

Margaret Dunlop Gibson, with translations; also a short and early form of the Recognitions of Clement in Arabic, transcribed and translated by Margaret Dunlop Gibson.

Part VI. *Select Narratives of Holy Women*, as written over the Syriac Gospels by John the Recluse of Beth-Mari Kaddisha in A.D. 778. No. I will contain the stories of

Eugenia, of Mary who was surnamed Marinus, of Onesima, and of Euphrosyne, transcribed and translated by Agnes Smith Lewis. These very entertaining tales throw a vivid light on the character of monastic life in its prime, and have apparently been the favourite reading of the Syriac monks who once formed part of the community on Mount Sinai.

## The Parables of Zechariah.

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### VIII.

#### THE PARABLE OF THE EPFAH.

(ZECH. V. 5-11.)

THE first five of Zechariah's parables advance steadily in a single direction, and they are all animated with the same spirit—the spirit of encouragement and hope. But at the sixth a check occurs; the spirit of the prophet darkens, and he speaks in a tone of severity and reproach. It is by the sense of prevailing sin that he is pulled up; and what he pauses to say is, that, till this scandal is removed out of the sacred community, the promises made in his previous parables cannot be fulfilled.

This is still the burden of the seventh parable: it is a denunciation of prevalent sin; only its application is more specific.

It is, however, a very obscure deliverance. So dark is it, that probably it is perused by the general reader without any comprehension whatever. Indeed, it has a curtness and grotesqueness by which the mind of any reader may at the first be irritated. Let us see, nevertheless, whether, by close study, we do not derive from it an instructive and even fascinating message.

I. First of all, let us try to get a clear idea of what the prophet saw, when anew the revealing spirit caused an image to appear on the field of prophetic vision.

He saw an ephah, that is, a vessel, in shape and size resembling our bushel.<sup>1</sup> The mouth of it was closed with a talent of lead, which served as

<sup>1</sup> In the second half of ver. 6, some, reading vav for yod, translate 'This is their wickedness.' If yod be retained, perhaps the best translation is, 'This is what their eyes are fixed upon.'

a lid, and concealed what the ephah contained. The hidden thing was, however, to be disclosed to the prophet. And, when the lid was lifted, behold, sitting in the ephah, there was a woman! Here was the secret, at the sight of which his soul blushed and was dismayed. But the scandal was not to be long tolerated; for there appeared on the scene two women to carry it away. They had wings like those of a stork, and, as they flew, the wind swelled their pinions and bore them forward. So the lid was crushed down again on the top of the woman; and the two, lifting up the ephah, with what it contained, bore it away to the land of Shinar; and there they fixed it, and left it in its own place.

Such are the details; but as yet there is very little light in the representation. All we see is, that the vision typifies some evil thing which was to be conveyed out of the midst of the community.

Light begins, however, to appear when we remark that the ephah is, in Hebrew, the principal measure of capacity—the standard for the transactions of the market-place. The talent, with which the mouth of the ephah is closed, is, in like manner, the typical weight—the standard, for example, used in weighing out the precious metals, when payments are made. The ephah and the talent, then, are the implements of the merchant, and stand for the transactions of merchandise. The talent served as a lid for the ephah; but, when it was lifted, a woman was discovered, who had been sitting there hidden. And when the prophet asked the woman's name, he was told that it was Wickedness. Evidently the meaning

is, that in the very heart of the merchandise of the community wickedness was concealed.

But it remains to be determined of what sort the wickedness was. This is indicated by the woman, no doubt conceived of by the prophet as young and alluring. The figure may mean the witchery of gain. While trade and commerce are intended to serve noble ends and may be carried on in an unselfish and God-fearing spirit, they are able to cast such a glamour over those who pursue them that the absorption becomes excessive; money becomes an object of unbridled desire; and the spiritual and eternal ends of life are forgotten. From this it is but a step to the dishonesty by which the fraudulent merchant seeks to advance his own interests, while the rights of others and the love of man are trampled under foot. It is not said that the ephah was false or the talent light; but this may be implied in the presence of the woman, hidden between them, and smiling at the evil perpetrated through their means.

This figure appears to me, however, to signify something more. The woman, protected by the ephah and the talent, is a sign for sins against the seventh commandment, produced and yet hidden by those against the eighth. From other portions of the literature of the Return we learn that sins of this description were among the principal difficulties with which the reformers of the period had to contend; and here Zechariah stigmatises the beginnings of the unchaste development.

The combination of the passion for gain and of the devices of dishonesty with this form of self-indulgence is no strange thing. From the days of Sodom and Gomorrah downwards, the 'pride, fulness of bread and abundance of idleness'<sup>1</sup> that go with unconsecrated riches have everywhere been associated with moral corruption. In our own day the same thing can be seen in every class. In districts where large wages can be earned by the young a too common result of premature independence and of the possession of money without wisdom to use it is an alarming relaxation of parental discipline, on which there soon ensues every kind of excess. In the great centres of business, where there is scope for speculation, those who earn money by questionable means often earn it to spend it on their lusts. In a society where the *nouveaux riches* predominate every kind of extravagance finds its market, and,

the more risky it is, the warmer is the welcome with which it is received. As the woman was hidden between the ephah and the talent, so the possession of money supplies the means of hiding away the orgies of sensuality behind the forms of respectability. But, when a sudden and widespread crash comes in commercial undertakings, it is far oftener due than is suspected to the waste which has been going on through secret indulgence.

One more trait is added to this picture by the statement that the ephah, with its contents, was carried to the land of Shinar and set there on its own base, or, as it is given in the Revised Version, in its own place. Shinar is an ancient name for the region in which Babylon stood; and it is used here in place of Babylon; indeed, the Septuagint rendering of the text is 'the land of Babylon.' When, then, the ephah is said to have been set there 'in its own place,' we learn whence the corruption had been derived which the prophet deplored. There can be no doubt that the commercial instincts of the Jews, for which they have been so noted in modern times, received an immense impulse during their stay in Babylon; and in the first heat of its new ambitions the nation might easily fall into worldliness, or even dishonesty. The moral character of all the civilisations of the ancient world was such, that purer and simpler peoples, coming into contact with them, might too easily carry away the taint of sensuality; and it is not surprising that some of the Jews carried it from Babylon. Nor is it anything but what might have been expected that the wealthy were those who chiefly caught the infection; so that the evil which presented itself, in this strange vision, to the sorrowing view of the prophet was a combination of an excessive or dishonest pursuit of money with moral laxity.

In our own day, when the intercourse between the countries of the world is so open and there are so many circumstances by which people are taken abroad, it is not unnecessary to remember what peril may lie in contact with the morals of a strange city or a foreign land. A business visit to Paris or Chicago may lead a man into the very jaws of temptation, and there are said to be those, even in the business world, who do not scruple to make use of the flatteries of temptation as bribes to secure customers. One would wish to think well of the example and the influence of one's own country; but, while it has been vouchsafed to

<sup>1</sup> Description of the sin of Sodom, Ezek. xvi. 19.

England to be the pioneer of civilisation and the missionary of Christianity in every quarter of the globe, it is sad to think how closely the European name is associated in the uncivilised and semi-civilised lands with certain forms of vice. If the ephah were always carried back to its own place, it is to be feared it would land sometimes at our own doors.

II. One of the most interesting features of this vision has yet to be considered—the mode in which the ephah was carried away out of the Holy Land, to be deposited in the unholy land, to which it belonged.

Two women came upon the scene and undertook the task of removing the ephah, covered with the leaden lid and containing the woman. No description is given of their appearance, though we are no doubt to conceive them as animated with a zeal for their task which flushed their faces with the glow of enthusiasm. But in one respect they were very peculiar: they were furnished with wings. These are said to have been like the wings of a stork. This may have reference to their colour, which would thus be designated as white, the reference no doubt being to the white variety of this bird; and white is the symbol of purity.<sup>1</sup> But the size and strength of the stork's wings may also have been in view. The stork was a bird of passage, and required superior muscular energy for its lengthy flights. So the winged women required sustained strength to carry them as far as Shinar with their heavy load. But another striking detail is here added: 'the wind was in their wings'; as they flew, a peculiar current of air bore them up and helped them forward.

What is the meaning of this portion of the vision? Obviously it is, that the form of sin to which the prophet is pointing can be removed from a land only by the zeal and the effort of woman. And this is a strong confirmation of the view we have taken of the kind of sin which the prophet was denouncing. Woman is the victim of sensuality; she is the puppet of the godless rich; she is the temptress through whom the corruption of a country or of an age is carried on; she leads the way down the road to ruin, and perishes along with those whom she has deceived. But, while it is by woman, deceived and deceiver, that men and nations are destroyed, it is by

woman, in her purity and zeal, that they are redeemed. If woman has her wings—if the angel in her is developed—and if the wind of God is in her wings—that is, if she is upborne and carried forward by the Holy Spirit—none can equal her in bearing the curse out of a land, and so preparing the way for the divine blessing.

It is possible that the primary reference may be to something very primitive and realistic. Imagine in some primitive hamlet, where everyone's affairs are known to everyone, a woman being discovered in some glaring and outrageous sin against the honour of her sex, and the womanhood of the place gathering by a common impulse and insisting that she be packed forth, bag and baggage, never again on pain of death to show face within the locality. Such may have been the scene from the tradition of which the prophet drew this representation. But he was carried by the force of his inspired thought, not only to something more dignified, but far beyond the customs and experiences of his own time, to unfold a conception of woman's sphere and service with which the world has hardly yet come up.

That mankind has been undone by woman is a common enough Oriental thought; and, both inside and outside Holy Writ, it can be found repeated in a thousand forms and with every degree of emphasis. No doubt, also, it is sadly true. The converse thought, however, that man must also owe to woman his purification and elevation, and that it must be by her influence and energy that those peculiar forms of evil are removed from the world with which debased woman is specially associated—this is a much rarer idea. And, when Zechariah still further represents women as inspired with the Spirit of God and combining with one another for the public weal,—for the ephah is not carried away by the effort of one, but by the united strength of two,—he seems to have overleapt his own age and country, and to be speaking with the voice of the Western man and in reference to the problems of the modern world.

There are no problems at present more pressing in our own civilisation than those with which the prophet was exercised in this vision. The problems of unconsecrated and irresponsible wealth; of the tricks of trade and the dishonesties of the exchange; of the degradation of woman and the prevalence of the social evil; of the veiled prostitu-

<sup>1</sup> See Tristram in Smith's *Dictionary of the Bible*, *sub voce*.

tion of the marriage market and the fastness of fashionable life—these are the patent forms at the present hour of the very evils which afflicted the soul of the prophet as he saw them in the life and practice of his contemporaries. Society is at present distracted by a strange uneasiness. Large sections of the wealthier classes, given over to frivolity, are wearied with inherited and moderate forms of amusement, and plunge deeper and deeper into dissipations in which nothing sacred is respected. The female sex especially is loudly claiming emancipation, and the freedom too often demanded is not only from the conventionalities of man, but from the law of God and the very dictates of nature. The corrupt influence of France, which was so predominant two centuries ago, is beginning again to flow back into our literature; and the cheap press makes the garbage on which the cultured classes have already fed a corrupt taste accessible to the million.

Where, in these circumstances, are we to look? Who will carry the ephah forth, with its hidden secrets, that the land may be blessed? Many are looking where Zechariah looked—to the zeal and the strength of woman. She must be the purifier and renovator of society.

Sometimes, indeed, this may be asserted in unwise and extravagant terms. There is a way of claiming for woman superiority to man and of setting her up as his judge and mentor that is irritating and untrue. There is a fussy and noisy way of claiming the rights of woman which inevitably calls forth reprisals. Yet, without leaving her true place at all, woman may exercise an immeasurable influence; and, with the progress of time, women will undoubtedly learn more and more the advantages of combination.

At the present moment it would not be difficult to name reforms in securing which their aid is indispensable. There can surely be no reform lying more obviously to their hand than the rescue of

those of their sisters who have fallen victims to the self-indulgence of man and in their turn have become man's temptresses. This is a work which many ignore; but the evil is too real and widespread to be pushed aside, and the work is of such a kind that men cannot do it. Another reform incumbent on women is, by their combined efforts, so to change the tone of society that money will not be able to open its gateway without the passport of character, and that man, when he breaks the laws of chastity, shall have to suffer for his conduct as infallibly as woman. And a third reform, for which the aid of woman may be confidently invoked, is the discontinuance of those drinking habits of society with which the degradation of both man and woman is so intimately connected.

These are honourable tasks which lie before woman; and it would be easy to add to their number. Only let woman remember that, if she is to help to clear the world of those abuses which delay the appearance of the kingdom of God, she must, like the figures in this parable, be furnished with wings. What are these? One of them is sympathy, woman's native and matchless gift, without which she can do nothing; and the other is knowledge, without which she has existed too long, but without which she cannot rise above the earth or sustain the weight of the destiny with which she is to be entrusted.

Yet there is another thing still more indispensable: it is the wind in her wings; and this is nothing less than the breath and inspiration of the Spirit of God. Mere emancipation or, even along with it, philanthropic zeal can do little. Indeed, few objects are less lovely than the emancipated woman, testifying and bustling in the public cause. Her true glory is the spirit awakened by the touch of the Spirit of God; it is the loyalty of her heart to the Saviour; and her work for man only succeeds when it is done for Christ's sake.

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