimated in various circumstances of the narrative. It was therefore his wish, his natural wish, to take leave of his son with the final blessing.

How his intention was frustrated we know. But grave moral questions arise ; and, viewed merely as a study of human nature, the story as we read it is perplexing. How are we to account for an obliquity of principle, or a want of confidence, discreditable to the pious peaceful home of Isaac and Rebekah ? What could make a resort to in-