

It is remarkable that a Christian should "rationalize" a reputed miracle and yet that his narrative should be accepted by the Church.

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OPERA FORIS.

MATERIALS FOR THE PREACHER.

IV.

EXODUS iii. 4:—*God called to him out of the midst of the bush.* Not, out of the midst of the fire. Commenting on Philo's treatment of this incident, Dr. E. A. Abbott observes, in his latest volume (*Indices to Diatessarica*, 1907, p. lxi.), that Philo would probably have said, with the author of the Elijah-story, "The Lord was not in the fire." The bush, symbolizing the oppressed Israelites, had its baptism of fire, but "in the revelation to Moses, as in the revelation to Elijah, the Lord was not in the fire but in the principle of life that made the fire harmless. This principle of life was revealed to Moses in the saying I AM, or rather I WILL BE—which occurs here for the first time in the Bible. At the first utterance, the word is modified so as to be a private or individual revelation (Exod. iii. 12), 'I WILL BE *with thee.*' Then it is used without any reference except to a repetition of itself, I WILL BE [WHAT I WILL BE. This revelation," as Dr. Abbott points out, is ambiguous and neutral in itself. It has caused critics¹ immense difficulty

¹ Thus some (e.g., E. Meyer) regard it as an evasive reply, the speaker putting off the query of Moses (cp. Gen. xxxii. 30). Others explain it as an equivalent for an unchangeable personality, while Professor Cheyne emends it into "Ashhur," a divine name (*Traditions and Beliefs of Ancient Israel*, pp. 530 f.). "No new truth concerning the character of God is given; but Moses had met God Himself, and was thus strengthened to meet Pharaoh. There is an immense difference between 'He' and 'I,' between hearing about God and hearing God. What an interval!" (Erskine of Linlathen to Maurice.)

by its apparently metaphysical tinge. But, when it is read in the light of the unconsumed bush, "it teaches that God who is on the side of the afflicted, and who may be said to be in the midst of the affliction (i.e. the bush), WILL BE ever the champion of the good, ever the Eternal Life, even in the midst of fires that seem to imply death."

This interpretation is quite consonant with what we know of Israel's belief in Jehovah as an outcome of the Mosaic era. Their faith was unique, owing to the character of Him whom they had learnt to know. "Other nations claimed the protection of their God by virtue of a natural bond : Jehovah became the God of Israel by His own free choice. Other gods arose in dim prehistoric times, none knew how ; the recollection of the crisis which made Jehovah Israel's God was never lost. Lastly, He had revealed Himself from the first under a moral aspect, as one who punished the oppressor and let the captive go free" (W. E. Addis, *Hebrew Religion*, pp. 63, 64).

The serviceableness of this interpretation for the preacher needs only to be outlined. (1) The fiery trials of the Christian life are not all. They are visible and conspicuous, apparently permitted to waste life without any divine check. But an invisible power prevents them from destroying the faith and patience of the soul. The bush is not consumed. (2) The impersonal troubles of the believing man's life are contrasted with the revelation of a personal will, which overrules and overcomes them. (3) The assurance of God's strong delivering grace, thus won from any crisis, private or public, throws light on His constant and characteristic attitude to the struggling sons of men ; it guarantees His aid in all future emergencies.

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Exodus iv. 14 : *Is there not Aaron the Levite, thy brother ?*

I know that he can speak well. And also, behold, he cometh forth to meet thee.

Moses had not thought of Aaron, for members of a household are apt to underrate the powers and possibilities that lie in one another. As Seneca put it, "vile habetur quod domi est." We will look anywhere for help and assistance, sometimes, rather than to the men and women among whom we dwell, simply because familiarity with the latter is prone to blind us to their capacities. We have a trick of not expecting much from our relations. Yet *I know*, whatever you think or do not think, *that he can speak well*. Do not undervalue or ignore his qualities.

Furthermore, *he is coming* at this very moment *to meet thee*. He needs no urging. Any one who will pluck up courage to initiate a movement will be sure to find allies, once he himself begins. Assistance flows in from the most unlikely quarters. The earnest soul, which takes the lead, will not be left alone for long; from unsuspected quarters, even in its own unromantic neighbourhood, that help will start up which by its sympathy and co-operation avails to win the day.

One spirit to command, and one to love
 And to believe in it, and do its best,
 Poor as that is, to help it—why, the world
 Has been won many a time, its length and breadth,
 By just such a beginning.¹

An apt parallel to this incident occurs in the second book of the *Iliad*, where Homer describes how the various Greek chieftains were summoned by Agamemnon to confer with him on the desperate state of the army's fortunes before Troy. Messengers were despatched to all. But the poet adds, Agamemnon's brother required no summons. He was already on his way, instinctively feeling that he

¹ Browning: *A Blot in the 'Scutcheon* (Act ii. scene 2).

might be needed. "Menelaus of the loud war-cry came to him unbidden, for he knew in his heart how his brother toiled."

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Psalm i. 6 :—

*For the Lord knoweth the way of the righteous ;
But the way of the ungodly shall perish.*

The first psalm serves as an introduction to the psalter, and these words, which form its climax, are deliberately chosen. Hitherto God's activity has not been mentioned. The poem has been occupied with a description of the pious Israelite, furnished with God's law and maintaining his allegiance to it amid and against unsympathetic neighbours. Now, the psalm closes with a reminder that the issues of this struggle are in higher hands. "It is not without reason," as Gunkel observes, "that this song is placed, like a sort of preface, in front of the psalter, throughout which man's belief in providence plays so large a part. Before we hear the pious folk praying, wailing and rejoicing in the psalter, we get the general proposition, the star and substance of their piety."¹

The Lord knoweth the way of the righteous. He knoweth ; that is all, but it is enough. He is not indifferent to the moral conflict. The reverence and the loyalty of the faithful are fully appreciated by Him ; for *to know*, in this sense, means not an abstract knowledge but the practical interest of one who approves and supervises. The man who is careful about his associates and who scrupulously avoids the principles and company of the openly irreligious, may rest assured that, whoever is callous about the matter, his God cares supremely. The temptation is to believe, as the cynical opponent asserts, that devotion to God's law and the strict discipline of faith do not matter one

¹ *Ausgewählte Psalmen*, pp. 1-2.

whit. They count for nothing. They are chosen at our own risk and upheld at our expense. But the genuine soul refuses to let the lines of good and evil be thus obliterated or confused, and he may have the moral satisfaction of feeling that this scrupulousness corresponds with the eternal estimate. God is alive to the distinction. On earth, if the pious man earns any notice, it is sometimes that of ridicule and contempt (ver. 1). In heaven, his methods and motives never fail to earn regard and sanction.

This belief that God will vindicate faith is the root of the whole psalter. He justifies faith; that is the oversong of the book. In an age like that of the psalmist, when religious principles were in danger of being blurred, and laxity either condoned or frankly justified as equally valid with strict faith, when faith was apt to burn down and the futility of conscience seemed almost a credible hypothesis, the heart had to swing back to the prophetic conviction that it is not all one to God, and that it will not be all one to men, whether they are reverent and honest and conscientious, or perfunctory in worship and unscrupulous in conduct. "Piety," Wellhausen points out, "cannot maintain itself if God makes no difference between the godly and the wicked, and has nothing more to say to the one than to the other; for piety is not content to stretch out its hands to the empty air, it must meet an arm descending from heaven. It must have a reward, not for the sake of the reward, but to be sure of its own reality, in order to know that there is a communion of God with men, and a road which leads to it." That is to say, moral principle and faith in providence react upon each other, in the religious sphere. Man's delight in the law of God corresponds to God's delight in the allegiance of His servants.

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Isaiah xxxvii. 31 :—*The remnant that is escaped of the*

house of Judah shall again take root downward, and bear fruit upward. Depth of character needed in order to produce a really fruitful life. Unless the roots of the soul are struck deep into prayer and conviction, the outward conduct will never flourish. The visible graces depend upon previous attention to the inner principles of mind and character. Milton's lady in *Comus*, the Countess of Carbery, resists the seduction of the tempter and displays the finer graces of human nature. But, as Lowell notes in his essay on Pope, the explanation of this heroine's success is given by Jeremy Taylor, in his prose notice of the Countess. "The religion of this excellent lady . . . took root downward in humility, and brought forth fruit upward in the substantial graces of a Christian, in charity and justice, in chastity and modesty, in fair friendships and sweetness of society."

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