

THE NEW TESTAMENT MYSTERIES.

IT is more easy to exaggerate the proportion than the significance of onomatopœic words in a language. They are likely to be few and far between; they are destined to be driven out like aborigines, to become rarer in the civilized development of the tongue. Yet there is always a character of their own about these terms, attracting and engaging attention none the less when they are found in new associations, and in strange departures from their original intention. For even thus they are seen to preserve something of their elemental force and native point. Now *μυστήριον* is clearly an onomatopœic word. Its source is indeed less obscure from the fact that its root-sound "mu" appears to have remarkable parallels in other languages as being one of the first essays in the articulation of syllables. This "mu" sound is heard as the earliest of efforts after word-formation. Such a question, however, must be left to other and more competent students. For the present purpose it will be enough to recall the term as it is illustrated in so early a writer as Herodotus. All classical scholars are aware how that writer employs it with reference to the pathetic strivings after guidance other than human, to the mysteries familiar to his quick observation, Greek, and Asiatic, as they might chance to be, pure or foul as they were by turn. At this early stage is to be noted the link which strongly binds the employment of the term to its derivation. The enigma of the oracles was two-fold, as it is, save the mark, with the utterances of some of our less intelligible preachers of to-day. On the one hand the significance was enwrapped in an impenetrable obscurity; on the other hand it was often impossible to catch the words. The response was doubtful—the delivery imperfect. The oracle's lips as he uttered the mystic sentences moved like an infant's; he muttered like an old man or an imbecile.

It was, however, these historic and verifiable conditions which helped fairly to fix the meaning of the term "mystery" after Herodotus. Certainly no Greek could use it without reference to one of the most remarkable institutions of the ancient world. As Greek patriotism can never be appreciated without reference to the national festivals and games, so neither can Greek religion be understood in its earlier stages without reference to those secret sacred rites destined to leave indelible marks not only in language but in thought to-day. It is not needful to pursue the familiar subject of the ancient Greek "mysteries" beyond observing how far their characteristic features survive, and are expressed in New Testament phraseology. Considering some of the frightful associations in the history of the word, one might naturally expect a hesitation, if not a repugnance, in regard to its employment in Christian thought and ideas. But it is not so. "Mystery" is just one of those characteristic terms fearlessly and freely incorporated into the literature of the New Testament, despite the pagan associations linked with it. But it is neither their falsity, still less their impurity, which necessarily pursues the word in its Christian adoption. Happily, that which was false or impure was not essential in the ancient Greek mysteries. To the religiously minded men of the Greek world, say in the third century before Christ, such features in the mysteries, wherever and whenever observed, must have been abhorrent. The mysteries were rather for them celebrations in and through which revelations might be made of the profounder secrets of the religious life; then, by an easy transition, they were regarded as the revelations themselves. Now here we light upon the essential point of the mysteries. Whatever else they were—whatever might be said for or against them—they were from first to last secret. It is this fittest survival of their meaning which is exhibited in the New Testament, and thence passes into the common speech of the

Early Church. In the one religion of Jesus Christ there are mysteries ; our most holy faith has its secrets still. May not the inference be drawn that Christianity does not condemn seekers after God like Plato and Cicero for regarding the "mysteries" as a pure and ennobling part of their higher religious education? Yet even on this idea, so characteristic and so permanent, of the "secrecy" of religious truths, the leaven of Christian thought begins immediately to work. The negative elements in mystery pass away, the idea remains and has become strong as it is positive, fruitful and energetic, eternally conspicuous in Christian life and conduct.

The mystic of the ancient Greek world only became such after long probation and painful research. The "initiated" were few and far between. Theirs was, in a sense, a strait gate and a narrow way, sought by mere human effort painfully made ; and though in theory entrance was open to all, it was reserved practically to a leisured class. On the other hand, the characteristic secrets of the Faith were hidden from the wise and understanding, and were revealed unto babes. The "mysteries" have changed hands, and the sphere of possession has passed from head to heart. Another contrast follows by consequence. There was no doubt a freemasonry between those who were duly initiated into the ancient mysteries—a close corporation of the higher religious education. Their jealousy of any intrusion was intense. The last scene of probation was at night, the time chosen by the shrinking Nicodemus of the Gospel for learning the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven.

But the Christian "mystic" is a missionary. He cannot but speak the things which he has seen and heard. It was with this purpose they were revealed to him by the Divine love. Woe unto him if he did not so. Necessity was laid upon him as a child of the light.

It is time, however, to examine these questions by the

illumination cast upon them in and through New Testament phraseology. We at once note how frequent is the occurrence both of the idea and of the word "mystery." If St. John is above other writers filled with the former, St. Paul's closer contact with Greek life and thought took bold and free hold of the latter. But neither idea nor word is wholly foreign to any part of the New Testament. The references are as suggestive as they are full of variety. The idea is transfigured, the very word is transmuted, a flood of light falls, a golden treasury of meaning is discovered. The "mysteries" are not of this earth, not of human teaching or effort, but supremely of the Divine dealings with the children of men, they appertain to God's eternal counsels of mercy and truth, of righteousness and peace in sweet and indissoluble union.

Thus (without burdening this article with references to each passage), we observe throughout its pages, first, how "mystery" is inevitably employed with the problems of the presence of sin and evil in the world, of death, of judgment, of the final triumph of good.

Mystery was already consecrated by our Lord's own application to the things of the Kingdom of God, and of heaven. In apostolic lips it describes now the message of the Gospel, now the authoritative commission to proclaim its truths. The Incarnation, the Divinity of our Lord and Saviour, are declared to be its most speaking instances. The very Being of God is shown to be a mystery of the profoundest character, and all the Divine purposes for the human family are seen to be mysterious. It is not falling to a low level, rather it is, according to St. Paul, a great, striking citation to refer to marriage as a mystery; for it must be this if it is once admitted as a symbol of the love betwixt Christ and His Church.

Again, the whole spiritual life and experience, the faith which animates, guides, and sustains it are mysterious;

every great and engrossing topic to which the thought of Christians turns, all that occupies their hearts in their holiest, happiest moments are mysterious verities; the whole together, rounded and complete in the faith once for all delivered to the saints is a mystery. And these mysteries, so apostolic teaching gravely warns us, need holy handling, they require careful and deliberate training. To preserve them truly, to distribute them rightly is itself an awful responsibility, a sacred stewardship and administration.

We have already seen that as the form of the word suggests the obscurity of the mystery, so its earliest historical associations impress upon it the sense of a secret. That sense survives strongly in New Testament phraseology. It is perhaps a startling paradox at first sight, that the Christian mysteries are "open secrets." He who is once possessed of them is, in all duty to His master, bound to reveal them. A suggestive and familiar definition of Richard Hooker may serve to explain the point. He defines preaching, as readers of the *Ecclesiastical Polity* will remember, as "the open publication of heavenly mysteries." Here, indeed, the contrast between the Pagan and Christian secrets is seen at its sharpest. It is seen also in the very sphere in which we should expect it to be drawn. A change has come over the spirit of the mysteries,—a change answering to a new origin and character, a change bearing upon life and conduct, upon service and effort.

The Christian mysteries are Divine truths, none the less real if expressed under symbols; none the less divine for the process of inter-communication—for their publication by man to man. The Christian mysteries are sacred secrets; a stranger to Christ does not, and cannot, possess them or intermeddle with them. These verities of the Christian faith are no longer sphinx-like puzzles which we must give up before we become utterly confused, but they are facts about which we steadily and courageously affirm that

we know not all, holding ever that there may be magnificent surprises in store hereafter for those that love and fear God, holding that we may, nay, we must, grow here in knowledge as in grace, and that much is meanwhile deliberately withheld as being in our present estate too wonderful and excellent for us. But does not New Testament phraseology strike in this issue also a new note of departure? Is it not so that already, according to the employment of the word, a significant modification of the meaning of mysteries is apparent? Do we not trace in this and that application of the expression the sense of their gradual and progressive revelation, until they, with all other secrets of the kingdom, are completely discerned in the light which will break upon all things, as upon ourselves, in the perfect day? Such a view, if not wholly warranted by the phrases of New Testament writers, finds at least some indirect support from the Christian literature of the third and fourth centuries. For here we find the term applied triumphantly to the speaking, living "sign" of the Eucharist, so that in the after ages to speak only of English theologians, men so removed both by circumstances and in sympathy as Bishop Butler and Richard Hooker, Newman, Mozley, and F. W. Robertson have grasped this twofold fact of the secrecy and the growth of heavenly mysteries, to the comfort of patient hearts, re-echoing the grand Pauline sentiment :

Now we see in a mirror—darkly,
Then face to face;
Now I know in part,
Then shall I know surely,
Even as also I am known.

Is it needful to draw the obvious lesson of the grave responsibility resting upon the Christian "mystic" of a true, that is a sober and unexaggerated, presentment of the secrets of his faith? To-day, when it is being assailed by every ingenuity of objection, it is a clear and imperative

duty not to make its saving truths less acceptable by crude insistence upon points which are not essential to them are, it may be of private interpretation, alas, sometimes the outcome of personal ignorance. We shall do more wisely, we shall publish these truths more effectively, not by declaring that our knowledge is yet complete, or our demonstrations mathematical; but by steady insistence that this knowledge is adequate for life. Too high for reason? Yes, a thousand times too high, these truths of the faith, but not too high to live and grow in grace by.

“Christianity not mysterious.” It was a cry in the eighteenth century, it is being heard again in different accents to-day. The only way to answer such fascinating utterances, which are now more appropriately conveyed through fiction than by treatise, is to take apostolic counsel, to see that we hold these mysteries of our common faith in that gravity and proportionateness, that simplicity and earnestness, that intelligence and hope, that abounding charity implied in the far-reaching and compelling task and function of a pure conscience.

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