

OPERA FORIS :
MATERIALS FOR THE PREACHER.

II.

PSALM cix. 21-22 :—

But do (or rather, work) thou, O God the Lord, for thy name's sake :

Because Thy mercy (or rather, lovingkindness) is good, deliver thou me.

For I am poor and needy,

And my heart is wounded within me.

I am gone like the shadow when it declineth :

I am tossed up and down as the locust.

The Psalmist has exhausted himself in calling down curses upon his thankless and faithless opponents. He now sinks back upon the thought of his own pitiful condition, and appeals to God for help. He is downhearted and depressed at the power of an evil world over his life, and this conception is brought out by a double metaphor. When the light of the sun is waning, the shadow lengthens upon the sand, soon to disappear altogether with the radiance on which its very existence depends. I am like that shadow, the Psalmist pleads ; I have to fade and pass away ; the forces of the outside world are too powerful for me. Also, I am whirled to and fro, like the locusts, at the mercy of gusts of passion and malice blown from strong opponents ; my life does not seem to lie within my own control.

Dr. Briggs, in his recent edition of the *Psalter* (vol. ii. 368) emends the locusts out of this passage, on the ground that they are abrupt and inappropriate. "There is no suggestion of a storm in the context." Yet, even though we might argue that no storm is meant, but only a strong wind, which might naturally spring up in the late afternoon or early evening, it is better not to tie down a Semitic poet

to uniformity of metaphor. Besides, as it happens, a recent traveller has described an experience of his own, one afternoon about five or six o'clock, at Tiberias, which exactly illustrates the Psalmist's language. In his posthumous volume, *Tent and Testament* (p. 123), Mr. Herbert Rix tells how he there witnessed "a yellow snow-storm" of locusts, drifting up between the mountains. "The westward drift of the swarm continued for an hour, then all of a sudden a sort of miracle seemed to occur. The wind quite suddenly changed to the exactly opposite quarter. In a moment heat was changed to coolness, and in a moment the flight of the locusts was checked. For a time there was a confused mixing of the swarms, just as we see when snowflakes are whirled about by gusts. Then a steady drift in a contrary direction set in, and the whole flight was driven back to the wilderness by the way that it had come. It was difficult to realize, as we saw them thus at the mercy of every breath, that these particles were all alive. Their helpless drifting greatly impressed me." Afterwards Mr. Rix recollected this passage from the Psalter in which the Hebrew singer compared his bitter, helpless fate to the flight of these insects whirled before a strong wind.

The contrast to such apparently irresistible forces and passions, which sometimes seem to play fast and loose with human life, lies in God's will of goodness. *Do thou, work thou, for me*, whatever or whoever is against me. Faith seeks to rally its powers by casting itself on what it knows of the Lord's character and purpose in the Lord's world. Faith lies at His mercy, not at the mercy of accident or malice. The basis of this trust in God's revealed רַחֲמֵי (or loving-kindness), i.e. the loyal affection which the head or father of his family shows to his dependents, to whose interests he is devoted. This is one of God's characteristic qualities. It is reliable and supreme, *good* activity exercised on

behalf of His creatures and children. Others¹ may forget or decline to show mercy (verse 16) ; God never does.

The immediate reference of the stanza is to the helpless condition of people whose happiness and fortunes seem now and then at the mercy of unchecked injustice and oppression from their fellow-men, and whose existence depends, for its precarious tenure, upon the unreliable favour of stronger people. But wider applications suggest themselves, e.g., the play of natural forces and factors, such as disease and temporal disaster, or, more widely still, the apparently uncontrolled power of death to have the human soul "blown about the desert dust." Against all such fears, born of its sense of dependence upon outside powers, the soul sets up its higher dependence upon the God who is bound to it in loving mercy.

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Lamentations i. 12 : *Behold and see if there be any sorrow like unto my sorrow.*

The captive nation appeals for pity on her unparalleled distress. Budde, in his brief commentary (*Kurze Hand-Commentar zum Alten Testament*, xvii. p. 82), prefers to rearrange the whole stanza, taking *Behold and see* with the words which immediately precede (*all ye who pass by*, you far-travelled observers, who have seen many tragedies), but the general sense is unaffected. In the first anguish of her grief, the exiled nation feels that nothing like this calamity has ever occurred among men. Surely it is unexampled, unprecedented. Such is the instinctive feeling, especially of the young, when distress overtakes them for the first time ; they exaggerate the size of their mishap, since they

¹ Mercy or lovingkindness, in this sense, was the bond between members of the community, a loyal helpfulness which formed part of the community's relation to its God and was bound up with His relationship to them. Compare the statement of this by Professor Robertson Smith in his *Prophets of Israel* (pp. 160 f.).

have not enough experience of life to see it in its true proportions. No one, they cry, can ever have suffered as we have. The pathos is intelligible, but it is not quite reasonable. The cry is natural, but it has to be modified in the light of wider observation.

A similar phase of feeling is represented in the Book of Job, where the individual rather than the nation is the subject. The theophany which concludes the book seems intended to correct the sufferer's attitude to his personal misdeeds. When God speaks out of the whirlwind, with a vast message of cosmic range, Job is really told, as Dr. Courtney puts it in his latest volume (*The Literary Man's Bible*, p. 42), "to look at the larger scheme of the universe. Every man in grief is naturally inclined to overrate the importance of his own personality. 'There is no suffering like my suffering,' he is apt to say; 'there is no such salient instance of the injustice of the world.' How can such a selfish attitude be cured? Only, the Book of Job would seem to suggest, by raising one's eyes to the hills, by thinking of the bigger things, by trying to understand an universal scheme in which the individual plays his part indeed, but a wholly subordinate and, perhaps, ineffective part." No Hebrew thinker would have admitted that the sufferer, whether as a nation or as an individual, whether punished for wrong-doing or tried by discipline, could play an ineffective part in God's plan; but otherwise the point of Dr. Courtney's interpretation is quite sound.¹

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In his latest volume (*Die Quellen des Lukas-evangeliums*, 1907), Dr. Bernhard Weiss does not cater for the preacher but for the specialist in New Testament criticism. His pages are crowded with technical and minute discussions of the

¹ Compare Mr. Meredith's remark in *Evan Harrington* (chap. x.): "A misery beyond our own is a wholesome picture for youth." Mr. Chesterton has also some shrewd sentences in *Charles Dickens* (pp. 24-35) upon the "starless outlook common in the calamities of boyhood."

Third Gospel in its relation to the other two synoptic narratives. Now and then, however, his exegesis yields some results which are capable of a wider use. Thus, on Luke xii. 1 f., he has some acute remarks. The passage in question runs thus : *Meanwhile, when the crowd was gathering in its thousands, insomuch that they trod one upon another, he began to say to his disciples first of all.*

Beware ye of the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy. Nothing is covered up

That shall not be revealed,

Or hidden

That shall not be known.

Wherefore, whatsoever ye have spoken in the darkness

Shall be heard in the light ;

And what ye have whispered in the inner chambers

Shall be proclaimed upon the housetops.

The words follow an account of the Pharisees' attempt to ensnare Jesus, and Weiss's contention is that Jesus warns His disciples, not against the "simulatio" of the Pharisees, who "cloaked their real disposition under the appearance of extreme piety, but simply against 'dissimulatio' in the sense of Galatians ii. 13, i.e., the temper which would hide its true convictions owing to the fear of man." The man who practises *ὑπόκρισις* of any kind plays a part. He is insincere. But his motives may vary. The real self which is kept in the background may be worse or better than the open actions and words in which the man seeks to come before the public. In one case, *ὑπόκρισις* may be "the compliment paid by vice to goodness"; the man may pretend to possess beliefs higher than his real ones. In another case, it may be toll paid needlessly and hurtfully by goodness to expediency and false prudence. The latter case, Weiss holds, was in the mind of Jesus when he uttered this warning. It was meant for disciples who may have felt that the powerful

authorities and large majority of the people were as yet unprepared to accept the new teaching, and who might consequently be tempted to dissemble some of their own convictions or to shrink from a fearless statement of the new faith. The words of Jesus meet this hesitancy by pointing out that all such covering up of principles is vain. Truth will out. The message cannot be always whispered; it will demand active and open propaganda. But this advance into the open is not independent of men's courage and confession. Jesus does not mean merely that the full and frank statement of his gospel will come, in spite of any timid concealment of opinion upon the part of his disciples; he implies that any such change will be brought about through their hearty co-operation, as they set aside temporizing and time-serving.

This responsibility of people for the advance of a cause in which they profess to be interested, is excellently argued, from a general point of view, by Mr. Morley in his volume upon *Compromise* (pp. 209-210). "When it is said that the various successive changes in thought and institution present and consummate themselves spontaneously, no one means by spontaneity that they come to pass independently of human effort and volition. On the contrary, this energy of the members of the society is one of the spontaneous elements. It is quite as indispensable as any other of them, if indeed it be not more so. . . . The world only grows better, even in the moderate degree in which it does grow better, because people will that it should, and take the right steps to make it better."

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John i. 47: *Jesus saw Nathanael coming to him, and saith of him, Behold an Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile.* Nathanael, as a genuine (ἀληθῶς) Israelite, free from prejudice, is contrasted with the majority of the Jews who were stubborn, suspicious, and distrustful of Jesus their Messiah

(cf. viii. 39–40). Nathanael's nature, it is implied, was unwarped. When Philip said, *Come and see*, he put aside his inherited prejudice and went with his friend to inquire. The absence of δόλος has been usually taken to suggest a contrast between him and Jacob or Israel, who caught at God's blessing by guile. Ἰσραηλεΐτης at any rate, seems to convey some implicit allusion to the patriarch. But may it not be to his vision of God at Bethel (Gen. xxviii. 12 f.) to which there is an evident allusion in verse 51 (*Ye shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man*)? Dr. Abbott, in his *Johannine Grammar* (pp. 595–596), prefers indeed to connect the phrase with the vision at Penuel (Gen. xxxii. 30–31). “It was there that Jacob said, *I have seen God face to face*; and from this fact Philo, though erroneously, explains the name of ‘Israel,’ there given to Jacob, as *seeing God*.”¹ Probably both visions of God to “Israel” are blended in the thought of this passage. Nathanael, this ideal, straightforward, sincere disciple, is a better Jacob, and he has a better vision of God. To the writer's mind, he is evidently the type of all genuine disciples, for the address in verse 51 passes into the plural, indicating that a wider circle is in view. If the guile, from which he is declared to be free (cf. Ps. xxxii. 2), were extended to cover man's relations to his fellow-men as well as to God, an apt illustration might be found in John Wesley's remark: “I am this day thirty years old, and till this day I know not that I have met with one person of that age, except in my father's house, who did not use guile, more or less.”

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¹ Dr. Abbott does not suggest, apparently, that this connexion was made by the writer of the Fourth Gospel or by Jesus. He simply adds, “Those who take this view would discern in the words addressed to Nathanael, i. 47, ‘Behold an *Israelite* indeed,’ the meaning, ‘Behold one that sees God,’ and would find an appropriateness between this and the following words” (in i. 50).