

OPERA FORIS.

MATERIALS FOR THE PREACHER.

VII.

EZEKIEL i. 8: *And they had the hands of a man under their wings.*

The details of the imagery in this weird theophany may have been borrowed in part from Assyrian mythology and sculpture. But there is another possible source, viz., the climatic conditions of the land. A recent traveller in Mesopotamia, Dr. A. Hume Griffith, has described to Reuter's representative a remarkable phenomenon which he observed in the district; this seems to have been practically a repetition of the outward scenery of Ezekiel's vision, with its whirlwind, brilliant colouring, and appearance of celestial wheels. "We had just pitched camp on the banks of the Khabur, a tributary of the Euphrates—the same river as is mentioned by Ezekiel as Chebar—when we witnessed a wonderful display as we watched the setting sun. During the afterglow the sky was lit up by rays of varied hues projecting like the spokes of a wheel from the setting sun. From either side of the sun there appeared to issue wings, and the whole appearance gave just the idea of the winged wheels within wheels described by the prophet. The period of the year was the same as that referred to in Ezekiel."

At least one trait of Ezekiel's vision, however, is due to his own religious feeling, and that is *the hands of a man under their wings*. The vision is not all unearthly. It has a human touch in it. The appeal of the vision is neither couched in a high-flying transcendental ecstasy, nor directed to some phase of experience which lies remote from the pangs and conflicts of ordinary life. Miss Dora Greenwell has happily applied this phrase to certain devotional writers

in whom the modern reader is apt to miss a sense of human reality and sympathy. "To be assured that they had joyed and sorrowed, and loved as men and women, and *as such* had felt Christ's unspeakable consolations, would be a touch of nature making them our kin. But it seldom comes. St. Thomas à Kempis, for instance, dismisses a whole world of feeling in two lines, 'Love no woman in particular, but commend all good women in general to God.' In Madame Guyon and Edwards we long, and long in vain, to see the hand of a man under the wings of the cherubim, and to feel its pressure." Ezekiel is alive to this need of the human touch in divine revelations or in the interpretations and applications of religious truth by men to men. The living creatures *had the likeness of a man . . . as for the likeness of their faces, they had the face of a man*. Above all, there was *the hand of a man* visible under their wings. No scenery could have taught the prophet this. It sprang from his deep sympathy and profound sense of relationship to men as God's interpreter.

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Joel iii. 4: *Will ye render me a recompence?* (will ye repay a deed of mine? R.V. margin).

In the name of God, the prophet challenges men to account, if they can, for their perversity. He denies them any justification. They are not to excuse themselves for evil doing by throwing the blame on a God who has mis-handled them, for God is innocent. He has never irritated men into rebellion nor goaded them by harsh measures into hatred. His treatment of men cannot be impugned. He has not pitched His demands too high, nor acted inconsiderately; He has never exposed men wantonly or unfairly to temptation, nor has He, like some human governor or parent, exasperated them by unwise discipline into any outburst of petulance and rebellion. What have you against Me,

God asks through Joel. How have I handicapped you ? What reasonable complaint can you bring, by way of excuse, to justify your opposition to my law ? What provocation have I given you ?

This dramatic and even sarcastic outburst of the prophet seems designed to meet such suspicions of God's fairness and goodness as are voiced in the well-known lines of Fitzgerald's *Rubaiyat*. The stanza is a brilliant mistranslation, but it is an accurate version of lurking ideas in the average man.

O Thou who man of baser earth didst make,
 And who with Eden didst devise the snake ;
 For all the sin wherewith the Face of Man
 Is blacken'd, Man's forgiveness give—and take.

The contention of the Hebrew prophet is that God, speaking here on behalf of His oppressed people, absolutely repudiates any provocation of the Phœnicians and Philistines. Men have themselves to blame, not God, for their misdeeds. They have nothing to blame God for, nothing that they can fairly bring up against Him ! His character and dealings stand out clear of all imperfection, dominated by justice and consideration. The question, in fact, expresses what we might venture to call the good Conscience, or the Innocence, of God. Like the arrows shot up at the sky by angry savages during an eclipse, man's blame of God falls back on himself, and God's character remains untouched, vindicated against any charges or suspicions from below.

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