

The key which he here puts into the hand of the Church is the only one by which it can hope even yet to unlock the riddles of this perplexing subject.

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THE CONTINUITY OF LIFE.

WHEN William Blake, the painter-poet, lay dying, "he said he was going to that country he had all his life wished to see," and just before he died "he burst into singing of the things he saw." It was the passion of a saint, whose heart had long been lifted above the present world; it was the vision of a mystic, whose imagination had long been exercised on the world to come. Few outside the Bible succession have been inspired of the Holy Ghost like him who wrote the Songs of Innocence and illustrated the Epic of Job. But common men share in their measure this instinct of the eternal, this curiosity of the unseen. One must be afflicted with spiritual stupidity or cursed by incurable frivolity who has never thought of that new state on which he may any day enter, nor speculated concerning its conditions. Amid the pauses of this life, when the doors are closed and the traffic on the streets has ceased, our thoughts travel by an irresistible attraction to the other life. What like will it be, and what will be its circumstances? What will be its occupations and history? "God forgive me," said Charles Kingsley, facing death, "but I look forward to it with an intense and reverent curiosity." He need not have asked pardon, for he was fulfilling his nature.

One is not astonished that this legitimate curiosity has created a literature, or that its books can be divided into sheep and goats. Whenever any province transcends experience and is veiled in mystery, it is certain to be the play of a childish and irresponsible fancy or the subject of

elaborate and semi-scientific reasoning. Were it possible to place a foolscap on one of our most sublime ideas, and turn immortality itself into an absurdity, it is done when a vulgar imagination has peddled with the details of the future, and has accomplished a travesty of the Revelation of St. John. From time to time ignorant charlatans will trade on religious simplicity and trifle with sacred emotions, whose foolishness and profanity go before them unto judgment. Heaven is the noblest imagination of the human heart, and any one who robs this imagination of its august dignity and spiritual splendour has committed a crime. Certain thoughtful and reverent writers, on the other hand, have addressed themselves to the future existence and its probable laws with a becoming seriousness and modesty. The *Unseen Universe*, which was understood to be written by two eminent scientists, and Isaac Taylor's *Physical Theory of Another Life*, are books worthy of a great subject, and a fit offering on the altar of Faith. Within a limited range science and philosophy are welcome prophets on the unseen, but at a point they leave us, and we stand alone, awestruck, fascinated, before the veil. No one has come from the other side and spoken with authority save Jesus.

One who believes in the pre-existence of our Master approaches the Gospels with high expectation and sustains a distinct disappointment. Jesus' attitude to the other world is a sustained contradiction because His life reveals a radiant knowledge and His teaching preserves a rigid silence. As Jesus moves through the Gospels, the sheen of Heaven is visible upon Him. Below the mixed noises of earth the voice of the eternal fell on His ear; beyond the hostile circle of Pharisees He saw the joy in the presence of God (St. Luke xv. 7). Once and again came the word from heaven, "This is my Beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased" (St. Matt. iii. 17), and in His straits the

angels ministered unto Him (St. Matt. iv. 11). He lived so close to the frontier that His garments were once shot through with light, and His relations with the departed were so intimate that He spake with the past leaders of Israel concerning His mission (St. Matt. xvii. 2). It does not surprise one that Jesus should suddenly disappear any more than that a bubble should rise to the surface of water, or that He ascended from the earth any more than that a bird should open its wings and fly. It was not strange that Jesus should pass into the unseen; it was strange that He should appear in the seen.

Jesus had established in His own Person that communication which ancient ages had desired, and modern science is labouring to attain. One may be pardoned for anticipating some amazing results—a more complete apocalypse. What unsuspected applications of natural law, what new revelations of spiritual knowledge, what immense reaches of Divine service, what boundless possibilities of life, might not Jesus have revealed in the sphere of the unseen. We search in vain for these open mysteries—this lifting of the veil from the occult. Whatever Jesus may have seen, and whatever He may have known, were locked in His breast,

“ . . . or something sealed
The lips of that Evangelist.”

No believer in the pre-existence of Jesus can affect indifference to this silence; everyone must desire some relief from its pressure. Most likely Jesus recognised that frequent references to the circumstances of the unseen world would have obscured one of the chief points in His teaching. He was ever insisting that the kingdom of heaven was no distant colony in the clouds, but an institution set up in this present world. He was ever hindered by the gross conceptions of the Jews, who could not compass any other Utopia than a conquering Messiah and a visible Theocracy.

It was hard enough to cleanse the sight of His disciples from a religious imperialism, and to possess them with the vision of a spiritual society. Had He once excited their imagination with an Apocalypse of gold, then they had never grasped the fact that the kingdom of God is within, and they had been quite unsettled for the labour of its establishment. They must understand with all their hearts that where Jesus and the men of His Spirit were the kingdom stood, whether in some obscure village of Galilee or in the many mansions of His Father's house. There are moods in which we should have liked a chapter on heaven from Jesus, in our wiser moments we see it would have been premature. When the kingdom had been fairly founded on earth an apocalypse of glory would be a reinforcement of hope. While it was only an ideal it had been the destruction of faith.

Jesus broke His reserve on the last night of the three years' fellowship, when He was about to depart from His disciples' sight by the way of the Cross, and they would be left to face the world in His name. They had come together to the veil, and before He passed within, through His rent body, He must give His friends an assurance of the unseen that their hearts may not be troubled. As often as He had spoken of the Ageless Life, He had touched on the life to come, now He gave His solitary deliverance on the sphere of that life, and the form is characteristic of the Master. There could never be competition or comparison between Jesus and St. John; the magnificence of the apocalypse fades before one simple word of the last discourse. Jesus utilizes the great parable of the Family for the last time; and as He had invested Fatherhood and Sonhood with their highest meaning so He now spiritualizes Home. What Mary's cottage at Bethany had been to the little company during the Holy Week, with its quiet rest after the daily turmoil of Jerusalem; what some humble house on the

shore of Galilee was to St. John, with its associations of Salome; what the great Temple was to the pious Jews, with its Presence of the Eternal, that on the higher scale was Heaven. Jesus availed Himself of a wealth of tender recollections and placed Heaven in the heart of humanity when He said, "My Father's House."

It is, however, one thing to be silent about the circumstances of the future and another to be silent about its nature. The reticence of Jesus about the next world has an ample compensation in His suggestions regarding the next life. Jesus was not indifferent to surroundings—He was grateful for the home at Bethany; Jesus was chiefly concerned about life—He counted it of the last importance to give a right direction to life. During all His ministry Jesus was fighting ideas of life which were false, not so much because they were wicked as because they were temporary. He was insisting on ideals of life which were true, not only because they were good but because they were eternal. His conception of life was open to criticism just because it was so independent of time and space. It was not national, it was human; it was not for His day, but for ever. You are impressed by the perspective in Jesus' teaching, the sense of beyond, and it is always spiritual. Neither this world in its poverty nor the next in its wealth is to be compared with life, any more than a body with a soul. The great loss of the present is to exchange your life for this world, the great gain in the world to come is still to obtain life (St. Mark x. 30). The point of connection between the seen and the unseen—the only bridge that spans the gulf—is life. In this state of things we settle its direction, in the next we shall see its perfection. According to the drift of Jesus' preaching, the whole spiritual content of this present life, its knowledge, skill, aspirations, character, will be carried over into the future, and life hereafter be the continuation of life here.

This assumption underlies Jesus' words at every turn, and comes to the surface in the parables of Service and Reward. They imply the continuity of life: they illuminate its conditions. The Master commits five talents to the servant, and the trust is shrewdly managed. The five become ten, and the Master is fully satisfied. What reward does He propose for His servant? Is it release from labour and responsibility—a future in contrast with the past? Is it, so to say, retirement and a pension? It would not be absurd, but it would be less than the best. Something more could surely be done with this man's exercised and developed gifts—his foresight, prudence, courage, enterprise. The past shapes the future, and this servant, having served his apprenticeship, becomes himself a master, "ruler over many things." So he entered into the joy of his Lord and the joy for which Jesus endured the Cross is a patient and perpetual ministry. Life will be raised, not reversed; work will not be closed, it will be emancipated. The fret will be gone, not the labour; the disappointment, not the responsibility. Our disability shall be no more, our capacity shall be ours for ever, and so the thorns shall be taken from our crown.

This conception of the future as a continuation under new and unimaginable forms of present energy, has hardly been allowed full play. The religious mind has been dominated by a conventional idea which is taught to our children, which is assumed in conversation: which is implied in sermons, which inspires our hymnology on the "Last Things." Heaven is a state of physical rest—a release from care, labour, struggle, progress, which more thoughtful people represent to themselves as an endless contemplation of God, and less thoughtful reduce to an endless service of praise. We fulfil the Divine Will here in occupation, there we shall fulfil it in adoration. We shall leave the market-place with its arduous, yet kindly business, and

enter a church where night and day the ceaseless anthem swells up to the roof. Upon this heaven the mystics, from St. John to Faber, have lavished a wealth of poetry, which we all admire and sing, and this is its sum :—

“Father of Jesus, love’s reward,
What rapture will it be
Prostrate before Thy throne to lie
And gaze and gaze on Thee.”

It is the Christian Nirvana.

If this Paradise of inaction be the true idea of Heaven, then it invites serious criticism. For one thing, it can have only a lukewarm attraction for average people (who are the enormous majority of the race), and may be repugnant to those who are neither unbelieving nor evil-living. Cloistered piety may long for this kind of life as the apotheosis of the monastic ideal, but all God’s children are not cast in the mould of A’Kempis. What, for instance, can an English merchant, a respectable, clean-living and fairly intelligent man we shall suppose, think of the conventional Heaven? He will not tell any one, because a sensible man rarely gives confidences on religion, and he may feel it wise to crush down various thoughts. But one has a strong sense of incongruity between the life he lives here and the life it is supposed he will live hereafter, and this without reflection on his present useful and honourable way of living. One imagines how he will miss his office and his transactions and his plans and his strokes of success, not because he has lost the machinery for making money, but because he misses the sphere for his strongest powers—his shrewdness, perseverance, enterprise, integrity. It were ludicrous to suggest that this excellent man even in his old age longs for death as the passage to that new world where he may begin life afresh, or that he wishes to be set free from the duties of this world that he may give himself, without hindrance, to the

exercises of devotion. If he were to tell you so, you would detect the unreality, but in justice to this type, he does not cant when death comes to his door. He will brace himself, as a brave and modest man, to face the inevitable, and will resign himself to Heaven, as one does to a great function from which exclusion would be a social disgrace, to which admission is a joyless honour. Certainly this man is not a St. John, but it does not follow that he is quite hopeless. The conventional heaven is antipathetic to him not because he is unspiritual but because he is natural.

It must also strike one that an office of devotion would be an inept and disappointing conclusion to the present life. For what purpose are we placed and kept in this world? Faith answers, in order that we may be educated for the life to come: this is how Faith solves the perplexing problem of the life which now is. Providence endows a person with some natural gift, arranges that this gift be developed, affords it a field of exercise, trains it within sight of perfection. There is something which this person can do better than his fellows, and that is his capital for future enterprise. Two possessions we shall carry with us into the unseen: they are free of death, and inalienable—one is character, the other is capacity. Is this capacity to be consigned to idleness and wantonly wasted? It were unreason: it were almost a crime. How this or that gift can be utilized in the other world is a vain question, and leads to childish speculation. We do not know where the unseen universe is, nor how it is constituted, much less how it is ordered, but our reason may safely conclude that the capacity which is exercised under one form here will be exercised under another yonder. "It is surely a frivolous notion," says Isaac Taylor, "that the vast and intricate machinery of the universe and the profound scheme of God's government are now to reach a resting place, where nothing more shall

remain to active spirits through an eternity but recollections of labour, anthems of praise, and inert repose."

This uninviting Heaven owes its imagination to two causes—the tradition of asceticism, and an abuse of the Apocalypse. Fantastic ideas of religion, which were reared under monastic glass, have been acclimatised in certain schools whose favoured doctrines have no analogy in life and whose cherished ideals make no appeal to the heart. Sensible people agree that character is the pledge of goodness, and that work is a condition of happiness, and that a sphere where good men could do their work without weariness in the light of God's face would be an ideal heaven, but sensible people are apt to be brow-beaten by traditions and to say what is not real. Unfortunately a really preposterous Paradise has been also credited with the glory of St. John's new Jerusalem, which cometh down "from God . . . as a bride adorned for her husband," whose foundations were "garnished with all manner of precious stones," whose street was "pure gold, as it were transparent glass." This is the vision of a Jewish mystic, very splendid poetry to be read for the sound and beauty thereof, and they are not to be lightly forgiven who have reduced it to bathos in certain pictures and books. St. John imagined the kingdom of Jesus in its glory moving like a stately harmony before the eyes of God, and cast his imagination into the ancient symbols of Jewish literature. He intended the age of gold.

Any view of the future may be fairly tried by this criterion—does it strengthen, gladden, inspire us in the present? Whenever this question is put, we turn to Jesus with His doctrine of continuity. Where the traditional forecast fails is in the absence of Hope. It takes all purpose from our present effort, whose hard-won gains in service are to be flung away. It takes all opportunity from the future, which is to be a state of practical in-

ertia. It is the depreciation of the market place, the workshop, the study; it is the vindication of a Trappist monastery. Where the forecast of Jesus tells is in the spirit of Hope; it invests the most trivial or sordid details of this life with significance, changing them into the elementary exercises of a great science; it points to the future as the heights of life to which we are climbing out of this narrow valley. One of the most pathetic sights in this life is to see a dying man struggling to the last in his calling, putting another touch to his unfinished picture, adding another page to his half-written book. "Art is long; life is brief" comes to his mind, but how stands the case? If the monkish heaven be true, then this foolish mortal had better be done with art or letters, for they can have no place in the land to which he hasteth. If Jesus' heaven be true, then he is bound to gather the last penny of interest on his talents, and make himself fit for his new work. Jesus heartens His followers by an assurance that not one hour of labour, not one grain of attainment, not one honest effort on to the moment when the tools of earth drop from their hands, but will tell on the after life. Again, one is tempted to quote the sagacious Taylor: "All the practical skill we acquire in managing affairs, all the versatility, the sagacity, the calculation of chances, the patience and assiduity, the promptitude and facility, as well as the highest virtues, which we are learning every day, may well find scope in a world such as is rationally anticipated when we think of heaven as the stage of life which is next to follow the discipline of life."

It follows upon Jesus' suggestion of the next life,—the continuation of the present on a higher level,—that it will be itself a continual progress, and Jesus gives us frequent hints of this law. When He referred to the many mansions (*μοναὶ πολλαί*) in His Father's house, He may have been intending rooms—places where those who had been

associated together on earth may be gathered together; but He may be rather intending stations—stages in that long ascent of life that shall extend through the ages of ages. In the parable of the unjust steward Jesus uses this expression in speaking of the future, “everlasting tents” (*αἰωνίους σκηναίς*). It is at once a contradiction and an explanation, for it combines the ideas of rest and advance—a life of achievement, where the tent is pitched, a life of possibilities, where it is being for ever lifted.

“Will the future life be work,
Where the strong and the weak this world’s congeries
Repeat in large what they practised in small,
Through life after life in unlimited series,
Only the scales be changed, that’s all?”

Does not this conception of the future solve a very dark problem—the lives that have never arrived. Beside the man whose gifts have been laid out at usury and gained a splendid interest, are others whose talents have been hid, not by their own doing, but by Providence. They realized their gift; they cherished it; they would have used it; but for them there was no market. Providence, who gave them wings, placed them in a cage. Round us on every side are cramped, hindered, still-born lives—merchants who should have been painters, clerks who should have been poets, labourers who should have been philosophers. Their talent is known to a few friends; they die, and the talent is buried in their coffin. Jesus says No. It has at last been sown for the harvest; it will come into the open and blossom in another land. These also are being trained—trained by waiting. They are the reserve of the race, kept behind the hill till God requires it. They will get their chance; they will come into their kingdom,

“Where the days bury their golden suns
In the dear hopeful West.”

The continuity of life lifts the shadow also from another

mystery—the lives that have been cut off in their prime. When one is richly endowed and carefully trained, and has come to the zenith of his power, his sudden removal seems a reflection on the economy of God's kingdom. Why call this man to the choir celestial when he is so much needed in active service? According to Jesus, he has not sunk into inaction, so much subtracted from the forces of righteousness. He has gone where the fetters of this body of humiliation and the embarrassment of adverse circumstances shall be no longer felt. We must not think of him as withdrawn from the field; we must imagine him as in the van of battle. We must follow him, our friend, with hope and a high heart.

“No, at noonday, in the bustle of man's worktime,
Greet the unseen with a cheer;
Bid him forward breast and back as either should be,
“Strive and thrive,” cry “speed, fight on, fare ever
There as here!”

JOHN WATSON.

PROBLEMS OF THE PROPHETIC LITERATURE.

II. HABAKKUK.

OF latest critics it is admittedly Professor Stade to whom we are pre-eminently indebted for a fresh and fruitful impetus in the investigation of that extremely difficult section of Biblical literature, the Prophetic. This is the case with regard to the small but specially beautiful and remarkable Book of Habakkuk. In 1884, in a brief essay in his *Zeitschrift*,¹ Stade brought forward detailed proof of his view, that the passages ii. 9–20 and chap. iii. cannot be assigned to the prophet of the close of the seventh century. In ii. 9–20 he found a prophetic denunciation of a small Pales-

¹ *Zeitschrift für Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft*, iv. pp. 154–9.