

who may himself desire our own disadvantage and failure. We can bless those that curse. Above all, it is possible to do the enemy a good turn." And then, though Mr. Montefiore has not read his Graetz for many years, he recalls a striking passage in which that historian speaks of some signal

charity shown on the African coast by certain Spanish Jews after the Expulsion, to some shipwrecked Christian Spaniards. Of these Jews he believes it may be truly said that they loved their enemies and fulfilled the mandate of Jesus.

## The Parables of Zechariah.

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### THE PARABLE OF THE HORSEMEN (CHAP. I. 7-17).

I. In this first vision Zechariah saw a horseman standing "among the myrtle trees in the bottom." To his readers these words in all probability denoted a well-known locality; and they would recognise at once why this was the place where the horseman arrived. But we are not so fortunate; no myrtle grove in a bottom (or hollow) being known to us. We know, however, that there were myrtle trees in the neighbourhood of Jerusalem about this period,<sup>1</sup> and the probability is that by this phrase some spot in the vicinity of the temple area was indicated.<sup>2</sup>

Behind this rider, who was mounted on a red horse, the prophet then perceived other horses, no doubt also with riders; and they were diverse in colour—red, speckled (R.V. "sorrel"), and white. Many efforts have been made to attach to these colours special significance;<sup>3</sup> but they are used merely to give vividness to the idea of the different directions from which the riders had come.

As yet the prophet had seen, but had not understood. He is supposed all through his visions, however, to be accompanied by an interpreter, who is able to explain whatever he cannot understand, as Dante, on his journey through the lower world, is accompanied by Virgil. This friendly being he calls "the angel who talked with me." In the LXX. the phrase is rendered, "the angel who talked in me"; and it is an expression for the spirit of inspiration. The prophet was made

<sup>1</sup> See Neh. viii. 15.

<sup>2</sup> Dr. Dods supposes that the myrtle grove in the bottom was a haunt in which the prophet was wont to meditate and pray. Ewald and Hitzig translate "at the tent," by which they understand the dwelling-place of God, or rather its heavenly counterpart.

<sup>3</sup> See Wright *in loc.*

to see a succession of symbols, and, as they passed one after another before his eyes, this interpreter, like Milton's "affable archangel," removed the veil of mystery.

In the present case, indeed, the interpreting angel did not himself give the explanation; because the first horseman, striking in, explained that he and his fellow-horsemen were "they whom the Lord had sent to walk to and fro through the earth." They had been riding through the world in all directions on the behests of Jehovah, and now they had converged to Zion, Jehovah's seat, to report what they had seen.

It has been conjectured that this idea of invisible horsemen scouring the earth may have been suggested by the postal system of the Persian Empire, which about this time was impressing the imagination of the inhabitants of the East; but the custom of sending out scouts and spies in warfare, which has always prevailed, is sufficient to account for it; and it is paralleled in the Gospels by the profound thought of the centurion, who had learned from the practice of his own profession to form to himself a vivid conception of the control exercised by Christ over the occult forces made use of in His miracles: "I also am a man under authority, and I say to this man, Go! and he goeth; and to another, Come! and he cometh; and to my servant, Do this, and he doeth it."

However it may have been suggested, it is a sublime conception—that the invisible messengers of God are posting, like swift horsemen, over the earth, to execute His commands, and to bring Him exact information of the condition of every corner of His dominions.<sup>4</sup> It is the same truth as is

<sup>4</sup> Von Orelli strangely admits only one of these functions.

expressed in the beautiful words, "The eyes of the Lord run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to show Himself strong in the behalf of them whose heart is perfect towards Him" (2 Chron. xvi. 9). Only it suggests the additional thought, that perhaps the divine omniscience and beneficence may have for their instruments and agents spiritual beings, wise, powerful and sympathetic, whose joy it is to execute His will. In the Sistine Madonna there is a trait which has startled many a visitor to the Dresden Gallery, as he has sat in reverie before that wonderful triumph of Raphael's art. Round the heads of the Virgin and the Child, in the upper part of the picture, there are what seem to be circlets of delicate white cloud; and for clouds they are generally taken by the visitor who is there for the first time. But, as he looks more closely, it suddenly dawns upon him that they are the heads of innumerable angels, crowding out of the space above, and gazing on the Christ with rapt and loving reverence. As these crowding and eager faces fill the great picture for the surprised spectator with new life and wonder, so was the world filled with a new and divine meaning for the young prophet when he saw it traversed by the angelic horsemen.<sup>1</sup>

II. The horsemen had come from their wanderings charged with a message as to the state of the world in the different quarters which they had visited. And this the prophet now hears them deliver to "the angel of the Lord" in the depths of the myrtle grove, where he is waiting to receive it.

The message of all is alike, and it is this: "We have walked to and fro through the earth, and, behold, all the earth sitteth still, and is at rest."

This sounds a satisfactory message. But it was far from being so to the prophet, as he listened. Peace in certain circumstances is the height of happiness, but in others it is the worst of evils. At this period the people of God were not at peace; on the contrary, they were in a flutter of weakness and fear, for they were beset with foes without, and sick with failure and self-distrust within. The peace reported was elsewhere—among their enemies. They were surrounded by an order of things to which they did not belong, but which was strong, united and irresistible. This was the peace which the horsemen reported—the peace of the vice in whose pressure Israel

<sup>1</sup> Compare the horses and chariots of fire revealed to the prophet's servant, 2 Kings vi. 17.

was quivering, or of the iceberg by which it was being chilled to death. The only hope of Israel was in the breaking-up of this peace, as the only hope of mariners confined in Arctic seas is the breaking-up of the winter which holds the dumb world in its grasp. This, accordingly, had been the promise of Haggai, the confederate of Zechariah, "Thus saith the Lord of hosts, Yet once, it is a little while, and I will shake the heavens, and the earth, and the sea, and the dry land; and I will shake all nations, and the desire of all nations will come." And again, "Speak to Zerubbabel, governor of Judah, saying, I will shake the heavens and the earth; and I will overthrow the throne of kingdoms, and I will destroy the strength of the kingdoms of the heathen; and I will overthrow the chariots, and those that ride in them; and the horses and their riders shall come down, every one by the sword of his brother." But these words had not yet been fulfilled; on the contrary, as the horsemen reported, the heathen world on every side was still and unshaken.

Thus is evil sometimes like a dead wall which cannot be scaled, and like a mountain which nothing can remove. It looks down upon those who are trying to live a righteous and godly life with contempt, or it does not condescend to notice them at all. It is entrenched in business, in politics, or in the world of ideas, and has at its back money, influence and opinion. Nothing can be more trying to faith. Again and again the psalmists, in such a state of society, confess that their feet have well-nigh slipped—

There are no bands in their death,  
But their strength is firm;  
They are not in trouble as other men,  
Neither are they plagued like other men.  
Therefore pride compasseth them as with a chain,  
Violence covereth them as a garment;  
Their eyes stand out with fatness,  
They have more than heart could wish;  
They are corrupt and speak wickedly concerning oppression,  
They speak loftily;  
They set their mouth against the heavens,  
And their tongue walketh through the earth;  
Therefore His people return hither,  
And waters of a full cup are wrung out to them;  
And they say, How doth God know?  
And is there knowledge in the Most High?

Such was the discouragement under which the community was languishing when Zechariah was sent to comfort it.

III. The message of the horsemen was thus one of sadness and dismay. Accordingly it evoked a cry of pain and a prayer to God to have mercy: "O Lord of hosts, how long wilt Thou not have mercy on Jerusalem and on the cities of Judah, against which Thou hast had indignation these threescore and ten years?"

But by whom was this prayer uttered? It was "the angel of the Lord" (ver. 12) who answered and spoke thus; and him we have already identified as God's representative, who received the message of the horsemen in the recesses of the myrtle grove. But in the next verse the speaker appears to be identified with the angel who talked with the prophet; because, in immediate response to this prayer, it is said, "the Lord answered the angel who talked with me with good words and with comfortable words." Are there two angels or only one? <sup>1</sup>

Anyway, here we have an outbreak in the angelic nature of pain for Israel's suffering. All beings interested in righteousness and holiness were moved by the condition of God's people. Zechariah felt the spiritual world around and above him throbbing and palpitating with emotion on account of the misery of his country. He and his fellow-sufferers were not forsaken and unheeded: in spite of the scorn of their cruel and powerful neighbours, they were objects of affection and concern to higher beings. It is a great thing to know that we are not forgotten.

It may be said, indeed, that it was only the pain and the affection of the young prophet's own heart that transferred themselves in his dream to the hearts of angels. But, even if this were the case, we should yet have to recognise the profound truth of the representation. For where did

<sup>1</sup> One of the peculiarities of Zechariah as a stylist is that it is frequently difficult to be sure, as we read, who is speaking and who is being spoken to; and in this first vision the obscurity is great. Ewald's proposal to omit the words, "riding upon a red horse," in ver. 8, if admissible, would simplify matters. We should then have the picture of the man in the myrtle grove (who is identical with "the angel of the Lord"), not on horseback, but standing to receive the horsemen. Still it is strange that the cry of ver. 12 should rise from "the angel of the Lord" rather than from the interpreting angel; and it is open to doubt whether these are not designations of the same person. "The angel of the Lord" is a term which is not confined in the later books of Scripture to the unique sense which it has in the Pentateuch. See the remarkable essay in Kurtz's *History of the Old Covenant*, vol. i.

Zechariah's own sympathy with the sorrows of the time come from? It was not his own. The fire of a patriotism like his, the insight of love, the sympathy of a heart willing to sacrifice everything in a holy cause—these do not spring out of the selfishness of human nature; they are the breath of a higher power; and Zechariah was right in ascribing the utterances that rose from the depths of his own heart to the spirit of inspiration. It was not merely because they received dreams and visions that Zechariah and men like him learned the mind of God; but because their hearts were emptied of selfishness, and filled with passionate love for the cause of goodness. It was because God was in them that they discovered the thoughts of the God without them. Nor is there any other way yet of entering into the secret and mystery of the truth. We may learn the Bible by heart, and read learned comments upon it; we may even revel in the life and words of our Lord Himself; but all will remain a sealed book to us if our hearts are loveless. It is love which opens windows into heaven; and every act of self-denial gives body and reality to the cross of Christ.

IV. This prayer, whether to be regarded primarily as rising from the loving heart of an angel or of a man, did not need to wait long for an answer. Prayers which are God-inspired are prayers which will be answered; for they are in accordance with the mind of God. The passionate plea of the angel tapped a far deeper lake of passion in the heart of God; and therefore the answer came swift and full.

"I am jealous for Jerusalem and for Zion with a great jealousy," said Jehovah. It is the voice of the Husband, the outflow of whose love has been interrupted, but cannot be permanently stopped. Although for a time He had been estranged, yet the tie of connexion had not been broken. Jerusalem still belonged to Him, and therefore her suffering was His suffering, and her shame His dishonour.

Continuing still in the same strain, He launches His anger against the heathen nations; "for," says He, "I was but a little displeased, and they helped forward the affliction." They had fanned the flame of jealousy in the heart of the offended Husband, so that He had overstepped the limits of just resentment, and, as Isaiah said, inflicted on the offending wife double for all her sins. It is an

extraordinarily bold image. The heathen nations had been the instruments in God's hand for chastising His people; but this did not exempt them from guilt: they had taken advantage of the permission of Providence and acted not as His agents, but to gratify their own hostility and cruelty; and therefore, already in Isaiah, Jehovah threatened that, when the chastisement of His people was finished, He would turn and avenge them on those who had inflicted the punishment. In the apocryphal book of Enoch it is put in this way—that for a time God had committed His people to their charge, with permission to slay a fixed number, but they had exceeded the figure, and would be punished for this excess. The conception, however, of Zechariah is the most original of all.

But the promise grows still more comforting. Jehovah had come back to make His abode again with her whom He had forsaken—"I am returned to Jerusalem with mercies." Therefore the city would rise again in glory and beauty—"My house shall be built in it, saith the Lord of hosts, and a line shall be stretched forth upon Jerusalem"—that is, the measuring-line of the architect, staking out the ground for new buildings. Nor would the change be confined to Jerusalem: it would extend to the daughter cities of Judah—"My cities shall yet through prosperity be spread abroad"; or, as it is in the Revised Version, "overflow with prosperity." And then once more the reason is added: "The Lord shall yet comfort Zion, and

shall yet choose Jerusalem." The reconciliation would be so signal and complete that it would seem as if the marriage had been solemnised over again.

All this may sound like an outburst of exaggerated national sentiment, ascribing to the Deity a one-sided partiality for one nation and a corresponding enmity towards the rest. But such a judgment would be a mistake; because the entire representation is supported by the ancient idea of the covenant, which is a thoroughly moral idea, implying the preparedness of Israel to sustain this relationship to Jehovah. Only on the presupposition of the righteousness and holiness of the people can such a union between God and them be entered into; and only by continued and growing holiness can it be maintained. There is no respect of persons with God. His strength is ours only as our life conforms to His law and our character to His perfection. But, given these conditions, then nothing can harm us; present afflictions will be but for a moment, and will work out for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory; all the resources of the universe are on our side, and the stars in their courses will fight on our behalf. This is why even the promise to Christ is so absolute: it is not on His divinity or on the divine decree merely that the permanence of Christianity rests; but it is because it is the cause of righteousness, holiness and love that nothing can permanently stand in its way, and at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow.

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## The Great Text Commentary.

"Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the vainglory of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world. And the world passeth away, and the lust thereof: but he that doeth the will of God abideth for ever."—1 John ii. 15-17 (R.V.).

### EXPOSITION.

"*Love not the world.*"—The world is with John eminently an ethical conception, mankind fallen away from God, and of hostile disposition towards

Him, together with all that it lives for and has made its own. From this it follows that "love not" here means neither "love not too much," nor "love not with unhallowed sense," but "love not" in the strictest sense of the word, consisting in a life of inner fellowship.—HUTHER.

"*Love not.*"—The command is not given to any particular class (as to the young), but to all.—WESTCOTT.

"*The things that are in the world.*"—Natural objects as such cannot be meant, but only these in so far as they are taken by the ungodly world into its service; or better, the apparently good things which the world pursues, or with which it delights