

But every Christian ought by his life to be, as it were, floating the grace of God to others sinking for want of it to lay hold of, and all his speech should be of a piece with this benediction.

A Christian's life should be "an epistle of Christ" written with His own hand, wherein dim eyes might read the transcript of His own gracious love, and through all his works and deeds should shine the image of his Master, even as it does through the delicate tendernesses and gracious pleadings of this pure pearl of a letter, which the slave, become a brother, bore to the responsive hearts in quiet Colossæ.

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SISERA AND JAEL.

JUDGES iv. 17-23.

THE welcome ray of light that has been shed on the confessedly dark transaction of Sisera's tragical death, by Captain Conder's *Tent Work in Palestine*, seems scarcely to have attracted the attention it deserves, or the interest it is fitted to awaken, although it is also fully noticed in Mr. Neil's interesting book, *Palestine Explored* (p. 8). In the *Student's Commentary* the previous lines of explanation are given in these words: "Deborah speaks of Jael's deed in the light of her own age, which did not make manifest the evil of guile and bloodshed; the light of ours does." But what Dr. Chalmers justly termed "the progressive morality" of the Biblical history, whilst applicable to other instances, furnishes no explanation of this very peculiar case. It was always evident that for its elucidation, and for our understanding of Deborah's unqualified praise, there must have been some ancient Eastern clue that had been lost in modern times or unknown in the West; and the recent finding of this clue comes to us with equal surprise and satisfaction.

To plead in extenuation of Jael's deed that the moral standard of her age was lower than ours sheds no light on her singular conduct; because, if taken apart from any Divine direction, it stands forth to us as a flagrant breach of the laws of hospitality, and in the eyes of a matron in a nomad tribe dwelling in tents, those laws were tenfold more sacred than in ours. The supreme sacredness of hospitality amongst such tribes is well brought out in the familiar story of the Arab robber, who had entered a palace by night and had found his way to the jewel room, where, groping in the dark, he laid his hand on a bowl full of pearls, which he mistook for a bowl of salt, and instantly fled; for now he could not wrong by one hair of his head the man in whose house he had touched that inviolable seal of friendship. The laws of morality were ropes of sand to the midnight robber; and if the laws of hospitality were supremely sacred even to him, their bonds must have been still more stringent when the moral character was high although with a conscience only partially enlightened. On this ground we have always held that, alike to Jael and to Deborah, the entire transaction must have been consistent with their high code of hospitality, although how it could so consist we were quite at a loss to conceive.

Toward the solution of a scriptural question, not indeed of primary importance, yet of considerable interest, devout students of the Bible must have read with a sense of relief and gratitude the following lucid explanation of the transaction by Captain Conder, while they may not agree in all the motives he ascribes to the Kenite heroine.

“The murder of a fugitive and a guest is so contrary to the morality of the Semitic nomads that we must seek for a very strong justification. It could not have been national enthusiasm which actuated Jael, for she was a Kenite, not a Jewess,—one of a nation hostile to Israel, and

there 'was peace between Jabin, king of Hazor (Sisera's master), and the house of Heber the Kenite.' The true reason is probably to be sought in Sisera's entering the tent at all. There are instances in later history in which a defeated Arab has sheltered himself in the women's apartments, but such an infringement of Eastern etiquette has always been punished by death; and it is not improbable that in revenge for such an insult Jael seized the iron tent-peg and drove it with the mallet, used to fix the tents to the ground, through Sisera's brain."¹

There is, however, no ground for the supposition that the house of Heber was "hostile to Israel," for it is expressly stated that he was "of the children of Hobab, the father (brother, R.V.) in law of Moses," with whom Israel from the first were evidently on the most friendly terms; and the Kenite inhabitants of Canaan, whose land was promised to Abraham (Gen. xv. 19), must have been a different people. At the outset of his expedition against Amalek, "Saul said unto the Kenites, Go, depart, get you down from among the Amalekites, lest I destroy you with them: for ye showed kindness to all the children of Israel, when they came up out of Egypt" (1 Sam. xv. 6). And David afterwards sent gifts "to them which were in the cities of the Kenites" with the significant message, "Behold a present for you of the spoil of the enemies of the Lord" (1 Sam. xxx. 26, 29). Those to whom he sent a present "of the spoil of the enemies of Jehovah" must have been numbered, not only with David's friends, but with the friends of the God of Israel.

From the whole narrative, we cannot but agree with those who hold that the Gentile heroine was in spiritual sympathy with the Hebrew prophetess, and that she slew Sisera, not "in revenge for insult," but in holy zeal for

¹ *Tent Work in Palestine*, p. 133; *Twenty-one Years' Work in the Holy Land*, p. 85.

the God of Israel and in love for His oppressed people. The plain of Zaanaim where Heber had pitched his tent was "by Kedesh"; and this Kedesh is placed by Captain Conder on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, and only twelve miles from Mount Tabor, probably less from the field of battle. As Kedesh where Israel assembled was the home of Barak, and as Jael knew both him and Sisera, and recognised them at once when they came near her tent, she might also have known Deborah, who had previously gone with Barak to Kedesh (*v.* 9). Deborah commends her in her Song as if well known by name and character. The Hebrew prophetess sings of her as one who came to the help of the Lord: "Curse ye Meroz, said the angel of the Lord, curse ye bitterly the inhabitants thereof; because they came not to the help of the Lord, to the help of the Lord against the mighty. Blessed above women shall Jael the wife of Heber the Kenite be, blessed shall she be above women in the tent." In extreme contrast to the double curse on the inhabitants of Meroz, who came not to the help of the Lord, is the double blessing on the wife of Heber the Kenite, who had come so signally to the help of the Lord against the mighty. The Gentile matron, through faith in the God of Israel, overcomes all fear in the avenging of His holy Name, when so many of the men of Israel held back in unbelief and selfishness: they bringing on themselves a curse for their unholy cowardice; she inheriting the blessing that might else have rested on them.

The following estimate of Jael's character was written before the information already quoted had thrown new light on what is termed her "treachery and violence," but is otherwise as just as it is appreciative: "If we can overlook the treachery and violence which belonged to the morals of the age and country, and bear in mind Jael's ardent sympathies with the oppressed people of God, her

faith in the right of Israel to possess the land in which they were now slaves, her zeal for the glory of Jehovah as against the gods of Canaan, and the heroic courage and firmness with which she executed her deadly purpose, we shall be ready to yield to her the praise which is her due."¹

With mingled wonder at the sight and gratitude to the God of Israel, Jael spies the haughty leader of the "nine hundred chariots of iron," and of the vast "multitude" that followed them, running by himself alone across the pastoral plain; and then, with mingled surprise and fear, she sees that not her husband's tent but her own is the object of his flight. It is a moment of suspense and danger, because the design of the reckless and desperate man may be to save his own life by taking hers, and secreting himself in her tent in the hope that no search will be made for him there. But the crisis of alarm quickly opens before her a door of hope; for by repairing to her tent instead of Heber's he has forfeited his life to her husband, who will certainly avenge the unpardonable wrong that has been done to him. The law of God had set a sacred hedge around domestic life by condemning the adulterer to death; and the unwritten law of the nomad tent had drawn a second circle round it by including in the same condemnation the intruder into the wife's apartment. The husband is not here to avenge himself and her, and it is most lawful in her eyes to avenge her own honour for the heinous affront which the offender's high rank alone could have emboldened him to offer.

But while the faithful wife of Heber feels herself justified in demanding or in taking the life of the presumptuous aggressor, she is moved by a higher impulse to put him to death. This cruel oppressor of the Lord's people during twenty years, the chief prop in God's holy land of the bloody and obscene rites of the gods of Canaan, now stands

¹ *Student's Commentary.*

before her: and the deliverance of Israel from a second Egyptian bondage, and the cleansing of the land from the vilest of all idolatries, are only half secured if he shall escape with his life. The heroic woman resolves, in the strength of the God of Israel, that he shall not escape out of her hands; and at the same time resolves on the only plan that seems to her possible in the very peculiar case. Her invitation to enter the tent is only asking him to complete his own attempt of lawless aggression, whilst the refusal or delay of admission might have been at the cost of her life; and after his breathless haste to reach it, the very significant fact of his sudden hesitation at the tent door, with his face betraying his "fear" to enter, clearly reveals his consciousness that the intrusion is at the peril of his life if any of Heber's men observe it. To the like effect is the injunction to Jael, "Stand in the door of the tent, and it shall be, when any man doth come and inquire of thee, and say, Is there any man here? that thou shalt say, No." When the God of Israel bowed the heavens on his people's behalf, "the stars in their courses fought against Sisera," and when "that ancient river, the river Kishon," overflowed its banks, Sisera's chariot probably stuck fast in the marshes of the plain, so that he was compelled to flee away on foot. In his flight he took the opposite direction from that of his scattered host, and when he ran toward Jael's tent his pursuers were certainly not within sight, for if they had seen him enter it no precaution of secrecy could have saved him. His charge to Jael seems therefore to have referred in the first instance to Heber's men; for although most of them appear to have been absent with their flocks, some lingerer about his tents might have noticed the direction taken by the fugitive, and if coming to inquire might have led to the taking of his life. Afterwards, when Barak has reached Jael's tent, he makes no inquiry there, as if it were secure from all sus-

picion, and is apparently hastening past, when she accosts him with the tidings that "the man whom he is seeking" is already dead.

The guile, however, of Jael's assurance to Sisera in the words, "fear not," can never be justified. When she uttered it she appears already to have conceived her plot for his death, for the curdled milk of the nomad tent which she set before him in the "lordly dish" was soporific in its effect as well as pleasant and refreshing. But Sisera had now made himself, not her guest, but her personal enemy; she would look upon this guile as one of the many deceptions that are used in war for misleading a foe; and in her less enlightened age would too readily regard it as a justifiable resource in a great crisis of life and death.

But whatever objections may be found with the details, the whole aspect of the perplexing tragedy is changed, and its leading difficulty removed, when Sisera is no longer thought of with pity as a hunted fugitive pleading for a place of rest in a friendly tribe, which he could as easily, though not so securely, have found in Heber's tent; but is seen in his true character as an ungodly and ruthless tyrant terminating his career of cruelty and oppression by a desperate and insolent violation of the sacredness of the domestic sanctuary.

On this ground it is that Deborah appears to rest her commendation of the wife of Heber. As our Lord rejoices in the singular faith of the Roman centurion, so the Hebrew prophetess extols the holy courage of the Kenite matron whom the Lord Himself so signally honoured by "delivering Sisera into her hand," and enabling her by faith to fight the half of the whole battle in that memorable day, and to overcome "in the power of His might." Deborah ascended Mount Tabor with Barak, she gave him the signal to go down into the plain where "the Lord had gone out before him," and she descended with him into

the field of battle, for she had given him the promise, "I will surely go with thee." After the defeat of Sisera's host, in Barak's pursuit of him to Kedesh, she would either "go with him" or follow him, for the prediction of Israel's victory was only half fulfilled so long as Sisera lived. In the tent of Jael she would learn for herself the details of his last hour of which she has recorded so vivid an account. The two noble women, Jew and Gentile, who had separately fought a good fight of faith on that great day and shared its chief honours between them, would now praise the Lord together and give all the glory of the day to Him alone. Jael would afterwards listen with holy joy and exultation to the lofty Song of Deborah and Barak, and would hear the voice of her own praise with holy shame and humility. But in that tribute to herself there is the distinctive praise which she would most of all desire, the distinction of being "*blessed above women in the tent.*" It is the violated sanctuary of her tent that has given her the right to take the life of "the mighty" for the help of the Lord; and on all that pertains to her tent, the milk, and the nail, and the mallet, the prophetess loves to dwell. For her weapons of war, in the strength of the Lord "she puts her hand to the nail, and her right hand to the workman's hammer," just as David afterwards took the sling and the stone, and both of them in faith of Israel's God giving the victory to them whom man despises.

"Blessed above women shall Jael the wife of Heber the Kenite be, blessed shall she be above women in the tent," are words of praise to which some may have hesitated to say Amen so long as to them the wife of Heber was only like another Gentile woman, the inhabitant of a village or a city. But when the lofty tribute is rendered to her as numbered distinctively among "women in the tent," they will cordially concur in the commendation of her self-sacrificing faith and courage, of her disinterested love for

Israel, and of her fervent jealousy for Israel's God. In Deborah's singularly glorious Song in memory of Israel's battle at the foot of Mount Tabor, the divinely heroic deed of Jael fitly contributes to the fulness of its closing sentence: "So let all Thine enemies perish, O Lord: but let them that love Him be as the sun when he goeth forth in his might."

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THOUGHTS.

MAN LIVETH NOT BY BREAD ALONE.

I. Adam's brief life not by bread alone in Eden.

—1. *The angels living by the word of God alone without bread.*—"He maketh His angels spirits"; and the highest of their heavenly host, those amongst them "that excel in strength," live only by "hearkening to the voice of His word." The prince of this world in his first estate lived by the word of God; but he kept not that word, for "His word is truth," and "he abode not in the truth," but became "a liar and the father of it."

2. *The ox living by grass alone without the word of God.*—To the ox his Creator gave "every green herb for meat," but without imparting the knowledge of his Maker, or capacity for acquiring it. The beast of the field was formed by the word of God, and sustained by His power; but with no command either what to eat or from what to abstain, with no consciousness of good or evil, of obedience, or transgression, and with no conception of the great Being to whom he owed his life. He ate the grass without sin and without holiness, and lived by grass alone without the word of God. As he was formed, so he liveth on from generation to generation to the world's end, "asking no questions."

3. *Adam living by bread with the word of God.*—"In the image of God made He man," and He made him for communion with Himself. He did not evolve him from any beast of the field after its likeness, but fashioned him in His own likeness, "a little lower than the angels"; leaving the ox utterly and for ever incapable of entering into the heart or the mind of man; but creating man capable at once of entering into His own thoughts, and of loving