

The Parables of Zechariah.

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VII.

THE PARABLE OF THE FLYING ROLL (CHAP. V. 1-4).

THE five parables of Zechariah already considered have all been messages of comfort. But the sixth and seventh speak in a different tone. They are sharp reproofs directed against the sins of the community.

This change of tone is the more surprising, because in the fourth parable—that of the Brand plucked from the Burning—the sin of the community has been already dealt with, and the assurance given that it has been put away. Yet the dashing of a bright prophetic picture with the intrusion of this subject is no unusual thing. In the second half of Isaiah, for example, where the colours are so brilliant and the air is ringing with victory and hope, nevertheless, before all is done, the sky mysteriously darkens and the sounds of menace and disaster are blown down the wind. Nor do we need to go far for the key to such inconsistencies. We know ourselves how difficult it is to get done with sin. It lurks where it is least expected; remove a covering by chance suddenly, and there it appears, spreading in secret; let watchfulness be relaxed only for a little, and it breaks out with astonishing violence.

This was the reason why the hopeful tenor of Zechariah's prophesying was interrupted, and he had to speak in the language of sharp reproof. Yet he may not have felt the inconsistency. The excision of diseased parts from the constitution, though painful to the members affected, is healthful to the body as a whole; and, therefore, the destruction of the unworthy adherents of the community may have appeared to the young prophet a promise rather than a threat. It is a mercy, when at any expense, sin is taken away.

I. When the veil of revelation was again drawn aside, the new vision which the prophet saw was a roll flying along the face of heaven. An ancient roll—the equivalent of a modern book—consisted, unlike a modern book, of but one continuous surface, spread out or rolled up, like a map. In this case it was spread out, like a great sheet. It was covered with writing, and this was a record of sin.

Such was the prophet's vivid way of indicating that in heaven, out of which the roll had obviously come, a record is kept of sins committed on earth. This is a fact which is constantly forgotten, as Zechariah's fellow-countrymen had no idea that such a record was standing against them. Sin, when it is past, is lost sight of by the majority: it does not trouble them; and they have great difficulty in thinking of it as still in any sense existent. But with God its continued existence is very real. There it stands before His eyes, graven in the rock for ever. And, indeed, even our own oblivion of it is only an illusion; because within ourselves a record of it is preserved. In memory and conscience all our past sins are written down. The record may be in invisible ink; but, by exposure to the fire of truth, it may at any moment start into visibility; and we may have to read it with confusion and terror, not being able to deny a single line of the indictment.

The roll which Zechariah saw was written on both sides. On the upper side were recorded the sins of the swearer, and on the under side the sins of the thief. In all probability these were prevalent sins of the time; but they have also a representative character. Swearing is a specimen of sins against God, that is, against the first table of the law; and theft is a specimen of sins against man, that is, against the second table of the law. The upper side of the roll was inscribed with sins referring to God above, and the under side with sins referring to man beneath. To these two classes all sins belong; and some men's sins may be more of the one type, and others' more of the other. Yet they are closely connected, as their record on the same roll suggests. Theft, for example, a sin against man, often leads to false swearing, a sin against God. Indeed, sins of every variety tend to produce one another; and every man's record contains sins of both sorts.

Another reason why the prophet directed his thunder against swearing and theft may have been that both are sins which pierce the conscience. There are some forms of sin against God—and

these perhaps the very worst—such as forgetfulness of Him or lack of love to Him, the neglect of His salvation or the grieving of His Spirit, which may be the practice of a lifetime, and yet hardly ever awaken remorse or fear. But even the most reckless sinner, when he swears a false oath in presence of the representatives of the law, is haunted with a sense of guilt, which he cannot easily forget; and the profane swearer, who makes use of oaths as ordinary expletives, however lightly he may think or speak of his sin, is well aware that it marks him out as one destitute of the love of God. In the same way there are forms of sin against our fellowmen, heinous enough in the sight of God, which hardly affect the ordinary conscience at all; but it is difficult to commit a theft without the sense of degradation and the dread of punishment. Theft burns in the conscience, and the thief knows that he cannot inherit the kingdom of God.

The prophet says that the length of the roll which he saw was twenty cubits, and its breadth ten cubits. This would have been a roll of monstrous size; and, I suppose, it is only a poetical way of saying that it was very great. That is, the record of sin, standing against the sinners, was long and large. And the record standing against anyone may easily grow monstrous in size without the fact being noticed. An ancient roll was enlarged by the gluing to it of one piece of parchment after another; and so year after year of a sinful life expands the debt in the books of God, till we are drowned in obligations which we cannot discharge.¹

II. The roll seen by the prophet in the sky was flying; but it was not with the uncertain course of a sheet of paper blown by the wind or a sail loosened from its fastenings in a storm, which is helplessly twisted and carried about here and there as the wind listeth. This roll had been sent from God, and it was flying swiftly in the direction in which it had been propelled by His hand. Or rather, it was itself a kind of living thing: with the keen eye of the eagle it saw its destination, and with the swift wing of the eagle it was speeding towards it. But what was its destination? It was the house of the false swearer and the house of the thief. As the saying goes, sins come home to roost.

¹ For fanciful interpretations of its dimensions, see Wright, *in loc.*

The roll was not only the record but the curse of sin. And if anyone desires to learn what this means, let him turn to the 28th chapter of Deuteronomy and read the terrific words in which the consequences were foretold by which the people of God would be pursued and punished, if in the Land of Promise they proved disloyal to the covenant. When they entered Canaan, at the conquest under Joshua, the tribes were ordered to stand on the twin mountains, Ebal and Gerizim, and with a loud voice proclaim from Gerizim the blessings which would follow obedience, and from Ebal the curses which would ensue upon disobedience. The curse extends to more than fifty verses of the chapter in which it occurs, and it cannot be read, even at this distance, without a thrill of terror. The ears that had heard it could never forget it; in all the generations of the life of Israel it was intended to serve as a warning; and it is probably to it that Zechariah refers.

Sin is a cursed thing. Wherever sin is lying, thither a curse is flying, if it has not already fixed on its prey.

In some of its forms sin carries its curse with it, which appears immediately. Some forms of sin obviously blight and degrade. If allowed to touch, they strike their tentacles into their victim, and they never let go. Their hold spreads and spreads, till, like a leprosy, it covers the whole man; and the beauty, the dignity and the happiness of manhood are slowly eaten away. There are those who in their very bodies exhibit the marks of this cursed presence; and many more are lepers, from head to foot, in soul.

Sometimes the curse is longer of coming. Sin is committed lightly, and soon forgotten. It was wrong, no doubt; but it was nothing serious. Perhaps the sinner laughs at it among his companions, or in secret he rolls the recollection of it as a sweet morsel under his tongue. But some morning when he thinks not of it, he opens his door, and there the curse is waiting for admission; and it has come to blast his reputation, to drive the sunshine from his home, and to ruin his career.

The curse may be very long of coming. It seems as if it were never to come, and therefore sinners go on in their own way without fear. 'Because sentence against an evil work is not executed speedily, therefore the hearts of the children of men are fully set in them to do evil.'

But the curse always comes sooner or later. Some day it appears as a speck on the horizon. It seems to be nothing. It disappears; and the heart returns to its rest and its evil-doing. But it reappears; it comes nearer and becomes more distinct; till at last it is seen to be the roll of God, long and broad, closely written, and flying straight to its goal. 'Be sure your sin will find you out.'

III. The prophet saw the roll flying towards the house of the false swearer and the house of the thief; but what was it going to do there? It was going to stay; but not to be inactive: 'It shall remain in the midst of his house, and it shall consume it, with the timber thereof and the stones thereof.' It would first attack the timber, the more perishable part of the structure; but, after destroying this, it would not rest, but attack even the stones, till they were consumed. This is an image of complete destruction.

Perhaps it is taken from primeval custom. When, in a primitive community, an inhabitant had committed a crime which shocked the moral sense of his neighbours, creating the impression that he was accursed and might perhaps become a curse to the place, they would come in a body and surround his house; they would drive forth him and his to be homeless vagabonds; and then they would raze his abode to the ground, burning the timber and not leaving one stone upon another.¹

The contemporaries of the prophet did not need to look far for illustrations of this oracle. They had returned from exile to Jerusalem, the glory of their fathers and the city of their own hearts. But what a spectacle had met their eyes! The city in heaps, the wall broken down, their homes burnt, the temple a mass of blackened ruins. What had produced this desolation? They knew too well; it was the curse of sin. The roll had come into their house and remained in it, till it had destroyed everything.

Had they been gifted with prophetic foresight, they might have foreseen still greater desolations springing from the same cause. They had been living in mighty Babylon, the extent and magnificence of which stunned every mind that looked upon it. Its wall was fifteen square miles, three hundred feet high and seventy-five feet thick, and,

¹ See Wellhausen, *in loc.*

inside the wall, the resources and appliances of luxury were on the same gigantic scale. Who that then beheld it could have believed that it would ever pass away? But the curse of sin entered into it, and its beauty and glory were eaten away. The music of its palaces became mute, and the tramp of many feet in its streets. The sands of the deserts choked up its gates, and the owl and the bittern hooted on its walls; till at length all was so completely extinguished that armies have marched over the tops of the mounds in the valley of the Euphrates without even suspecting that they were trampling on the remains of buried capitals.

This destructive force of sin blasted the civilisations of the ancient world and the cities which were their centres. But it is the same accursed thing everywhere and in every age; and, if it be not checked, what it did in Babylon and Nineveh, Rome and Athens, may be repeated in London, Paris, and New York.

On the smaller scale, the curse may at any time be seen at work. In the commercial world businesses are founded and enterprises launched. For a time they are sound, and they prosper; but avarice gets the upper hand, and directors are in haste to be rich; or they abandon themselves to vice, and squander not only their own property but the means of others on their pleasures. Then comes the crash, and disaster is spread far and wide. It is an everyday spectacle to see a fair career, started under brilliant auspices and supported by plenty of ability and opportunity; but some form of indulgence is yielded to, and its curse comes with it; lower and lower sinks the wretched man, till the end is a criminal's banishment or a drunkard's grave.

Thus, on the great scale and the small, the curse does its deadly work, abolishing from the face of the earth the persons and the things incurably evil.

As has been hinted already, this may have seemed to the prophet, in its own way, a blessing and a promise; because the enterprises which he was supporting could not succeed if they were impeded by those on whom the curse of heaven rested. It was better that their secret unfaithfulness should be brought to light, and that the community should be liberated from responsibility. The Old Testament abandons the enemies of God, without much compunction, to their fate, its one

resource being their destruction. It remained for the New Testament to make known God's more excellent way. Yet in the ancient view there is an imperishable truth. The destroying

course is the concomitant and the natural end of sin; and, if it be not averted by penitence and atonement, it will sooner or later inevitably take effect.

At the Literary Table.

THE BOOKS OF THE MONTH.

(The Prices of the Books mentioned below will generally be found in the Advertisement pages.)

I.

LECTURES ON THE RELIGION OF THE SEMITES. BY THE LATE W. ROBERTSON SMITH, M.A., LL.D. (*Black*. 8vo, Revised Edition, pp. xiv, 507). It was with a keen sense of disappointment that men heard that the first series of Burnett Lectures was to be the last from Robertson Smith. He himself when he died had no manuscript of the succeeding series in a fit state for publication, and everyone who heard the subsequent lectures had missed the opportunity of taking a full enough report. Why did not Robertson Smith prepare his manuscript for the press? He had time to revise the first series, and that thoroughly, for here the revision is in this enlarged and handsome volume. Why did he not rather spend himself upon the other lectures which he had delivered but had not published? No doubt the answer is that that was not Robertson Smith's way. He did not care to publish, he only cared to publish well. If what he had done could be made better, he would make it better, and do more *after* that, if he was able.

The new edition has twenty more pages than the old. But the additional twenty are not to be discovered in a moment. They are not in the Notes at the end. Indeed the Notes are one fewer, though the lost Note will be found in the Text. They are in the Text itself. And they are worked through it steadily, thoroughly, conscientiously. Professor Robertson Smith has not altered his attitude; but again and again he has adjusted himself in details, and altered his expression. And this is just the kind of work which we need expressed as clearly and as characteristically as possible. For it is not only that we do not know these things ourselves, it is also because we wish to know them as they appeared to Robertson Smith.

A SHORT HISTORY OF SYRIAC LITERATURE. BY THE LATE WILLIAM WRIGHT, LL.D. (*A. & C. Black*. Crown 8vo, pp. 296.) Professor Wright's article in the *Encyclopædia Britannica* on 'Syriac Literature' has been regarded by those who knew as one of the soundest pieces of scholarship in the whole work. That article is now reprinted in the volume before us, together with such additions as bring its information up to date. And surely it is well, even though its appeal must be limited, that those who will profit by it should find it both accessible and complete. The editing has been done by the careful, reverential hands of Mr. Norman MacLean. He tells us that the additions, which are enclosed in brackets, are due to M. Duval, Dr. Nestle, the author himself, and, above all, the late Professor Robertson Smith.

THE OLD TESTAMENT IN GREEK ACCORDING TO THE SEPTUAGINT. EDITED BY HENRY BARCLAY SWETE, D.D. (Cambridge: *At the University Press*. Crown 8vo, vol. iii. pp. xx, 880). Professor Swete has now finished the first part of his undertaking on the Septuagint. This is the concluding volume of the Cambridge Manual Edition. The *magnum opus* still lies ahead, too far almost to be spoken of yet. At present and for many a day this is the edition of the Septuagint for use. Perhaps it will always be the edition for ordinary working use. For even after all that has been done in the Greek New Testament since Tischendorf, we still employ his *Editio Octava* as our working basis. And so also we shall almost certainly have Swete next our hand henceforth always, even though Rendel Harris or Mrs. Lewis should add a *Greek* 'Sinaitic' to their Syriac, older than the oldest we possess.