

elucidate a topic of practical moment to Christian people of all sorts, who desire to know aright the Christ of History, that they may the better have fellowship with the Christ of Faith.

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THE FIRST LEPER HEALED.

(MATT. VIII. 2; MARK I. 40; LUKE V. 12.)

AMONG the ancient Jews, a leper was of all human creatures most forlorn. The horrible nature of his disease, in which the blood was poisoned until the very bones rotted and the body slowly fell to pieces, was enough to make him feel that he was doomed, and in some sense already dead. Therefore, Moses prayed for Miriam, "Let her not be as one dead"; and when the king of Israel was invited to restore Naaman, he felt how poor a thing is a monarch in the iron presence of fate, and cried, "Am I God, to kill and to make alive?" (Num. xii. 12; 2 Kings v. 7.) So far beyond all hope of recovery was this disease, that the marvellous pharmacopœia of the Rabbis had neither a drug nor an incantation to oppose to it (Eldersheim, *Life*, i. 492).

Josephus described the lepers as being "in effect dead persons"; and he dismisses the regulations for their purification with an expression which, however pious, has in it the ring of orthodoxy much rather than of faith: "if in answer to prayer any of them recovered." Clearly the leper was beyond hope.¹ Yet Keim asserts that "this

¹ Students of Tennyson will remember how, in the middle ages, a kind of funeral service, with a casting of earth upon the leprous body as upon a living corpse, was performed over those who suffered from the disease, which some, even yet, confound with the leprosy of Scripture. It differs from it, as in other respects, so especially in the important matter of contagion.

disease is reported, both in the Old and New Testament "to have been "often (!) arrested by a copious discharge of the matter which produced it." He should have written "which it secreted," but this would have exposed the futility of his contention. At the same time he admits, what certainly suggests its desperate virulence, that Isaiah has "no prediction concerning leprosy, as concerning the deaf and dumb, which could have been condensed into a material fact" by myth or legend (iii. 209, 210).

As if this hideous malady were not terrible enough already, the sufferer was looked askance upon, as being in some special sense "smitten of God"—a phrase which, occurring in the fifty-third chapter of Isaiah, was taken to announce that the Messiah Himself should be a leper.

Nor is it hard to understand how the leper came thus to be regarded as one under a ban. For the Old Testament had made his disease a special type of sin, which is indeed the origin of all our ailments, yet the horror of which seems most to reveal itself in this.

Therefore the leper might not even touch his fellow-men. As if already mourning for himself, he should go with rent clothes, shaggy hair, and covered lip, and should loudly proclaim to all men, not so much his misery, as the shame of his uncleanness. He was excluded from the camp, and by inference from all walled cities (Lev. xiii. 45, 46).

Not only was his disease hereditary, as we read in the curse pronounced upon Gehazi, but the absence of contagion (except through the very closest possible intimacy), which immunity allowed Naaman to retain his position in the court, and Gehazi to relate the acts of Elisha before the king himself, was counterbalanced by inflicting, with more than usual severity, the artificial contagion of ceremonial impurity. Thus the disease was made to express not only the infection which we inherit from the fall, but

also the corrupting influence of each sinner upon the rest.

The rigour of these laws, so unlike the manner of other nations, was used by Josephus to disprove the slander that his people and their chief had been driven out by the Egyptians as intolerably leprous, in which case he argued, not unreasonably, that Moses would have treated the ailment as gently as other legislators did (*Antiq.* III. xi. 3, 4).

From all this austerity, and its connection with the divine law, it was natural to regard the victim as himself under that special malison which his terrible doom symbolized; and thus it happened that his penalties and disabilities, prescribed by Scripture, were cruelly exaggerated in its received interpretations and expositions. To salute him was forbidden; a hundred cubits was the distance to windward which he must keep; and it was a religious thing to keep him off, even by throwing stones at him.¹

And yet the law itself contained a provision which might well have suggested kindlier thoughts to a heart that was prepared to receive them. For just when the disease was at its worst, when vengeance—if it were vengeance—was having its perfect work, the law ceased to exclude its unhappy victim from the consolations of human society. His uncleanness lasted while the disease was spreading upon the skin: it was at an end when the whole body was affected, when further severity would have been cruel indeed, and every good heart would have rebelled against so unnatural an edict. “If the leprosy shall have covered all his flesh, *the priest* shall pronounce him clean that

¹ Keim has no warrant whatever for his assertion that the restrictions of the law were administered with laxity (iii. 207). All the evidence looks the other way, including the only passage to which he refers (2 Kings vii. 3), since the four lepers were not in the city, but at the gate. How does he suppose that they obtained egress from a besieged city after sunset?

hath the plague ; it is all turned white, he is clean " (Lev. xiii. 3).

And among the minute coincidences which strengthen so greatly our faith in the Gospel narratives, this is one, that whereas the ten lepers stand aloof and cry from a distance, the " man full of leprosy " may come quite close to Jesus.

It is further to be remarked that no prophet of the Old Testament ever himself heals a leper. Moses prays to God for Miriam, and her recovery is the direct act of heaven. Elisha merely announces to Naaman the terms upon which God will heal him, namely purification in running water, according to the law of Israel (which fact explains the jealous reference to the rivers of Damascus) but he himself does nothing, and even gives additional offence by failing to associate himself with the cure, striking his hand over the place.

The notion of competition with Old Testament marvels prompting the growth of this among other legends is therefore particularly baseless ; and we have seen that no prediction could have inspired the expectation of such a work. Yet this is what Strauss insinuated by speaking of " the cure of the leper by the prophet Elisha, from whose history so many features have entered into that of Christ " (*New Life*, ii. 173).

As if any contrast could be sharper than exists between Elisha's treatment of the proud warrior commended by a king, and the kindness of Jesus to His nameless suppliant, some obscure Galilean, with no introduction except his wretchedness.

This miracle is indeed a stumbling-block to every sceptical theory.

Strauss himself has done excellent service against the sentimental school, who represent the miracles as wrought by the charm of an exquisite personality, a word, a sigh

which were not ineffectual, in simply reminding us of the nature of the disease. What this theory asks us to believe is that by a sort of mesmerism, by such an infection of energy as that with which Napoleon boasted that he could induce armies to die for him, "a skin which in consequence of thorough corruption of the blood had been eaten into by the most obstinate and malignant of eruptions, was rendered instantly pure and sound by a word and a touch" (*Life*, bk. ii., sec. 90). But this would be a miracle. Call it psychological instead of physical: you do not make it natural, nor much reduce its value as a challenge to the conscience to weigh the teaching of the unique man. In fact, however, there is little danger that our modern materialism will invest ideas and emotions with power instantaneously to secrete new tissue and expel deep-seated poison from the system. When men of our day are brought thus far, their struggle against the faith will be well-nigh closed.

But how came it that men ever turned to such resources of despair?

It is because the narrative bears on its face the most undeniable proofs of truthfulness. The author of *Supernatural Religion* may declare that for the existence of miracles "there is no evidence worthy of the name"; but writers equally sceptical, yet a little more cautious, or more capable of weighing evidence, make very startling admissions. Schenkel declares that "a mythical origin of the narrative is, for several reasons, not to be admitted. In the first place the narrative is given by the primitive Mark. . . . Then, again, it contains particulars which cannot have been invented." Hereupon we ask, with heightened curiosity, what is Schenkel's own theory? And we are only told that the expression in the third Gospel, "full of leprosy," is an exaggeration, and that "it is not improbable that the leper, when he went to Jesus, was already in an advanced state of cure, but received from

Jesus an accession of vital power greatly accelerating his restoration" (p. 376).

This attempt at an explanation is put forward as an improvement upon that of Hase, who felt himself compelled to accept the story, and to be content with pleading that cutaneous diseases are very movable, and no positive law of nature was violated by the power of Jesus over leprosy. Schenkel saw plainly enough that if, according to our narratives, Jesus cured this leper, the common sense of mankind would recognise a work utterly beyond the natural powers of a Galilean carpenter, and would not stop to ask whether He violated any positive law of nature, a matter about which the first believers were profoundly indifferent and ignorant. Yet Schenkel felt the inherent power of the narrative to be so coercing, that he could attempt no more than to file down the wonder until its reduced proportions would not utterly defy his own system. Observe, however, what he has to throw overboard. In denying that the man was "full of leprosy," he quite ignores the special interest of medical details for St. Luke, whose diagnosis is habitually both accurate and full. What is more, he fails to explain the close access which the sufferer gained to Jesus, at a moment, too, when Jesus is, *ex hypothesi*, specially jealous about compliance with the law.

The ten lepers remained afar off, as they were bound to do; and the first two evangelists, by narrating the difference in the behaviour of this suppliant, entirely confirm the report of Luke, that the disease had reached that dreadful stage at which the disability was removed. But Schenkel, while struggling so violently, commits suicide. For while contending that Jesus only "accelerated his restoration," he admits among those particulars which cannot have been invented, the injunction to exhibit himself to the priests, and offer the gifts which would only be accepted when a complete and final recovery had been

achieved, "a command," says Keim rightly, "which supplies the final and fundamental element in the healing process, and which proves the cure, or after-cure to be complete."

These explanations which explain nothing, these incredible attempts to render the miracle credible while denying the miraculous, these unnatural coincidences by means of which Jesus builds up a reputation as a Healer, in a world of sickness, while only charming and invigorating those who were already convalescent, these could not impose on such a man as Keim. He therefore confesses himself "at once in the midst of great difficulties." For it is equally "impossible to overlook altogether the striking marks of genuineness in the report" of which, however, Keim only enumerates two, the sending of the sick (healed?) man to the priests, and the unusually impassioned prohibition to make the event known. "We may thus arrive at the conclusion that the thrice-given report is not to be put aside as absolutely unhistorical. But if a positive miracle cannot here be admitted, still less can a modified degree of the miraculous"—and for this he gives some of the evidence adduced above.

How then does he explain the mystery? He revives the old rationalistic method which reduced the miracles to natural events, curiously misunderstood, so that the five thousand were fed by a generous impulse, leading those who had provisions to share with their hungry neighbours; and the walking on the waters was but a standing on some reef or promontory, and calling thence to frightened sailors, who thereupon discovered that they were safe enough.

This method has long been abandoned to the ridicule even of unbelievers, but it is a rag of its tatters which Keim now wraps about his nakedness. His theory has been somewhat misunderstood, which is the greater pity, because when accurately stated it refutes itself.

He bases his argument on the fact that the verb *καθαρίζειν* means not only to cleanse but also to make the formal pronouncement of cleanness, "that declaration of cleanness which, in the very same words, was reserved to the priests by the legislation of Moses." It is so used in the thirteenth of Leviticus; and our Revisers have acted on this analogy in their bold but doubtless correct rendering of Mark vii. 19. This much therefore we concede. He proceeds to state that the skilled inspection, upon which this pronouncement was based, had now been usurped by the Scribes, "placing themselves as men learned in the law in successful competition with the priests, and themselves uttering the decisive sentence, while, in order to avoid a direct disobedience to Moses, they left to the priests the empty and formal executive: 'the man is clean, and the priest shall pronounce him clean.'" In this sentence lurks the fallacy. The object of Keim is to transfer the official act from the priest to the scribe. Without this, his rendering will not help him in the least; and it is for the sake of this that he makes the inspection by the scribes to issue in "uttering the decisive sentence." But it is plain that as long as the "formal executive" was left to the priests, as long as the letter of the law was respected, it is to their act only that the verb *καθαρίζειν* could apply. For, as Keim rightly started by contending, this is reserved to them by the language of Leviticus, *καθαριεὶ αὐτὸν ὁ ἱερεὺς* (xiii. 6, 13). The fact seems to be that any skilled person could certify cleanness to the priests, and they took action when they were satisfied, which was perfectly reasonable. But the one important point is that the formal cleansing belonged still, and even by Keim's own showing, to the priests alone.

Bearing this in mind, we return to his explanation of the miracle. The man had perfectly recovered, and neither asked healing nor needed it. All he wanted (and surely such ingratitude at such a time should excite other feelings

than compassion) was to escape the trouble and cost of a journey to Jerusalem. "Since Jesus stood before the public as a scribe, the convalescent might in fact, with Jesus' sentence in his hand, dispense with going to Jerusalem, and Jesus, on His part, could Himself, without being either physician or priest, certify according to the practice of others a visible recovery, but still reserving the formal sentence" [=καθαριεῖ, be it always observed] "to the legally authorized priest."

This, it appears, is what actually happened; and it explains the urgency of the command that he should show himself to the priests, for a testimony unto them that Jesus would not usurp their functions. Yet He was actually joining Himself with the scribes in an act which "undermined the Levitical ordinance." He refused to dispense with the formal judgment, but pronounced the antecedent verdict, and even touched the convalescent, and such a course of action excited the great admiration which we read about, "on account of His heroic love to His fellow men, and His determined conduct." Heroic love, truly, and marvellous determination, to do what any Scribe on the shore of the lake would have done as readily, and to add the hazard of touching perfectly healthy flesh! But the materializing, mythical spirit, we learn, promptly converted this declaration of cleansing into an actual cleansing.

So then we are to understand that for a favour which any Scribe could give, the man came kneeling and even prostrating himself in the dust, and declaring, Lord, if Thou wilt, Thou canst certify my cleanness. And Jesus, moved with compassion for a perfectly healthy man, ventured so far as to touch a body to which contagion and infection no longer attached, and won great applause by saying, "I will, be thou pronounced clean." And the narrative adds, with marvellous explicitness surely, "immediately he was pronounced clean." In the meanwhile, what happened was the reverse.

What Jesus must have said was, I refuse to pronounce thee clean: I willingly perform the preliminary steps, but only in Jerusalem can the official pronouncement be promulgated.

The man, thus baffled and rebuked, rapturously believed himself to have received all he wanted, and the whole district believed that what he wanted and got was a stupendous miracle. To such extremities the simple, self-evidencing story has reduced its keenest foes.

Surely, in the presence of these wonderful attempts to deny the miracle and yet to recognise the truth of the story, which they feel and confess, we are justified in saying that there exists no better evidence for the faith than the attacks upon it.

We contrast with such incredible myths, in which everyone behaves as no person ever yet acted in the real world, the simple and straightforward story in which human nature, a heart, sufficient motives, and intelligible action are as striking as miraculous power. On a sudden, stalking into the group, unseen and unannounced, "lo, a man full of leprosy!" He kneels, he throws himself prostrate before the mighty Healer, whose fame is just beginning to fill the land. Leprosy Jesus was not yet known to have removed, nor was there any promise that even the Messiah should do this; but the institutions of Leviticus held out some hope, on which the lonely heart of misery had doubtless brooded longingly, and to him the work seemed no harder than others which had been already done. Would Jesus do this? The victim felt himself miserable enough to melt any heart, and the new Teacher was reputed to be kind. At least, this supreme wretchedness would cry aloud to the only man who could help, and would learn whether, brought face to face with such dire need, He could refuse to hear its prayer.

The time was not far off when to doubt the love of Jesus

would be less possible than even to doubt His power, and the Apostle would declare himself "persuaded that He is able to keep my deposit" without needing to make any profession of faith in His goodwill. This advance was wrought by experience, beginning with cases such as this, when the unhappy leper, more conscious of hideous foulness than even of pain, or perhaps aware that his loathsomeness must either shock the fastidiousness or evoke the compassion of the Healer, cried out so hastily, Lord [I am one to shrink away from, but] if Thou wilt Thou art able to cleanse me.

It was a striking moment, when men saw together the Loftiest and the most abject, the Image of God and the very type and embodiment of the curse. But since the Word had come forth expressly to show lost souls the fathomless compassion of heaven, He heard with profoundest pity that half-despairing cry. Therefore He would not heal him fastidiously, nor at a distance, and His followers beheld Jesus do for a peasant what Elisha refused to do for a noble and a conqueror. For the Life laid His sacred hand unshrinkingly upon that living death, and said, "I will, be cleansed," and the touch of His purity was more strong to convey cleanness than that purulent mass of corruption to defile. Immediately the leper was cleansed.

Some of us know the delicious sensation of reviving energy after illness, or even after a passing attack of faintness. But who can tell the rapture of that long tortured frame, that mind which had bidden farewell to hope, when the blood again suddenly flowed pure in the long sluggish veins, when at a stroke the fevered tissues became once more fresh and cool, and the yearning human creature felt himself no longer repulsive and dreadful to his fellow men, nor banned, nor doomed.

In the rush of that great ecstasy, it is little wonder if the common ritual proprieties were in danger to be set at

nought. We need no artificial explanation of the earnestness wherewith Jesus enforced his duties upon him, or of the commandment to keep silence, not to make himself the centre of wondering crowds, but to go his way promptly and do his duty.

We need no comment either upon the purblind stupidity of rationalism, which mistakes for a "heroic" announcement that there was no cause of repulsion, no demand on heroism, that exquisitely gracious act, which all the narratives alike commemorate, the stretching forth of His unshrinking hand, which no more drew back from the touch of leprosy than from the anguish of the cross.

Is it true, then, that leprosy represented the contagion and the doom of sin? It follows that when diseased souls, far more hateful in His eyes although they be, cry out to Him in their anguish, they may learn by His action now what to expect. On our fallen humanity He lays His holy hand, which shrinks not from the contact; to our prayer He answers, "I will, be clean"; a new and immortal life is poured into the sick hearts of all who seek Him out; and then He bids us walk, in the strength which He has given, the homely, unsensational road of obedience—obedience for the most part not to any new and exciting call, but along the common, dusty ways of duty.

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