

HENRY BURTON

EXPOSITOR'S BIBLE: THE
GOSPEL OF ST LUKE

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CHAPTER I.

THE GENESIS OF THE GOSPEL

The four walls and the twelve gates of the Seer looked in different directions, but together they guarded, and opened into, one City of God. So the four Gospels look in different directions; each has its own peculiar aspect and inscription; but together they lead towards, and unveil, one Christ, "which is, and which was, and which is to come, the Almighty." They are the successive quarterings of the one Light. We call them "four" Gospels, though in reality they form but one, just as the seven arches of colour weave one bow; and that there should be four, and not three or five, was the purpose and design of the Mind which is above all minds. There are "diversities of operations" even in making Testaments, New or Old; but it is one Spirit who is "over all, and in all;" and back of all diversity is a heavenly unity – a unity that is not broken, but rather beautified, by the variety of its component parts.

Turning to the third Gospel, its opening sentences strike a key-note unlike the tone of the other three. Matthew, the Levite Apostle, schooled in the receipt of custom – where parleying and preambing were not allowed – goes to his subject with sharp abruptness, beginning his story with a "genesis," "the book of the generation of Jesus Christ." Mark, too, and John, without staying for any prelude, proceed at once to their portrayals of the Divine Life, each starting with the same word "beginning" – though between the "beginning" of St. Mark and that of St. John there is room for an eternity. St. Luke, on the other hand, stays to give to his Gospel a somewhat lengthy preface, a kind of vestibule, where we become acquainted with the presence and personality of the verger, before passing within the temple proper.

It is true the Evangelist does not here inscribe his name; it is true that after inserting these lines of explanation, he loses sight of himself completely, with a "sublime repressing of himself" such as John did not know; but that he here throws the shadow of himself upon the page of Scripture, calling the attention of all people and ages to the "me also," shows clearly that the personal element cannot be eliminated from the question of inspiration. Light is the same in its nature; it moves only in straight lines; it is governed by fixed laws; but in its reflections it is infinitely varied, turning to purple, blue, or gold, according to the nature of the medium and reflecting substance. And what, indeed, is beauty, what the harmony of colours, but the visible music as the same light plays upon the diverse keys? Exactly the same law

rules in inspiration. As the Divine Love needed an incarnation, an enshrining in human flesh, that the Divine Word might be vocal, so the Divine Light needs its incarnation too. Indeed, we can scarcely conceive of any revelation of the Divine Mind but as coming through a human mind. It needs the human element to analyze and to throw it forward, just as the electric spark needs the dull carbon-point to make it visible. Heaven and earth are here, as elsewhere, "threads of the same loom," and if we take out one, even the earthly woof of the humanities, we leave only a tangle; and if it is true of works of art that "to know them we must know the man who produced them," it is equally important, if we would know the Scripture, that we have some knowledge of the scribe. And especially important is it here, for there are few books of Scripture on which the writer's own personality is more deeply impressed than on the Gospel of St. Luke. The "me also" is only legible in the third verse, but we may read it, between the lines, through the whole Gospel.

Concerning the life of St. Luke the facts are few. It has been thought by some that he was one of the "certain Greeks" who came to Jerusalem to worship; while others, again, suppose him to be the nameless one of the two Emmaus travellers. But both these suppositions are set aside by the fact that the Evangelist carefully separates himself from those who were "eye-witnesses," which he could not well have done had he taken part in those closing scenes of the Lord's life, or had he been honoured with that "infallible proof" of the Lord's resurrection. That he

was a Gentile is evident; his speech bewrayeth him; for he speaks with a Grecian accent, while Greek idioms are sprinkled over his pages. Indeed, St. Paul speaks of him as not being of the "circumcision" (Col. iv. 11, 14), and he himself, in Acts i. 19, speaks of the dwellers at Jerusalem, and the Aceldama of "their" proper tongue. Tradition, with unanimous voice, represents him as a native of Antioch, in Syria.

Responding to the Divine Voice that bids him "write," St. Luke brings to the task new and special qualifications. Familiar with the Old Testament Scriptures – at least in their Septuagint form, as his many quotations show – intimately acquainted with the Hebrew faith and ritual, he yet brings to his work a mind unwarped by its traditions. He knows nothing of that narrowness of spirit that Hebraism unconsciously engendered, with its insulation from the great outer world. His mount of vision was not Mount Zion, but a new Pisgah, lying outside the sacred borders, and showing him "all the kingdoms of the world," as the Divine thought of humanity took possession of him. And not only so, we must remember that his connection with Christianity has been mainly through St. Paul, who was the Apostle of the "uncircumcision." For months, if not for years, he has been his close companion, reading his innermost thoughts; and so long and so close together have they been, their two hearts have learned to beat in a perfect synchronism. Besides, we must not forget that the Gentile question – their *status* in the new kingdom, and the conditions demanded of them – had been the

burning question of the early Church, and that it was at this same Antioch it had reached its height. It was at Antioch the Apostle Peter had "dissembled," so soon forgetting the lessons of the Cæsarean Pentecost, holding himself aloof from the Gentile converts until Paul felt constrained to rebuke him publicly; and it was to Antioch came the decree of the Jerusalem Council, that Magna Charta which recognized and enfranchised manhood, giving the privileges of the new kingdom to Gentiles, without imposing upon them the Judaic anachronism of circumcision. We can therefore well understand the bent of St. Luke's mind and the drift of his sympathies; and we may expect that his pen – though it is a reed shaken with the breath of a higher inspiration – will at the same time move in the direction of these sympathies.

And it is exactly this – its "gentility," if we may be allowed to give a new accent and a new meaning to an old word – that is a prominent feature of the third Gospel. Not, however, that St. Luke decries Judaism, or that he denies the "advantage" the Jews have; he cannot do this without erasing Scripture and silencing history; but what he does is to lift up the Son of man in front of their tabernacle of witness. He does not level down Judaism; he levels up Christianity, letting humanity absorb nationality. And so the Gospel of St. Luke is the Gospel of the world, greeting "all nations, and kindreds, and peoples, and tongues" with its "peace on earth." St. Matthew traces the genealogy of Christ back to Abraham; St. Luke goes farther back, to the fountain-head, where all the divergent streams meet and mingle, as he

traces the descent to Adam, the Son of God. Matthew shows us the "wise men," lost in Jerusalem, and inquiring, "Where is He that is born King of the Jews?" But St. Luke gives, instead, the "good tidings" to "all people;" and then he repeats the angel song, which is the key-note of his Gospel, "Glory to God in the highest, . . . goodwill toward men." It is St. Luke only who records the first discourse at Nazareth, showing how in ancient times, even, the mercy of God flowed out towards a Gentile widow and a Gentile leper. St. Luke alone mentions the mission of the Seventy, whose very number was a prophecy of a world-wide Gospel, seventy being the recognized symbol of the Gentile world, as twelve stood for the Hebrew people. St. Luke alone gives us the parable of the Good Samaritan, showing that all the virtues did not reside in Israel, but that there was more of humanity, and so more of Divinity, in the compassionate Samaritan than in their priest and Levite. St. Luke alone records the call of Zacchæus, the Gentile publican, telling how Jesus cancelled their laws of heredity, passing him up among the sons of Abraham. St. Luke alone gives us the twin parables of the lost coin and the lost man, showing how Jesus had come to seek and to save that which was lost, which was humanity, here, and there, and everywhere. And so there breathes all through this Gospel a catholic spirit, more pronounced than in the rest, a spirit whose rhythm and deep meaning have been caught in the lines —

"There's a wideness in God's mercy,

Like the wideness of the sea."

The only other fact of the Evangelist's life we will here notice is that of his profession; and we notice this simply because it enters as a factor into his work, reappearing there frequently. He was a physician; and from this fact some have supposed that he was a freedman, since many of the Roman physicians were of that class. But this by no means follows. All physicians were not freedmen; while the language and style of St. Luke show him to be an educated man, one, too, who walked in the upper classes of society. Where he speaks natively, as here in the introduction, he uses a pure Greek, somewhat rounded and ornate, in which there is a total absence of those rusticisms common in St. Mark. That he followed his calling at Troas, where he first joined St. Paul, is probable; but that he practised it on board one of the large cornships of the Mediterranean is a pure conjecture, for which even his nautical language affords no presumption; for one cannot be at sea for a few weeks – especially with an observant eye and attentive ear, as St. Luke's were – without falling naturally into nautical language. One's speech soon tastes of salt.

The calling of a physician naturally develops certain powers of analysis and synthesis. It is the art of putting things together. From the seen or felt symptoms he traces out the unseen cause. Setting down the known quantities, by processes of comparison or of elimination he finds the unknown quantity, which is the disease, its nature and its seat. And so on the

pages of the third Gospel we frequently find the shadow of the physician. It appears even in his brief preface; for as he sits down with ample materials before him – on one side the first-hand testimony of "eye-witnesses," and on the other the many and somewhat garbled narratives of anonymous scribes – we see the physician-Evangelist exercising a judicious selection, and thus compounding or distilling his pure elixir. Then, too, a skilled and educated physician would find easy access into the higher circles of society, his very calling furnishing him with letters of introduction. And so, indeed, we find it. Our physician dedicates his Gospel, and also the "Acts," to, not the "most excellent," but the "most noble" Theophilus, giving to him the same title that he afterwards gave to Felix and to Festus. Perhaps its English equivalent would be "the honourable." At any rate it shows that this Theophilus was no mere myth, a locution for any "friend of God," but that he was a person of rank and influence, possibly a Roman governor. Then, too, St. Luke's mention of certain names omitted by the other Evangelists, such as Chuza and Manaen, would suggest that probably he had some personal acquaintance with the members of Herod's household. Be this as it may, we recognize the "physician" in St. Luke's habits of observation, his attention to detail, his fondness for grouping together resemblances and contrasts, his fuller reference to miracles of healing, and his psychological observations. We find in him a student of the humanities. Even in his portrayal of the Christ it is the human side of the Divine

nature that he emphasizes; while all through his Gospel, his thought of humanity, like a wide-reaching sky, overlooks and embraces all such earthly distinctions as position, sex, or race.

With a somewhat high-sounding word "Forasmuch," which here makes its solitary appearance in the pages of Scripture – a word, too, which, like its English equivalent, is a treble compound – the Evangelist calls our attention to his work, and states his reasons for undertaking it. It is impossible for us to fix either the date or the place where this Gospel was written, but probably it was some time between A.D. 58-60. Now, what was the position of the Church at that date, thirty-five years after the Crucifixion? The fiery tongues of Pentecost had flashed far and wide, and from their heliogram even distant nations had read the message of peace and love. Philip had witnessed the wonderful revival in "the (a) city of Samaria." Antioch, Cæsarea, Damascus, Lystra, Philippi, Athens, Rome – these names indicate, but do not attempt to measure, the wide and ever-widening circle of light. In nearly every town of any size there is the nucleus of a Church; while Apostles, Evangelists, and Christian merchants are proclaiming the new kingdom and the new laws everywhere. And since the visits of the Apostles would be necessarily brief, it would only be a natural and general wish that some permanent record should be made of their narratives and teaching. In other places, which lay beyond the line of Apostles' travel, the story would reach them, passed from mouth to mouth, with all the additions of

rumour, and exaggerations of Eastern loquacity. It is to these ephemeral Gospels the Evangelist now refers; and distinguishing, as he does, the "many" from the "eye-witnesses" and "ministers of the word," he shows that he does not refer to the Gospels of St. Matthew and St. Mark – which probably he has not seen – for one was an Apostle, and both were "eye-witnesses." There is no censure implied in these words, nor does the expression "taken in hand" in itself imply failure; but evidently, to St. Luke's mind, these manifold narratives were incomplete and unsatisfactory. They contain some of the truth, but not all that the world should know. Some are put together by unskilled hands, and some have more or less of fable blended with them. They need sifting, winnowing, that the chaff may be blown away, and the seed tares separated from the wheat. Such is the physician's reason for now assuming the rôle of an Evangelist. The "forasmuch," before being entered on the pages of his Scriptures, had struck upon the Evangelist's soul, setting it vibrating like a bell, and moving mind and hand alike in sympathy.

And so we see how, in ways simple and purely natural, Scripture grows. St. Luke was not conscious of any special influence resting upon him. He did not pose as an oracle or as the mouthpiece of an oracle, though he was all that, and vastly more. He does not even know that he is doing any great work; and who ever does? A generous, unselfish thought takes possession of him. He will sacrifice leisure and ease, that he may throw forward to others the light that has fallen upon his own heart

and life. He will be a truth-seeker, and a light-bearer for others. Here, then, we see how a human mind falls into gear with the Divine mind, and human thought gets into the rhythm and swing of the higher thought. Simply natural, purely human are all his processes of reasoning, comparing, and planning, and the whole Gospel is but the perfect bloom of this seed-thought. But whence came this thought? That is the question. Did it not grow out of these manifold narratives? and did not the narratives themselves grow out of the wonderful Life, the Life which was itself but a Divine Thought and Word incarnate? And so we cannot separate heaven from earth, we cannot eliminate the Divine from even our little lives; and though St. Luke did not recognize it as such – he was an ordinary man, doing an ordinary thing – yet we, standing a few centuries back, and seeing how the Church has hidden in her ark the omer of manna that he gathered, to be carried on and down till time itself shall be no more, we see another Apocalyptic vision, and we hear a Voice Divine that commands him "write." When St. Luke wrote, "It seemed good to me also," he doubtless wrote the pronoun small; for it was the "me" of his obscure, retiring self; but high above the human thought we see the Divine purpose, and as we watch, the smaller "me" grows into the ME, which is a shadow of the great I AM. And so while the "many" treatises, those which were purely human, have passed out of sight, buried deep in their unknown sepulchres, this Gospel has survived and become immortal – immortal because God was behind it, and God was in it.

So in the mind of St. Luke the thought ripens into a purpose. Since others "have taken in hand" to draw up a narrative concerning those matters which have been "fulfilled among us," he himself will do the same; for has he not a special fitness for the task, and peculiar advantages? He has long been intimately associated with those who from the very first were "eye-witnesses and ministers of the Word," the chosen companion of one Apostle, and doubtless, owing to his visit to Jerusalem and to his prolonged residence at Cæsarea, personally acquainted with the rest. His shall not be a Gospel of surmise or of rumour; it shall only contain the record of facts – facts which he himself has investigated, and for the truth of which he gives his guarantee. The clause "having traced the course of all things accurately from the first" – which is a more exact rendering than that of the Authorized Version, "having had perfect understanding of all things from the very first" – shows us the keen, searching eye of the physician. He looks into things. He distinguishes between the To seem and the To be, the actual and the apparent. He takes nothing for granted, but proves all things. He investigates his facts before he endorses them, sounding them, as it were, and reading not only their outer voice, which may be assumed, and so untrue, but with his stethoscope of patient research listening for the unconscious voices that speak within, and so finding out the reality. He himself is committed to nothing. He is not anxious to make up a story. Himself a searcher after truth, his one concern is to know, and then to tell, the truth, naturally, simply,

with no fictitious adornment or dressing up of his own. And having submitted the facts of the Divine Life to a close scrutiny, and satisfied himself of their absolute truth, and having thrown aside the many guesses and fables which somehow have woven themselves around the wonderful Name, he will write down, in historical order as far as may be, the story, so that his friend Theophilus may know the "certainty of the things" in which he has been "instructed," or orally catechized, as the word would mean.

Where, then, it may be asked, is there room for inspiration? If the genesis of the Gospel is so purely human, where is there room for the touch of the Divine? Why should the Gospel of St. Luke be canonized, incorporated into Holy Scripture, while the writings of others are thrown back into an Apocrypha, or still farther back into oblivion? The very questions will suggest an answer. That touch of the Divine which we call inspiration is not always an equal touch. Now it is a pressure from above that is overwhelming. The writer is carried out of himself, borne up into regions where Sight and Reason in their loftiest flights cannot come, as the prophet foretells events no human mind could foresee, much less describe. In the case of St. Luke there was no need for this abnormal pressure, or for these prophetic ecstasies. He was to record, for the most part, facts of recent occurrence, facts that had been witnessed, and could now be attested, by persons still living; and a fact is a fact, whether it is inspired or no. Inspiration may record a fact, while others

are omitted, showing that this fact has a certain value above others; but if it is true, inspiration itself cannot make it more true. Nevertheless, there is the touch of the Divine even here. What is the meaning of this new departure? for it is a new and a wide departure. Why does not Thomas write a Gospel? or Philip, or Paul? Why should the Evangelist-mantle be carried outside the bounds of the sacred land, to be thrown around a Gentile, who cannot speak the sacred tongue except with a foreign Shibboleth? Ah, we see here the movings of the Holy Ghost! selecting the separate agents for the separate tasks, and dividing to "every man severally as He will." And not only does the Holy Spirit summon him to the work, He qualifies him for it, furnishing him with materials, and guiding his mind as to what shall be omitted and what retained. It is the same Spirit, who moved "holy men of old" to speak and write the things of God, who now touches the mind and heart of the four Evangelists, enabling them to give the four versions of the one Story, in different language, and with sundry differences of detail, but with no contradiction of thought, each being, in a sense, the complement of the rest, the four quarters making one rounded and perfect whole.

Perhaps at first sight our subject may not seem to have any reference to our smaller lives; for who of us can be Evangelists or Apostles, in the highest meaning of the words? And yet it has, if we look into it, a very practical bearing upon our lives, even the commonplace, every-day life. Whence come our gifts? Who makes these gifts to differ? Who gives us the differing taste and

nature? for we are not consulted as to our nature any more than as to our nativities. The fact is, our "human" is touched by the Divine at every point. What are the chequered scenes of our lives but the black or the white squares to which the Unseen Hand moves us at will? Earth's problem is but Heaven's purpose. And are not we, too, writing scriptures? putting God's thoughts into words and deeds, so that men may read them and know them? Verily we are; and our writing is for eternity. In the volume of our book are no omissions or erasures. Listen, then, to the heavenly call. Be obedient to your heavenly vision. Leave mind and heart open to the play of the Divine Spirit. Keep self out of sight. Delight in God's will, and do it. So will you make your lowlier life another Testament, written ever with Gospels and Epistles, and closing at last with an Apocalypse.

CHAPTER II.

THE MUTE PRIEST

Luke i. 5-25, 57-80

After his personal prelude, our Evangelist goes on to give in detail the pre-Advent revelations, so connecting the thread of his narrative with the broken-off thread of the Old Testament. His language, however, suddenly changes its character and accent; and its frequent Hebraisms show plainly that he is no longer giving his own words, but that he is simply recording the narratives as they were told him, possibly by some member of the Holy Family.

"There was in the days of Herod, king of Judæa." Even the surface-reader of Scripture will observe how little is made in its pages of the time-element. There is a purposed vagueness in its chronology, which scarcely accords with our Western ideas of accuracy and precision. We observe times and seasons. We strike off the years with the clang of bells or the hush of solemn services. Each day with us is lifted up into prominence, having a personality and history all its own, and as we write its history, we keep it clear of all its to-morrows and its yesterdays. And so the day grows naturally into a date, and dates combine into

chronologies, where everything is sharp, exact. Not so, however, was it, or indeed is it, in the Eastern world. Time there, if we may speak temporally, was of little moment. To that slow-moving and slow-thinking world one day was a trifle, something atomic; it took a number of them to make an appreciable quantity. And so they divided their time, in ordinary speech, not minutely as we do, due into larger periods, measuring its distances by the shadows of their striking events. Why is it that we have four Gospels, and in fact a whole New Testament, without a date? for it cannot possibly be a chance omission. Is the time-element so subdued and set back, lest the "things temporal" should lead off our minds from the "things spiritual and eternal"? For what is time, after all, but a negative quantity? an empty space, in itself all silent and dead, until our thoughts and deeds strike against it and make it vocal? Nay, even in the heavenly life we see the same losing of the time-element, for we read, "There should be time no longer." Not that it will then disappear, swallowed up in that infinite duration we call eternity. That would make heaven a confusion; for to finite minds eternity itself must come in measured beats, striking, like the waves along the shore, in rhythmic intervals. But *our* time will be no longer. It must needs be transfigured, ceasing to be earthly, that it may become heavenly in its measurement and in its speech. And so in the Bible, which is a Divine-human book, written for the ages, God has purposely veiled the times, at any rate the "days" of earthly reckoning. Even the day of our Lord's birth,

and the day of His death, our chronologies cannot determine: we measure, we guess, but it is randomly, like the blinded men of Sodom, who wearied themselves to find the door. In Heaven's reckoning deeds are more than days. Time-beats by themselves are only broken silences, but put a soul among them, and you make songs, anthems, and all kinds of music. "In those days" may be a common Hebraism, but may it not be something more? may it not be an idiom of celestial speech, the heavenly way of referring to earthly things? At any rate we know this, that while Heaven is careful to give us the purpose, the promise, and the fulfilment, the Divine Spirit does not care to give us the exact moment when the promise became a realization. And that it is so shows that it is best it should be so. Silence sometimes may be better than speech.

But in saying all this we do not say that Heaven is unobservant of earthly times and seasons. They are a part of the Divine order, stamped on all lives, on all worlds. Our days and nights keep their alternate step; our seasons observe their processional order, singing in antiphonal responses; while our world, geared in with other worlds, strikes off our earthly years and days with an absolute precision. So, now, the time of the Advent has been Divinely chosen, for whole millenniums unalterably fixed; nor have the cries of Israel's impatient hopes been allowed to hurry forward the Divine purpose, so making it premature. But why should the Advent be so long delayed? In our off-handed way of thinking we might have supposed the Redeemer would have

come directly after the Fall; and as far as Heaven was concerned, there was no reason why the Incarnation and the Redemption should not be effected immediately. The Divine Son was even then prepared to lay aside His glories, and to become incarnate. He might have been born of the Virgin of Eden, as well as of the Virgin of Galilee; and even then He might have offered unto God that perfect obedience by which the "many are made righteous." Why, then, this strange delay, as the months lengthen into years, and the years into centuries? The Patriarchs come and go, and only see the promise "afar off." Then come centuries of oppression, as Canaan is completely eclipsed by the dark shadow of Egypt; then the Exodus, the wanderings, the conquest. The Judges administer a rough-handed justice; Kings play with their little crowns; Prophets rebuke and prophesy, telling of the "Wonderful" who shall be; but still the Messiah delays His coming. Why this strange postponement of the world's hopes, as if prophecy dealt in illusions only? We find the answer in St. Paul's Epistle to the Galatians (chap. iv. 4). The "fulness of the time" was not yet come. The time was maturing, but was not yet ripe. Heaven was long ago prepared for an Incarnation, but Earth was not; and had the Advent occurred at an earlier stage of the world's history, it would have been an anachronism the age would have misunderstood. There must be a leading up to God's gifts, or His blessings cease to be blessings. The world must be prepared for the Christ, or virtually He is no Christ, no Saviour to them. The Christ must come into the world's mind as a familiar

thought, He must come into the world's heart as a deep-felt need, before He can come as the Word Incarnate.

And when is this "fulness of the time"? "In the days of Herod, king of Judæa." Such is the phrase that now strikes the Divine hour, and leads in the dawn of a new dispensation. And what dark days were those to the Hebrew people, when on the throne of their David sat that Idumean shadow of the dread Cæsar! Their land swarms with Gentile hordes, and on the soil devoted to Jehovah rise stately, splendid temples, dedicated to strange gods. It is one irruption of Paganism, as if the Roman Pantheon had emptied itself upon the Holy Land. Nay, it seemed as if the Hebrew faith itself would become extinct, strangled by heathen fables, or at any rate that she would survive, only the ghost of her other self, walking like an apparition, with veiled face and sealed lips, amid the scenes of her former glories. "The days of Herod" were the Hebrew midnight, but they give us the Bright and Morning Star. And so upon this dial-plate of Scripture the great Herod, with all his royalties, is nothing more than the dark, empty shadow which marks a Divine hour, "the fulness of the time."

Israel's corporate life began with four centuries of silence and oppression, when Egypt gave them the doubled task, and Heaven grew strangely still, giving them neither voice nor vision. Is it but one of the chance repetitions of history that Israel's national life should end, too, with four hundred years of silence? for such is the coincidence, if, indeed, we may not call it something more. It

is, however, just such a coincidence as the Hebrew mind, quick to trace resemblances and to discern signs, would grasp firmly and eagerly. It would revive their long-deferred and dying hopes, overlaying the near future with its gold. Possibly it was this very coincidence that now transformed their hope into expectation, and set their hearts listening for the advent of the Messiah. Did not Moses come when the task was doubled? And was not the four hundred years' silence broken by the thunders of the Exodus, as the I AM, once again asserting Himself, "sent redemption to His people"? And so, counting back their silent years since Heaven's last voice came to them through their prophet Malachi, they caught in its very silences a sound of hope, the footfall of the forerunner, and the voice of the coming Lord. But where, and how, shall the long silence be broken? We must go for our answer – and here, again, we see a correspondence between the new Exodus and the old – to the tribe of Levi, and to the house of Amram and Jochebed.

Residing in one of the priestly cities of the hill-country of Judæa – though not in Hebron, as is commonly supposed, for it is most unlikely that a name so familiar and sacred in the Old Testament would here be omitted in the New – was "a certain priest named Zacharias." Himself a descendant of Aaron, his wife, too, was of the same lineage; and besides being "of the daughters of Aaron," she bore the name of their ancestral mother, "Elisabeth." Like Abraham and Sarah, they were both well advanced in years, and childless. But if they were not

allowed to have any lien upon posterity, throwing themselves forward into future generations, they made up the lack of earthly relationships by cultivating the heavenly. Forbidden, as they thought, to look forward down the lines of earthly hopes, they could and did look heavenward; for we read that they were both "righteous" – a word implying a Mosaic perfection – "walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless." We may not be able, perhaps, to give the precise distinction between "commandments" and "ordinances," for they were sometimes used interchangeably; but if, as the general use of the words allows us, we refer the "commandments" to the moral, and the "ordinances" to the ceremonial law, we see how wide is the ground they cover, embracing, as they do, the (then) "whole duty of man." Rarely, if ever, do the Scriptures speak in such eulogistic terms; and that they should here be applied to Zacharias and Elisabeth shows that they were advanced in saintliness, as well as in years. Possibly St. Luke had another object in view in giving us the portraits of these two pre-Advent Christians, completing in the next chapter the quarternion, by his mention of Simeon and Anna. It is somewhat strange, to say the least, that the Gentile Evangelist should be the one to give us this remarkable group – the four aged Templars, who, "when it was yet dark," rose to chant their matins and to anticipate the dawn. Whether the Evangelist intended it or not, his narrative salutes the Old, while it heralds the New dispensation, paying to that Old a high though unconscious tribute. It shows us that

Hebraism was not yet dead; for if on its central stem, within the limited area of its Temple courts, such a cluster of beautiful lives could be found, who will tell the harvest of its outlying branches? Judaism was not altogether a piece of mechanism, elaborate and exact, with a soulless, metallic click of rites and ceremonies. It was an organism, living and sentient. It had nerves and blood. Possessed of a heart itself, it touched the hearts of its children. It gave them aspirations and inspirations without number; and even its shadows were the interpreters, as they were the creations, of the heavenly light. And if now it is doomed to pass away, outdated and superseded, it is not because it is bad, worthless; for it was a Divine conception, the "good" thing, preparing for and proclaiming God's "better thing." Judaism was the "glorious angel, keeping the gates of light;" and now, behold, she swings back the gates, welcomes the Morning, and herself then disappears.

It is the autumn service for the course of Abia – which is the eighth of the twenty-four courses into which the priesthood was divided – and Zacharias proceeds to Jerusalem, to perform whatever part of the service the lot may assign to him. It is probably the evening of the Sabbath – the presence of the multitude would almost imply that – and this evening the lot gives to Zacharias the coveted distinction – which could only come once in a lifetime – of burning incense in the Holy Place. At a given signal, between the slaying and the offering of the lamb, Zacharias, barefooted and robed in white, passes up the steps,

accompanied by two assistants, one bearing a golden censer containing half a pound of the sweet-smelling incense, the other bearing a golden vessel of burning coals taken from the altar. Slowly and reverently they pass within the Holy Place, which none but Levites are permitted to enter; and having arranged the incense, and spread the live coals upon the altar, the assistants retire, leaving Zacharias alone – alone in the dim light of the seven-branched candlestick, alone beside that veil he may not uplift, and which hides from his sight the Holy of Holies, where God dwells "in the thick darkness." Such is the place, and such the supreme moment, when Heaven breaks the silence of four hundred years.

It is no concern of ours to explain the phenomenon that followed, or to tone down its supernatural elements. Given an Incarnation, and then the supernatural becomes not only probable, but necessary. Indeed, we could not well conceive of any new revelation without it; and instead of its being a weakness, a blemish on the page of Scripture, it is rather a proof of its heavenliness, a hall-mark that stamps its Divinity. Nor is there any need, believing as we do in the existence of intelligences other and higher than ourselves, that we apologize for the appearance of angels, here and elsewhere, in the story; such deference to Sadducean doubts is not required.

Suddenly, as Zacharias stands with uplifted hands, joining in the prayers offered by the silent "multitude" without, an angel appears. He stands "on the right side of the altar of incense,"

half-veiled by the fragrant smoke, which curling upwards, filled the place. No wonder that the lone priest is filled with "fear," and that he is "troubled" – a word implying an outward tremor, as if the very body shook with the unwonted agitation of the soul. The angel does not at first announce his name, but seeks rather to calm the heart of the priest, stilling its tumult with a "Fear not," as Jesus stilled the waters with His "Peace." Then he makes known his message, speaking in language most homely and most human: "Thy prayer is heard." Perhaps a more exact rendering would be, "Thy request was granted," for the substantive implies a specific prayer, while the verb indicates a "hearing" that becomes an "assenting." What the prayer was we may gather from the angel's words; for the whole message, both in its promise and its prophecy, is but an amplification of its first clause. To the Jew, childlessness was the worst of all bereavements. It implied, at least they thought so, the Divine displeasure; while it effectually cut them off from any personal share in those cherished Messianic hopes. To the Hebrew heart the message, "Unto you a son is born," was the music of a lower Gospel. It marked an epoch in their life-history; it brought the fulfilment of their desires, and a wealth of added dignities. And Zacharias had prayed, earnestly and long, that a son might be born to them; but the bright hope, with the years, had grown distant and dim, until at last it had dropped down beyond the horizon of their thoughts, and become an impossibility. But those prayers were heard, yea, and granted, too, in the Divine purpose;

and if the answer has been delayed, it was that it might come freighted with a larger blessing.

But in saying that this was the specific prayer of Zacharias we do not wish to disparage his motives, confining his thoughts and aspirations within a circle so narrow and selfish. This lesser hope of offspring, like a satellite, revolved around the larger hope of a Messiah, and indeed grew out of it. It drew all its brightness and all its beauty from that larger hope, the hope that lighted up the dark Hebrew sky with the auroras of a new and fadeless dawn. When mariners "take the sun," as they call it, reading from its disc their longitudes, they bring it down to their horizon-level. They get the higher in the lower vision, and the real direction of their looks is not the apparent direction. And if Zacharias' thoughts and prayers seem to have an earthward drift, his soul looks higher than his speech; and if he looks along the horizon-level of earthly hopes, it is that he may read the heavenly promise. It is not a son that he is looking for, but *the* Son, the "Seed" in whom "all the families of the earth shall be blessed." And so, when the silent tongue regains its powers of speech, it gives its first and highest doxologies for that other Child, who is Himself the promised "redemption" and a "horn of salvation;" his own child he sets back, far back in the shadow (or rather the light) of Him whom he calls the "Lord." It is the near realization of both these hopes that the angel now announces.

A son shall be born to them, even in their advanced years, and they shall call his name "John," which means "The Lord is

gracious." "Many will rejoice with them at his birth," for that birth will be the awakening of new hopes, the first hour of a new day. "Great in the sight of the Lord," he must be a Nazarite, abstaining wholly from "wine and strong drink" – the two Greek words including all intoxicants, however made. "Filled with the Holy Ghost from his mother's womb" – that original bias or propensity to evil, if not obliterated, yet more than neutralized – he shall be the Elijah (in spirit and in power) of Malachi's prophecy, turning many of Israel's children "to the Lord their God." "Going before Him" – and the antecedent of "Him" must be "the Lord their God" of the preceding verse, so early is the purple of Divinity thrown around the Christ – he "shall turn the hearts of fathers to their children," restoring peace and order to domestic life, and the "disobedient" he shall incline "to walk in the wisdom of the just" (R.V.), bringing back the feet that have erred and slipped to "the paths of uprightness," which are the "ways of wisdom." In short, he shall be the herald, making ready a people prepared for the Lord, running before the royal chariot, proclaiming the coming One, and preparing His way, then leaving his own little footprints to disappear, thrown up in the chariot-dust of Him who was greater and mightier than he.

We can easily understand, even if we may not apologize for, the incredulity of Zacharias. There are crises in our life when, under profound emotion, Reason herself seems bewildered, and Faith loses her steadiness of vision. The storm of feeling throws the reflective powers into confusion, and thought becomes

blurred and indistinct, and speech incoherent and wild. And such a crisis was it now, but intensified to the mind of Zacharias by all these additions of the supernatural. The vision, with its accessories of place and time, the message, so startling, even though so welcome, must necessarily produce a strange perturbation of soul; and what surprise need there be that when the priest does speak it is in the lisping accents of unbelief? Could it well have been otherwise? Peter "wist not that it was true which was done by the angel, but thought he saw a vision;" and though Zacharias has none of these doubts of unreality – it is to him no dream of the moment's ecstasy – still he is not yet aware of the rank and dignity of his angel-visitant, while he is perplexed at the message, which so directly contravenes both reason and experience. He does not doubt the Divine power, let it be observed, but he does seek for a sign that the angel speaks with Divine authority. "Whereby shall I know this?" he asks, reminding us by his question of Jacob's "Tell me thy name." The angel replies, in substance, "You ask whereby you may know this; that is, you wish to know by whose authority I declare this message to you. Well, I am Gabriel, that stand in the presence of God; and I was sent to speak unto you, and to bring you these good tidings. And since you ask for a sign, an endorsement of my message, you shall have one. I put the seal of silence upon your lips, and you shall not be able to speak until the day when these things shall come to pass, because you believed not my words." Then the vision ends; Gabriel returns to the songs and anthems

of the skies, leaving Zacharias to carry, in awful stillness of soul, this new "secret of the Lord."

This infliction of dumbness upon Zacharias has generally been regarded as a rebuke and punishment for his unbelief; but if we refer to the parallel cases of Abraham and of Gideon, such is not Heaven's wonted answer to the request for a sign. We must understand it rather as the proof Zacharias sought, something at once supernatural and significant, that should help his stumbling faith. Such a sign, and a most effective one, it was. Unlike Gideon's dew, that would soon evaporate, leaving nothing but a memory, this was ever present, ever felt, at least until faith was exchanged for sight. Nor was it dumbness simply, for the word (ver. 22) rendered "speechless" implies inability to hear as well as inability to speak; and this, coupled with the fact mentioned in ver. 62, that "they made signs to him" – which they would scarcely have done could he have heard their voices – compels us to suppose that Zacharias had suddenly become deaf as well as dumb. Heaven put the seal of silence upon his lips and ears, that so its own voice might be more clear and loud; and so the profound silences of Zacharias' soul were but the blank spaces on which Heaven's sweet music was written.

How long the interview with the angel lasted we cannot tell. It must, however, have been brief; for at a given signal, the stroke of the Magrephah, the attendant priest would re-enter the Holy Place, to light the two lamps that had been left unlighted. And here we must look for the "tarrying" that so perplexed

the multitude, who were waiting outside, in silence, for the benediction of the incensing priest. Re-entering the Holy Place, the attendant finds Zacharias smitten as by a sudden paralysis – speechless, deaf, and overcome by emotion. What wonder that the strange excitement makes them oblivious of time, and, for the moment, all-forgetful of their Temple duties! The priests are in their places, grouped together on the steps leading up to the Holy Place; the sacrificing priest has ascended the great brazen altar; ready to cast the pieces of the slain lamb upon the sacred fire; the Levites stand ready with their trumpets and their psalms – all waiting for the priests who linger so long in the Holy Place. At length they appear, taking up their position on the top of the steps, above the rows of priests, and above the silent multitude. But Zacharias cannot pronounce the usual benediction to-day. The "Jehovah bless thee and keep thee" is unsaid; the priest can only "beckon" to them, perhaps laying his finger on the silent lips, and then pointing to the silent heavens – to them indeed silent, but to himself all vocal now.

And so the mute priest, after the days of his ministration are completed, returns to his home in the hill-country, to wait the fulfilment of the promises, and out of his deep silences to weave a song that should be immortal; for the *Benedictus*, whose music girdles the world to-day, before it struck upon the world's ear and heart, had, through those quiet months, filled the hushed temple of his soul, lifting up the priest and the prophet among the poets, and passing down the name of Zacharias as one of the first sweet

singers of the new Israel.

And so the Old meets, and merges into the New; and at the marriage it is the speaking hands of the mute priest that join together the two Dispensations, as each gives itself to the other, never more to be put asunder, but to be "no longer twain, but one," one Purpose, one Plan, one Divine Thought, one Divine Word.

CHAPTER III.

THE GOSPEL PSALMS

Unlike modern church builders, St. Luke sets his chancel by the porch. No sooner have we passed through the vestibule of his Gospel than we find ourselves within a circle of harmonies. On the one side are Zacharias and Simeon, the one chanting his *Benedictus*, and the other his *Nunc Dimittis*. Facing them, as if in antiphon, are Elisabeth and Mary, the one singing her *Beatitude*, and the other her *Magnificat*; while overhead, in the frescoed and star-lighted sky, are vast multitudes of the heavenly host enriching the Advent music with their *Glorias*. What means this grand irruption of song? and why is St. Luke, the Gentile Evangelist, the only one who repeats to us these Hebrew psalms? At first it would seem as if their natural place would be as a prelude to St. Matthew's Gospel, which is the Gospel of the Hebrews. But strangely enough, St. Matthew passes them by in silence, just as he omits the two angelic visions. St. Matthew is evidently intent on one thing. Beginning a New Testament, as he is, he seems especially anxious that there shall be no rent or even seam between the Old and the New; and so, in his first pages, after giving us the genealogy, running the line of descent up to Abraham, he laces up the threads of his narrative with the broken-off threads of the old prophecies, so that the written

Word may be a vestment of the Incarnate Word, which shall be "without seam, woven from the top throughout." And so really the Advent hymns would not have suited St. Matthew's purpose. Their ring would not have been in accord with the tone of his story; and had we found them in his first chapters, we should instinctively have felt that they were out of place, as if we saw a rose blossoming on a widespread oak.

St. Luke, however, is portraying the Son of man. Coming to redeem humanity, he shows how He was first born into that humanity, making His advent in a purely human fashion. And so the two conceptions form a fit beginning for his Gospel; while over the Divine Birth and Childhood he lingers reverently and long, paying it however, only the homage Heaven had paid it before. Then, too, was there not a touch of poetry about our Evangelist? Tradition has been almost unanimous in saying that he was a painter; and certainly in the grouping of his figures, and his careful play upon the lights and shadows, we can discover traces of his artistic skill, in word-painting at any rate. His was evidently a soul attuned to harmonies, quick to discern any accordant or discordant strains. Nor must we forget that St. Luke's mind is open to certain occult influences, whose presence we may indeed detect, but whose power we are not able to gauge. As we have already seen, it was the manifold narratives of anonymous writers that first moved him to take up the pen of the historian; and to those narratives we doubtless owe something of the peculiar cast and colouring of St. Luke's story. It is with

the Nativity that tradition would be most likely to take liberties. The facts of the Advent, strange enough in themselves, would at the hands of rumour undergo a process of developing, like the magnified and somewhat grotesque shadows of himself the traveller casts on Alpine mists. It was doubtless owing to these enlargements and distortions of tradition that St. Luke was led to speak of the Advent so fully, going into the minutiae of detail, and inserting, as is probable, from the Hebrew tone of these first two chapters, the account as given orally, or written, by some members of the Holy Family.

It must be admitted that to some inquiring and honest minds these Advent psalms have been a difficulty, an enigma, if not a stumbling-block. As the bells that summon to worship half-deafen the ear of the worshipper on a too near approach, or they become merely a confused and unmeaning noise if he climbs up into the belfry and watches the swing of their brazen lips, so this burst of music in our third Gospel has been too loud for certain sensitive ears. It has shaken somewhat the foundations of their faith. They think it gives an unreality, a certain mythical flavour, to the story, that these four pious people, who have always led a quiet, prosaic kind of life, should now suddenly break out into impromptu songs, and when these are ended lapse again into complete silence, like the century plant, which throws out a solitary blossom in the course of a hundred years. And so they come to regard these Hebrew psalms as an interpolation, an afterthought, thrown into the story for effect. But let us not forget

that we are dealing now with Eastern mind, which is naturally vivacious, imaginative, and highly poetical. Even our colder tongue, in this glacial period of nineteenth-century civilization, is full of poetry. The language of common every-day life – to those who have ears to hear – is full of tropes, metaphors, and parables. Take up the commonest words of daily speech, and put them to your ear, and they will sing like shells from the sea. There are whole poems in them – epics, idylls, of every sort; and let our colder speech get among the sweet influences of religion, and like the iceberg adrift in the Gulf Stream, it loses its rigidity and frigidity at once, melting in liquid, rhythmic measures, throwing itself away in hymns and *jubilates*. The fact is, the world is full of music. As the Sage of Chelsea said, "See deep enough, and you see musically, the heart of Nature being everywhere music if you can only reach it." And it is so. You can touch nothing but there are harmonies slumbering within it, or itself is a stray note of some grander song. Dead wood from the forest, dead ore from the mine, dead tusks of the beast – these are the "base things" that strike our music; and only put a mind within them, and a living soul with a living touch before them, and you have songs and anthems without number.

But to Eastern minds poetry was a sort of native language. Its inspiration was in the air. Their ordinary speech was ornate and efflorescent, throwing itself out in simile and hyperbole. It only needed some small excitement, and they fell naturally into the couplet form of utterance. Even to-day the children swing

under the mulberry-trees to songs and choruses; hucksters extol their wares in measured verse; and the Bethany fruit-girl sings in the market, "O lady, take of our fruit, without money and without price: it is yours; take all that you will"! And so it need not surprise us, much less trouble us, that Simeon and Elisabeth, Zacharias and Mary, should each speak in measured cadences. Their speech blossomed with flowers of rhetoric, just as naturally as their hills were ablaze with daisies and anemones. Besides, they were now under the direct inspiration of the Holy Spirit. We read, "Elisabeth was filled with the Holy Ghost;" and again, Zacharias was "filled with the Holy Ghost;" Simeon "came in the Spirit into the Temple;" while Mary now seemed to live in one conscious, constant inspiration. It is said that "a poet is born, not made;" and if he be not thus "free-born" no "great sum," either of gold or toil, will ever pass him up within the favoured circle. And the same is true of the poet's creations. Sacred hymns are not the product of the unaided intellect. They do not come at the bidding of any human will. They are inspirations. There is the overshadowing of the Holy Spirit in their conception. The human mind, heart, and lips are but the instrument, a kind of Æolian lyre, played upon by the Higher Breath, which comes and goes – how, the singer himself can never tell; for

"In the song
The singer has been lost."

It was when "filled with the Spirit" that Bezaleel put into his gold and silver the thoughts of God; it was when the Spirit of God came upon him that Balaam took up his parable, putting into stately numbers Israel's forward march and endless victories. And so the sacred psalm is the highest type of inspiration; it is a voice from no earthly Parnassus, but from the Mount of God itself – the nearest approach to the celestial harmonies, the harmonies of that city whose very walls are poetry, and whose gates are praise.

And so, after all, it was but fitting and perfectly natural that the Gospel that Heaven had been so long time preparing should break upon the world amid the harmonies of music. Instead of apologizing for its presence, as if it were but an interlude improvised for the occasion, we should have noted and mourned its absence, as when one mourns for "the sound of a voice that is still." When the ark of God was brought up from Baale Judah it was encircled with one wide wreath of music, a travelling orchestra of harps and psalteries, castanets and cymbals; and as now that Ark of all the promises is borne across from the Old to the New Dispensation, as the promise becomes a fulfilment, and the hope a realization, shall there not be the voice of song and gladness? Our sense of the fitness of things expects it; Heaven's law of the harmonies demands it; and had there not been this burst of praise and song, we should have listened for the very stones to cry out, rebuking the strange silence. But the voice was not silent. The singers were there, in their places; and they sang, not because they would, but because they must. A heavenly

pressure, a sweet constraint, was upon them. If Wealth lays down her tribute of gold, with frankincense and myrrh, Poetry weaves for the Holy Child her beautiful songs, and crowns Him with her fadeless amaranth; and so around the earthly cradle of the Lord, as around His heavenly throne, we have angelic songs, and "the voices of harpers, harping with their harps."

Turning now to the four Gospel-psalmists – not, however, to analyze, but to listen to their song – we meet first with Elisabeth. This aged daughter of Aaron, and wife of Zacharias, as we have seen, resided somewhere in the hill-country of Judæa, in their quiet, childless home. Righteous, blameless, and devout, religion to her was no mere form; it was her life. The Temple services, with which she was closely associated, were to her no cold clatter of dead rites; they were realities, full of life and full of music, as her heart had caught their deeper meaning. But the Temple, while it attracted her thoughts and hopes, did not enclose them; its songs and services were to her but so many needles, swinging round on their marble pivot, and pointing beyond to the Living God, the God who dwelt not in temples made with hands, but who, then as now, inhabits the purified temple of the heart. Long past the time when motherly hopes were possible, the fretting had subsided, and her spirit had become, first acquiescent, then quiescent. But these hopes had been miraculously rekindled, as she slowly read the vision of the Temple from the writing-table of her dumb husband. The shadow of her dial had gone backward; and instead of its being evening, with gathering shadows and

ever-lessening light, she found herself back in the glow of the morning, her whole life lifted to a higher level. She was to be the mother, if not of the Christ, yet of His forerunner. And so the Christ was near at hand, this was certain, and she had the secret prophecy and promise of His advent. And Elisabeth finds herself exalted – borne up, as it were, into Paradise, among visions and such swells of hosannas that she cannot utter them; they are too sweet and too deep for her shallow words. Was it not this, the storm of inward commotion, that drove her to hide herself for the five months? Heaven has come so near to her, such thoughts and visions fill her mind, that she cannot bear the intrusions and jars of earthly speech; and Elisabeth passes into a voluntary seclusion and silence, keeping strange company with the dumb and deaf Zacharias.

At length the silence is broken by the unexpected appearance of her Nazareth relative. Mary, fresh from her hasty journey, "entered into the house of Zacharias and saluted Elisabeth." It is a singular expression, and evidently denotes that the visit of the Virgin was altogether unlooked for. There is no going out to meet the expected guest, as was common in Eastern hospitalities; there was even no welcome by the gate; but like an apparition, Mary passes within, and salutes the surprised Elisabeth, who returns the salutation, not, however, in any of the prescribed forms, but in a benediction of measured verse: —

"Blessed art thou among women,

And blessed is the fruit of thy womb!
And whence is this to me,
That the mother of my Lord should come unto me?
For, behold, when the voice of thy salutation came into mine
ears
The babe leaped in my womb for joy.
And blessed is she that believed,
For there shall be a fulfilment of the things which have been
spoken to her from the Lord."

The whole canticle – and it is Hebrew poetry, as its parallelisms and strophes plainly show – is one apostrophe to the Virgin. Striking the key-note in its "Blessed art thou," the "thou" moves on, distinct and clear, amid all variations, to the end, reaching its climax in its central phrase, "The mother of my Lord." As one hails the morning star, not so much for its own light as for its promise of the greater light, the dayspring that is behind it, so Elisabeth salutes the morning star of the new dawn, at the same time paying homage to the Sun, whose near approach the star heralds. And why is Mary so blessed among women? Why should Elisabeth, forgetting the dignity of years, bow so deferentially before her youthful relative, crowning her with a song? Who has informed her of the later revelation at Nazareth? It is not necessary to suppose that Elisabeth, in her seclusion, had received any corroborative vision, or even that she had been supernaturally enlightened. Had she not the message the angel delivered to Zacharias? and was not that enough? Her son was

to be the Christ's forerunner, going, as the angel said, before the face of "the Lord." Three times had the angel designated the Coming One as "the Lord," and this was the word she had carried with her into her seclusion. What it meant she did not fully understand; but she knew this, that it was He of whom Moses and the prophets had written, the Shiloh, the Wonderful; and as she put together the detached Scriptures, adding, doubtless, some guesses of her own, the Christ grew as a conception of her mind and the desire of her heart into such colossal proportions that even her own offspring was dwarfed in comparison, and the thoughts of her own maternity became, in the rush of greater thoughts, only as the stray eddies of the stream. That such was the drift of her thoughts during the five quiet months is evident; for now, taught of the Holy Ghost that her kinswoman is to be the mother of the expected One, she greets the unborn Christ with her lesser *Benedictus*. Like the old painters, she puts her aureole of song around the mother's head, but it is easy to see that the mother's honours are but the far-off reflections from the Child. Is Mary blessed among women? it is not because of any wealth of native grace, but because of the fruit of her womb. Does Elisabeth throw herself right back in the shade, asking almost abjectly, "Whence is this to me?" it is because, like the centurion, she feels herself unworthy that even the unborn "Lord" should come under her roof. And so, while this song is really an ode to the Virgin, it is virtually Elisabeth's salute of the Christ who is to be, a salute in which her own offspring takes part, for she

speaks of his "leaping" in her womb, as if he were a participant in her joy, interpreting its movements as a sort of "Hail, Master!" The canticle thus becomes invested with a higher significance. Its words say much, but suggest more. It carries our thought out from the seen to the unseen, from the mother to the Holy Child, and Elisabeth's song thus becomes the earliest "Hosannah to the Son of David," the first prelude to the unceasing anthems that are to follow.

It will be observed that in the last line the song drops out of the first and the second personals into the third. It is no longer the frequent "thy," "thou," "my," but "she: " "Happy is she that believed." Why is this change? Why does she not end as she began – "Happy art thou who hast believed"? Simply because she is no longer speaking of Mary alone. She puts herself as well within this beatitude, and at the same time states a general law, how faith ripens into a harvest of blessedness. The last line thus becomes the "Amen" of the song. It reaches up among the eternal "Verities," and sets them ringing. It speaks of the Divine faithfulness, out of which and within which human faith grows as an acorn within its cup. And who could have better right to sing of the blessedness of faith, and to introduce this New Testament grace – not unknown in the Old Testament, but unnamed – as she who was herself such an exemplification of her theme? How calmly her own heart reposed on the Divine word! How before her far-seeing and foreseeing vision valleys were exalted, mountains and hills made low, that the way of the Lord might

appear! Elisabeth sees the unseen Christ, lays before Him the tribute of her song, the treasures of her affection and devotion; even before the Magi had saluted the Child-King, Elisabeth's heart had gone out to meet Him with her hosannas, and her lips had greeted Him "My Lord." Elisabeth is thus the first singer of the New Dispensation; and though her song is more a bud of poetry than the ripe, blossomed flower, enfolding rather than unfolding its hidden beauties, it pours out a fragrance sweeter than spikenard on the feet of the Coming One, while it throws around Him the purple of new royalties.

Turning now to the song of Mary, our *Magnificat*, we come to poetry of a higher order. Elisabeth's introit was evidently spoken under intense feeling; it was the music of the storm; for "she lifted up her voice with a loud cry." Mary's song, on the other hand, is calm, the hymn of the "quiet resting-place." There is no unnatural excitement now, no inward perturbation, half mental and half physical. Mary was perfectly self-possessed, as if the spell of some Divine "peace" were upon her soul; and as Elisabeth's "loud cry" ceased, Mary "said" – so it reads – her response. But if the voice was lower, the thought was higher, more majestic in its sweep. Elisabeth's song was on the lower heights. "The mother of my Lord," this was its starting-place, and the centre around which its circles were described; and though its wings beat now and again against the infinities, it does not attempt to explore them, but returns timidly to its nest. But Elisabeth's loftiest reach is Mary's starting-point; her song

begins where the song of Elisabeth ends. Striking her key-note in the first line, "The Lord," this is her one thought, the Alpha and Omega of her psalm. We call it the *Magnificat*; it is a *Te Deum*, full of suggested doxologies. Beginning with the personal, as she is almost compelled to do by the intense personality of Elizabeth's song, Mary hastes to gather up the eulogies bestowed upon herself, and to bear them forward to Him who merits all praise, as He is the Source of all blessing. Her soul "magnifies the Lord," not that she, by any weak words of hers, can add to His greatness, which is infinite, but even she may give the Lord a wider place within her thoughts and heart; and whoever is silent, her song shall make "the voice of His praise to be heard." Her spirit "hath rejoiced in God her Saviour," and why? Has He not looked down on her low estate, and done great things for her? "The bondmaid of the Lord," as she a second time calls herself, glorying in her bonds, such is her promotion and exaltation that all generations shall call her blessed. Then, with a beautiful effacement of self, which henceforth is not even to be a mote playing in the sunshine, she sings of Jehovah – His holiness, His might, His mercy, His faithfulness.

Mary's song, both in its tone and language, belongs to the Old Dispensation. Thoroughly Hebraic, and all inlaid with Old Testament quotations, it is the swan-song of Hebraism. There is not a single phrase, perhaps not a single word, that bears a distinctive Christian stamp; for the "Saviour" of the first strophe is the "Saviour" of the Old Testament, and not of the New, with

a national rather than an evangelical meaning. The heart of the singer is turned to the past rather than to the future. Indeed, with the solitary exception, how all generations shall call her blessed, there is no passing glimpse into the future. Instead of speaking of the Expected One, and blessing "the fruit of her womb," her song does not even mention Him. She tells how the Lord hath done great things for her, but what those "great things" are she does not say; she might, as far as her own song tells us, be simply a later Miriam, singing of some family or personal deliverance, a salvation which was one of a thousand. A true daughter of Israel, she dwells among her own people, and her very broadest vision sees in her offspring no world-wide blessing, only a Deliverer for Israel, His servant. Does she speak of mercy? it is not that wider mercy that like a sea laves every shore, bearing on its still bosom a redeemed humanity; it is the narrower mercy "toward Abraham and his seed for ever." Mary recognizes the unity of the Godhead, but she does not recognize the unity, the brotherhood of man. Her thought goes back to "our fathers," but there it halts; the shrunken sinew of Hebrew thought could not cross the prior centuries, to find the world's common father in Paradise. But in saying this we do not depreciate Mary's song. It is, and ever will be, the *Magnificat*, great in its theme, and great in its conception. Following the flight of Hannah's song, and making use of its wings at times, it soars far above, and sweeps far beyond its original. Not even David sings of Jehovah in more exalted strains. The holiness of God, the might supreme above all

powers, the faithfulness that cannot forget, and that never fails to fulfil, the Divine choice and exaltation of the lowly – these four chief chords of the Hebrew Psalter Mary strikes with a touch that is sweet as it is clear.

Mary sang of God; she did not sing of the Christ. Indeed, how could she? The Christ to be was part of her own life, part of herself; how could she sing His praise without an appearance of egotism and self-gratulation? There are times when silence is more eloquent than speech; and Mary's silence about the Christ was but the silence of the winged cherubim, as they bend over the ark, beholding and feeling a mystery they can neither know nor tell. It was the hush inspired by a near and glorious presence. And so the *Magnificat*, while it tells us nothing of the Christ, swings our thoughts around towards Him, sets us listening for His advent; and Mary's silence is but the setting for the Incarnate WORD.

The song of Zacharias follows that of Mary, not only in the order of time, but also in its sequence of thought. It forms a natural postlude to the *Magnificat*, while both are but different parts of one song, this earliest "Messiah." It is something remarkable that our first three Christian hymns should have their birth in the same nameless city of Judah, in the same house, and probably in the same chamber; for the room, which now is filled with the priest's relatives, and where Zacharias breaks the long silence with his prophetic *Benedictus*, is doubtless the same room where Elisabeth chanted her greeting, and Mary sang

her *Magnificat*. The song of Mary circled about the throne of Jehovah, nor could she leave that throne, even to tell the great things the Lord had done for her. Zacharias, coming down from his mount of vision and of silence, gives us a wider outlook into the Divine purpose. He sings of the "salvation" of the Lord; and salvation, as it is the key-note of the heavenly song, is the key-note of the *Benedictus*. Does he bless the Lord, the God of Israel? it is because He has "visited" (or looked upon) "His people, and wrought redemption for" them; it is because He has provided an abundant salvation, or a "horn of salvation," as he calls it. Has God remembered His covenant, "the oath He sware unto Abraham"? has He "shown mercy towards their fathers"? that mercy and faithfulness are seen in this wonderful salvation – a salvation "from their enemies," and "from the hand of all that hate" them. Is his child to be "the prophet of the Most High," going "before the face of the Lord," and making "ready His ways"? it is that he may "give knowledge of" this "salvation," in "the remission of sins." Then the psalm ends, falling back on its key-note; for who are they who "sit in darkness and the shadow of death," but a people lost? And who is the Day-spring who visits them from on high, who shines upon their darkness, turning it into day, and guiding their lost feet into the way of peace, but the Redeemer, the Saviour, whose name is "Wonderful"? And so the *Benedictus*, while retaining the form and the very language of the Old, breathes the spirit of the New Dispensation. It is a fragrant breeze, blowing off from the shores of a new, and now

near world, a world already seen and possessed by Zacharias in the anticipations of faith. The Saviour whose advent the inspired priest proclaims is no mere national deliverer, driving back those eagles of Rome, and rebuilding the throne of his father David. He might be all that – for even prophetic vision had not sweep of the whole horizon; it only saw the little segment of the circle that was Divinely illumined – but to Zacharias He was more, a great deal more. He was a Redeemer as well as Deliverer; and a "redemption" – for it was a Temple word – meant a price laid down, something given. The salvation of which Zacharias speaks is not simply a deliverance from our political enemies, and from the hand of all that hate us. It was a salvation higher, broader, deeper than that, a "salvation" that reached to the profound depths of the human soul, and that sounded its jubilee there, in the remission of sin and deliverance from sin. Sin was the enemy to be vanquished and destroyed, and the shadow of death was but the shadow of sin. And Zacharias sings of this great redemption that leads to salvation, while the salvation leads into the Divine peace, to "holiness and righteousness," and a service that is "without fear."

The ark of Israel was borne by four of the sons of Kohath; and here this ark of song and prophecy is borne of four sweet singers, the sexes dividing the honours equally. We have listened to the songs of three, and have seen how they follow each other in a regular, rhythmic succession, the thought moving forward and outward in ever-widening circles. Where is the fourth? and what

is the burden of his song? It is heard within the precincts of the Temple, as the parents bring the Child Jesus, to introduce Him to the visible sanctities of religion, and to consecrate Him to the Lord. It is the *Nunc Dimittis* of the aged Simeon. He too sings of "salvation," "Thy salvation" as he calls it. It is the "consolation of Israel" he has looked for so ardently and so long, and which the Holy Ghost had assured him he should behold before his promotion to the higher temple. But the vision of Simeon was wider than that of Zacharias, as that in turn was wider and clearer than the vision of Mary. Zacharias saw the spiritual nature of this near salvation, and he described it in words singularly deep and accurate; but its breadth he did not seem to realize. The theocracy was the atmosphere in which he lived and moved; and even his vision was theocratic, and so somewhat narrow. His *Benedictus* was for the "God of Israel," and the "redemption" he sang was "for His people." The "horn of salvation" is "for us;" and all through his psalm these first personal pronouns are frequent and emphatic, as if he would still insulate this favoured people, and give them a monopoly even of "redemption." The aged Simeon, however, stands on a higher Pisgah. His is the nearer and the clearer vision. Standing as he does in the Court of the Gentiles, and holding in his arms the Infant Christ, "the Lord's Christ," he sees in Him a Saviour for humanity, "the Lamb of God, who taketh away the sin of the world." Still, as ever, "the glory of God's people Israel," but likewise "a light for the unveiling of the Gentiles." Like the sentry who keeps watch through the

night till the sunrise, Simeon has been watching and longing for the Day-spring from on high, reading from the stars of promise the wearing of the night, and with the music of fond hopes "keeping his heart awake till dawn of morn." Now at length the consummation, which is the consolation, comes. Simeon sees in the Child Jesus the world's hope and Light, a salvation "prepared before the face of all people." And seeing this, he sees all he desires. Earth can give no brighter vision, no deeper joy, and all his request is —

"Now lettest Thou Thy servant depart, O Lord,
According to Thy word, in peace;
For mine eyes have seen Thy salvation."

And so the four psalms of the Gospels form in reality but one song, the notes rising higher and still higher, until they reach the very pinnacle of the new temple — God's purpose and plan of redemption; that temple whose altar is a cross, and whose Victim is "the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world;" that temple where courts and dividing-lines all disappear; where the Holiest of all lies open to a redeemed humanity, and Jews and Gentiles, bond and free, old and young, are alike "kings and priests unto God." And so the Gospel psalms throw back, as it were, in a thousand echoes, the *Glorias* of the Advent angels, as they sing —

"Glory to God in the highest,

And on earth peace."

And what is this but earth's prelude or rehearsal for the heavenly song, as all nations, and kindreds, and peoples, and tongues, falling down before the Lamb in the midst of the throne, sing, "Salvation unto our God, which sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb"?

CHAPTER IV.

THE VIRGIN MOTHER

The Beautiful Gate of the Jewish Temple opened into the "Court of the Women" – so named from the fact that they were not allowed any nearer approach towards the Holy Place. And as we open the gate of the third Gospel we enter the Court of the Women; for more than any other Evangelist, St. Luke records their loving and varied ministries. Perhaps this is owing to his profession, which naturally would bring him into more frequent contact with feminine life. Or perhaps it is a little Philippian colour thrown into his Gospel; for we must not forget that St. Luke had been left by the Apostle Paul at Philippi, to superintend the Church that had been cradled in the prayers of the "river-side" women. It may be a tinge of Lydia's purple; or to speak more broadly and more literally, it may be the subtle, unconscious influences of that Philippian circle that have given a certain femininity to our third Gospel. St. Luke alone gives us the psalms of the three women, Anna, Elisabeth, and Mary; he alone gives us the names of Susanna and Joanna, who ministered to Christ of their substance; he alone gives us that Galilean idyll, where the nameless "woman" bathes His feet with tears, and at the same time rains a hot rebuke on the cold civilities of the Pharisee, Simon; he alone tells of the widow of Zarephath, who

welcomed and saved a prophet men were seeking to slay; he alone tells us of the widow of Nain, of the woman bent with infirmity, and of the woman grieving over her lost piece of silver. And as St. Luke opens his Gospel with woman's tribute of song, so in his last chapter he paints for us that group of women, constant amid man's inconstancies, coming ere the break of day, to wrap around the body of the dead Christ the precious and fragrant offering of devotion. So, in this Paradise Restored, do Eve's daughters roll back the reproach of their mother. But ever first and foremost among the women of the Gospels we must place the Virgin Mother, whose character and position in the Gospel story we are now to consider.

We need not stay to discuss the question – perhaps we ought not to stay even to give it a passing notice – whether there might have been an Incarnation even had there been no sin. It is not an impossible, it is not an improbable supposition, that the Christ would have come into the world even had man kept his first estate of innocence and bliss. But then it would have been the "Christ" simply, and not Jesus Christ. He would have come into the world, not as its Redeemer, but as the Son and Heir, laying tribute on all its harvests; He would have come as the flower and crown of a perfected humanity, to show the possibilities of that humanity, its absolute perfections. But leaving the "might-have-beens," in whose tenuous spaces there is room for the nebulæ of fancies and of guesses without number, let us narrow our vision within the horizon of the real, the actual.

Given the necessity for an Incarnation, there are two modes in which that Incarnation may be brought about – by creation, or by birth. The first Adam came into the world by the creative act of God. Without the intervention of second causes, or any waiting for the slow lapse of time, God spake, and it was done. Will Scripture repeat itself here, in the new Genesis? and will the second Adam, coming into the world to repair the ruin wrought by the first, come as did the first? We can easily conceive such an advent to be possible; and if we regarded simply the analogies of the case, we might even suppose it to be probable. But how different a Christ it would have been! He might still have been bone of our bone, flesh of our flesh; He might have spoken the same truths, in the same speech and tone; but He must have lived apart from the world. It would not be our humanity that He wore; it would only be its shadow, its semblance, playing before our minds like an illusion. No, the Messiah must not be simply a second Adam; He must be the Son of man, and He cannot become Humanity's Son except by a human birth. Any other advent, even though it had satisfied the claims of reason, would have failed to satisfy those deeper voices of the heart. And so, on the first pages of Scripture, before Eden's gate is shut and locked by bolts of flame, Heaven signifies its intention and decision. The coming One, who shall bruise the serpent's head, shall be the woman's "Seed" – the Son of woman, that so He may become more truly the Son of man; while later a strange expression finds its way into the sacred prophecy, how "a Virgin shall conceive,

and bear a son." It is true these words primarily might have a local meaning and fulfilment – though what that narrower meaning was no one can tell with any approach to certainty; but looking at the singularity of the expression, and coupling it with the story of the Advent, we can but see in it a deeper meaning and a wider purpose. Evidently it was that the virgin-conception might strike upon the world's ear and become a familiar thought, and that it might throw backwards across the pages of the Old Testament the shadow of the Virgin Mother. We have already seen how the thought of a Messianic motherhood had dropped deep within the heart of the Hebrew people, awaking hopes, and prayers, and all sorts of beautiful dreams – dreams, alas! that vanished with the years, and hopes that blossomed but to fade. But now the hour is coming, that supreme hour for which the centuries have all been waiting. The forerunner is already announced, and in twelve short weeks he who loved to call himself a Voice will break the strange silence of that Judæan home. Whence will come his Lord, who shall be "greater than he"? Where shall we find the Mother-elect, for whom such honours have been reserved – honours such as no mortal has ever yet borne, and as none will ever bear again? St. Luke tells us, "Now in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God unto a city of Galilee, named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David; and the virgin's name was Mary" (R.V.). And so the Mother-designate takes her place in this firmament of Scripture, silently and serenely as a morning star, which indeed she is; for

she shines in a borrowed splendour, taking her glories all from Him around whom she revolves, from Him who was both her Son and her Sun.

It will be seen in the above verse how particular the Evangelist is in his topographical reference, putting a kind of emphasis upon the name which now appears for the first time upon the pages of Scripture. When we remember how Nazareth was honoured by the angel visit; how it was, not the chance, but the chosen home of the Christ for thirty years; how it watched and guarded the Divine Infancy, throwing into that life its powerful though unconscious influences, even as the dead soil throws itself forward and upward into each separate flower and farthest leaf; when we remember how it linked its own name with the Name of Jesus, becoming almost a part of it; how it wrote its name upon the cross, then handing it down to the ages as the name and watchword of a sect that should conquer the world, we must admit that Nazareth is by no means "the least among the cities" of Israel. And yet we search in vain through the Old Testament for the name of Nazareth. History, poetry, and prophecy alike pass it by in silence. And so the Hebrew mind, while rightly linking the expected One with Bethlehem, never associated the Christ with Nazareth. Indeed, its moralities had become so questionable and proverbial that while the whole of Galilee was too dry a ground to grow a prophet, Nazareth was thought incapable of producing "any good thing." Was, then, the Nazareth chapter of the Christ-life an afterthought of the Divine Mind, like the marginal reading of

an author's proof, put in to fill up a blank or to be a substitute for some erasure? Not so. It had been in the Divine Mind from the beginning; yea, it had been in the authorized text, though men had not read it plainly. It is St. Matthew who first calls our attention to it. Writing, as he does, mainly for Hebrew readers, he is constantly looping up his story with the Old Testament prophecies; and speaking of the return from Egypt, he says they "came and dwelt in a city called Nazareth: that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophets, that He should be called a Nazarene." We said just now that the name of Nazareth was not found in the Old Testament. But if we do not find the proper name, we find the word which is identical with the name. It is now regarded by competent authorities as proved that the Hebrew name for Nazareth was Netser. Taking now this word in our mind, and turning to Isaiah xi. 1, we read, "And there shall come forth a shoot out of the stock of Jesse, and a branch [Netser] out of his roots shall bear fruit: and the Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon Him." Here, then, evidently, is the prophetic voice to which St. Matthew refers; and one little word – the name of Nazareth – becomes the golden link binding in one the Prophecies and the Gospels.

Returning to our main subject, it is to this secluded, and somewhat despised city of Nazareth the angel Gabriel is now sent, to announce the approaching birth of Christ. St. Luke, in his nominative way of speaking, says he came "to a Virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of

David; and the Virgin's name was Mary." It is difficult for us to form an unbiassed estimate of the character before us, as our minds are feeling the inevitable recoil from Roman assumptions. We are confused with the childish prattle of their *Ave Marias*; we are amused at their dogmas of Immaculate Conceptions and Ever Virginities; we are surprised and shocked at their apotheosis of the Virgin, as they lift her to a throne practically higher than that of her Son, worshipped in devouter homage, supplicated with more earnest and more frequent prayers, and at the blasphemies of their Mariolatry, which make her supreme on earth and supreme in heaven. This undue exaltation of the Virgin Mother, which becomes an adoration pure and simple, sends our Protestant thought with a violent swing to the extreme of the other side, considerably over the line of the "golden mean." And so we find it hard to dissociate in our minds the Virgin Mother from these Marian assumptions and divinations; for which, however, she herself is in no way responsible, and against which she would be the first to protest. Seen only through these Romish haloes, and atmospheres highly incensed, her very name has been distorted, and her features, spoiled of all grace and sweet serenity, have ceased to be attractive. But this is not just. If Rome weights one scale with crowns, and sceptres, and piles of imperial purple, we need not load down the other with our prejudices, satires, and negations. Two wrongs will not make a right. It is neither on the crest of the wave, nor yet in the deep trough of the billows, that we shall find the mean sea-level,

from which we can measure all heights, running out our lines even among the stars. Can we not find that mean sea-level now, hushing alike the voices of adulation and of depreciation? Laying aside the traditions of antiquity and the legends of scribulous monks, laying aside, too, the coloured glasses of our prejudice, with which we have been wont to protect our eyes from the glare of Roman suns, may we not get a true portraiture of the Virgin Mother, in all the native naturalness of Scripture? We think we can.

She comes upon us silently and suddenly, emerging from an obscurity whose secrets we cannot read. No mention is made of her parents; tradition only has supplied us with their names – Joachim and Anna. But whether Joachim or not, it is certain that her father was of the tribe of Judah, and of the house of David. Having this fact to guide us, and also another fact, that Mary was closely related to Elisabeth – though not necessarily her cousin – who was of the tribe of Levi and a daughter of Aaron, then it becomes probable, at least, that the unnamed mother of the Virgin was of the tribe of Levi, and so the connecting link between the houses of Levi and Judah – a probability which receives an indirect but strong confirmation in the fact that Nazareth was intimately connected with Jerusalem and the Temple, one of the cities selected as a residence of the priests. May we not, then, suppose that this unnamed mother of the Virgin was a daughter of one of the priests then residing at Nazareth, and that Mary's relatives on the mother's side –

some of them – were also priests, going up at stated times to Jerusalem, to perform their "course" of Temple services? It is certainly a most natural supposition, and one, too, that will help to remove some subsequent difficulties in the story; as, for instance, the journey of Mary to Judæa. Some honest minds have stumbled at that long journey of a hundred miles, while others have grown pathetic in their descriptions of that lonely pilgrimage of the Galilean Virgin. But it is neither necessary nor likely that Mary should take the journey alone. Her connection with the priesthood, if our supposition be correct, would find her an escort, even among her own relatives, as least as far as Jerusalem; and since the priestly courses were half-yearly in their service, it would be just the time the "course of Abijah," in which Zacharias served, would be returning once again to their Judæan homes. It is only a supposition, it is true, but it is a supposition that is extremely natural and more than probable; and if we look through it, taking "Levi" and "Judah" as our binocular lenses, it carries a thread of light through otherwise dark places; while throwing our sight forward, it brings distant Nazareth in line with Jerusalem and the "hill-country of Judæa."

Betrothed to Joseph, who was of the royal line, and as some think, the legal heir to David's throne, Mary was probably not more than twenty years of age. Whether an orphan or not we cannot tell, though the silence of Scripture would almost lead us to suppose that she was. Papias, however, who was a disciple of St. John, states that she had two sisters – Mary the wife

of Cleophas, and Mary Salome the wife of Zebedee. If this be so – and there is no reason why we should discredit the statement – then Mary the Virgin Mother would probably be the eldest of the three sisters, the house-mother in the Nazareth home. Where it was that the angel appeared to her we cannot tell. Tradition, with one of its random guesses, has fixed the spot in the suburbs, beside the fountain. But there is something incongruous and absurd in the selection of such a place for an angelic appearance – the public resort and lounge, where the clatter of feminine gossip was about as constant as the flow and sparkle of its waters. Indeed, the very form of the participle disposes of that tradition, for we read, "He came in unto her," implying that it was within her holy place of home the angel found her. Nor is there any need to suppose, as some do, that it was in her quiet chamber of devotion, where she was observing the stated hours of prayer. Celestials do not draw that broad line of distinction between so-called secular and sacred duties. To them "work" is but another form of "worship," and all duties to them are sacred, even when they lie among life's temporal, and so-called secular things. Indeed, Heaven reserves its highest visions, not for those quiet moments of still devotion, but for the hours of busy toil, when mind and body are given to the "trivial rounds" and the "common tasks" of every-day life. Moses is at his shepherding when the bush calls him aside, with its tongues of fire; Gideon is threshing out his wheat when God's angel greets him and summons him to the higher task; and Zacharias is

performing the routine service of his priestly office when Gabriel salutes him with the first voice of a New Dispensation. And so all the analogies would lead us to suppose that the Virgin was quietly engaged in her domestic duties, offering the sacrifice of her daily task, as Zacharias offered his incense of stacte and onycha, when Gabriel addressed her, "Hail, thou that art highly favoured, the Lord is with thee" (R.V.). The Romanists, eager to accord Divine honours to the Virgin Mother as the dispenser of blessing and of grace, interpret the phrase, "Thou that art full of grace." It is, perhaps, not an inapt rendering of the word, and is certainly more euphonious than our marginal reading "much graced;" but when they make the "grace" an inherent, and not a derived grace, their doctrine slants off from all Scripture, and is opposed to all reason. That the word itself gives no countenance to such an enthronement of Mary, is evident, for St. Paul makes use of the same word when speaking of himself and the Ephesian Christians (Eph. i. 6), where we render it "His grace, which He freely bestowed on us in the Beloved." But criticism apart, never before had an angel so addressed a mortal, for even Daniel's "greatly beloved" falls below this Nazareth greeting. When Gabriel came to Zacharias there was not even a "Hail;" it was simply a "Fear not," and then the message; but now he gives to Mary a "Hail" and two beatitudes besides: "Thou art highly favoured;" "the Lord is with thee." And do these words mean nothing? Are they but a few heavenly courtesies whose only meaning is in their sound? Heaven does not speak thus with

random, unmeaning words. Its voices are true, and deep as they are true, never meaning less, but often more than they say. That the angel should so address her is certain proof that the Virgin possessed a peculiar fitness for the Divine honours she was now to receive – honours which had been so long held back, as if in reserve for herself alone. It is only they who look heavenward who see heavenly things. There must be a heart aflame before the bush burns; and when the bush is alight it is only "he who sees takes off his shoes."

The glimpses we get of the Virgin are few and brief; she is soon eclipsed – if we may be allowed that shadowy word – by the greater glories of her Son; but why should she be selected as the mother of the human Christ? why should her life nourish His? why should the thirty years be spent in her daily presence, her face being the first vision of awaking consciousness, as it was in the last earthward look from the cross? – why all this, except that there was a wealth of beauty and of grace about her nature, a certain tinge of heavenliness that made it fitting the Messiah should be born of her rather than of any woman else? As we have seen, the royal and the priestly lines meet in her, and Mary unites in herself all the dignity of the one with the sanctity of the other. With what delicacy and grace she receives the angel's message! "Greatly troubled" at first – not, however, like Zacharias, at the sight of the messenger, but at his message – she soon recovers herself, and "casts in her mind what manner of salutation this might be." This sentence just describes one prominent feature of

her character, her reflective, reasoning mind. Sparing of words, except when under the inspiration of some *Magnificat*, she lived much within herself. She loved the companionship of her own thoughts, finding a certain music in their still monologue. When the shepherds made known the saying of the angel about this child, repeating the angelic song, perhaps, with sundry variations of their own, Mary is neither elated nor astonished. Whatever her feelings – and they must have been profoundly moved – she carefully conceals them. Instead of telling out her own deep secrets, letting herself drift out on the ecstasies of the moment, Mary is silent, serenely quiet, unwilling that even a shadow of herself should dim the brightness of His rising. "She kept," so we read, "all these sayings, pondering them in her heart;" or putting them together, as the Greek word means, and so forming, as in a mental mosaic, her picture of the Christ who was to be. And so, in later years, we read (ii. 51) how "His mother kept all these sayings in her heart," gathering up the fragmentary sentences of the Divine Childhood and Youth, and hiding them, as a treasure peculiarly her own, in the deep, still chambers of her soul. And what those still chambers of her soul were, how heavenly the atmosphere that enswathed them, how hallowed by the Divine Presence, her *Magnificat* will show; for that inspired psalm is but an opened window, letting the music pass without, as it throws the light within, showing us the temple of a quiet, devout, and thoughtful soul.

With what complacency and with what little surprise she

received the angel's message! The Incarnation does not come upon her as a new thought, a thought for which her mind cannot possibly find room, and human speech can weave no fitting dress. It disturbs neither her reason nor her faith. Versed in Scripture as she is, it comes rather as a familiar thought – a heavenly dove, it is true, but gliding down within her mind in a perfect, because a heavenly naturalness. And when the angel announces that the "Son of the Most High," whose name shall be called Jesus, and who shall reign over the house of Jacob for ever, shall be born of herself, there is no exclamation of astonishment, no word of incredulity as to whether this can be, but simply a question as to the manner of its accomplishment: "How shall this be, seeing that I know not a man?" The Christ had evidently been conceived in her mind, and cradled in her heart, even before He became a conception of her womb.

And what an absolute self-surrender to the Divine purpose! No sooner has the angel told her that the Holy Ghost shall come upon her, and the power of the Most High overshadow her, than she bows to the Supreme Will in a lowly, reverential acquiescence: "Behold, the handmaid [bondmaid] of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word." So do the human and the Divine wills meet and mingle. Heaven touches earth, comes down into it, that earth may evermore touch heaven, and indeed form part of it.

The angel departs, leaving her alone with her great secret; and little by little it dawns upon her, as it could not have done at first,

what this secret means for her. A great honour it is, a great joy it will be; but Mary finds, as we all find, the path to heaven's glories lies through suffering; the way into the wealthy place is "through the fire." How can she carry this great secret herself? and yet how can she tell it? Who will believe her report? Will not these Nazarenes laugh at her story of the vision, except that the matter would be too grave for a smile? It is her own secret yet, but it cannot be a secret long; and then – who can defend her, and ward off the inevitable shame? Where can she find shelter from the venomous shafts that will be hurled from every side – where, save in her consciousness of unsullied purity, and in the "shadow of the Highest"? Was it thoughts like these that now agitated her mind, deciding her to make the hasty visit to Elisabeth? or was it that she might find sympathy and counsel in communion with a kindred soul, one that age had made wise, and grace made beautiful? Probably it was both; but in this journey we will not follow her now, except to see how her faith in God never once wavered. We have already listened to her sweet song; but what a sublime faith it shows, that she can sing in face of this gathering storm, a storm of suspicion and of shame, when Joseph himself will seek to put her away, lest his character should suffer too! But Mary believed, even though she felt and smarted. She endured "as seeing Him who is invisible." Could she not safely leave her character to Him? Would not the Lord avenge His own elect? Would not Divine Wisdom justify her child? Faith and hope said "Yes;" and Mary's soul, like a nightingale, trilled out her

Magnificat when earth's light was disappearing, and the shadows were falling thick and fast on every side.

It is on her return to Nazareth, after her three months' absence, that the episode occurs narrated by St. Matthew. It is thrown into the story almost by way of parenthesis, but it casts a vivid light on the painful experience through which she was now called to pass. Her prolonged absence, most unusual for one betrothed, was in itself puzzling; but she returns to find only a scant welcome. She finds herself suspected of shame and sin, "the white flower of her blameless life" dashed and stained with black aspersions. Even Joseph's confidence in her is shaken, so shaken that he must put her away and have the betrothal cancelled. And so the clouds darken about the Virgin; she is left almost alone in the sharp travail of her soul, charged with sin, even when she is preparing for the world a Saviour, and likely, unless Heaven speedily interpose, to become an outcast, if not a martyr, thrown outside the circle of human courtesies and sympathies as a social leper. Like another heir of all the promises, she too is led as a lamb to the slaughter, a victim bound, and all but sacrificed, upon the altar of the public conscience. But Heaven did intervene, even as it stayed the knife of Abraham. An angel appears to Joseph, throwing around the suspected one the mantle of unsullied innocence, and assuring him that her explanation, though passing strange, was truth itself. And so the Lord did avenge His own elect, stilling the babble of unfriendly tongues, restoring to her all the lost confidences, together with a

wealth of added hopes and prospective honours.

Not, however, out of Galilee must the Shiloh come, but out of Judah; and not Nazareth, but Bethlehem Ephratah is the designated place of His coming forth who shall be the Governor and Shepherd of "My people Israel." What means, then, this apparent divergence of the Providence from the Prophecy, the whole drift of the one being northward, while the other points steadily to the south? It is only a seeming divergence, the backward flash of the wheel that all the time is moving steadily, swiftly forward. The Prophecy and the Providence are but the two staves of the ark, moving in different but parallel lines, and bearing between them the Divine purpose. Already the line is laid that links Nazareth with Bethlehem, the line of descent we call lineage; and now we see Providence setting in motion another force, the Imperial Will, which, moving along this line, makes the purpose a realization. Nor was it the Imperial Will only; it was the Imperial Will acting through Jewish prejudices. These two forces, antagonistic, if not opposite, were the centrifugal and centripetal forces that kept the Divine Purpose moving in its appointed round and keeping Divine hours. Had the registration decreed by Cæsar been conducted after the Roman manner, Joseph and Mary would not have been required to go up to Bethlehem; but when, out of deference to Jewish prejudice, the registration was made in the Hebrew mode, this compelled them, both being descendants of David, to go up to their ancestral city. It has been thought by some that Mary possessed some inherited

property in Bethlehem; and the narrative would suggest that there were other links that bound them to the city; for evidently they intended to make Bethlehem henceforth their place of residence, and they would have done so had not a Divine monition broken in upon their purpose (Matt. ii. 23).

And so they move southward, obeying the mandate of Cæsar, who now is simply the executor of the higher Will, the Will that moves silently but surely, back of all thrones, principalities, and powers. We will not attempt to gild the gold, by enlarging upon the story of the Nativity, and so robbing it of its sweet simplicity. The toilsome journey; its inhospitable ending; the stable and the manger; the angelic symphonies in the distance; the adoration of the shepherds – all form one sweet idyll, no word of which we can spare; and as the Church chants her *Te Deum* all down the ages this will not be one of its lowest strains: —

"When Thou tookest upon Thee to deliver man
Thou didst not abhor the Virgin's womb."

And so the Virgin becomes the Virgin Mother, graduating into motherhood amid the acclamations of the sky, and borne on to her exalted honours in the sweep of Imperial decrees.

After the Nativity she sinks back into a second – a far-off second – place, "for the greater glory doth dim the less;" and twice only does her voice break the silence of the thirty years. We hear it first in the Temple, as, in tones tremulous with anxiety and

sorrow, she asks, "Son, why hast Thou thus dealt with us? Behold, Thy father and I sought Thee sorrowing." The whole incident is perplexing, and if we read it superficially, not staying to read between the lines, it certainly places the mother in anything but a favourable light. Let us observe, however, that there was no necessity that the mother should have made this pilgrimage, and evidently she had made it so that she might be near her precious charge. But now she strangely loses sight of Him, and goes even a day's journey without discovering her loss. How is this? Has she suddenly grown careless? or does she lose both herself and her charge in the excitements of the return journey? Thoughtfulness, as we have seen, was a characteristic feature of her life. Hers was the "harvest of the quiet eye," and her thoughts centred not on herself, but on her Divine Son; He was her Alpha and Omega, her first, her last, her only thought. It is altogether outside the range of possibilities that she now could be so negligent of her maternal duties, and so we are compelled to seek for our explanation elsewhere. May we not find it in this? The parents had left Jerusalem earlier in the day, arranging for the child Jesus to follow with another part of the same company, which, leaving later, would overtake them at their first camp. But Jesus not appearing when the second company starts, they imagine that He has gone on with the first company, and so proceed without Him. This seems the only probable solution of the difficulty; at any rate it makes plain and perfectly natural what else is most obscure and perplexing. Mary's mistake, however –

and it was not her fault – opens to us a page in the sealed volume of the Divine Boyhood, letting us hear its solitary voice – "Wist ye not that I must be in My Father's house?"

We see the mother again at Cana, where she is an invited and honoured guest at the marriage, moving about among the servants with a certain quiet authority, and telling her Divine Son of the breakdown in the hospitalities: "They have no wine." We cannot now go into details, but evidently there was no distancing reserve between the mother and her Son. She goes to Him naturally; she speaks to Him freely and frankly, as any widow would speak to the son on whom she leaned. Nay, she seems to know, as by a sort of intuition, of the superhuman powers that are lying dormant in that quiet Son of hers, and she so correctly reads the horoscope of Heaven as to expect this will be the hour and the place of their manifestation. Perhaps her mind did not grasp the true Divinity of her Son – indeed, it could not have done so before the Resurrection – but that He is the Messiah she has no doubt, and so, strong in her confidence, she says to the servants, "Whatsoever He saith unto you, do it." And her faith must have been great indeed, when it required a "whatsoever" to measure it. Some have thought they could detect a tinge of impatience and a tone of rebuke in the reply of Jesus; and doubtless there is a little sharpness in our English rendering of it. It does sound to our ears somewhat unfilial and harsh. But to the Greeks the address "Woman" was both courteous and respectful, and Jesus Himself uses it in that last tender salute from the cross. Certainly, she did

not take it as a rebuke, for one harsh word, like the touch on the sensitive plant, would have thrown her back into silence; whereas she goes off directly to the servants with her "whatsoever."

We get one more brief glimpse of her at Capernaum, as she and her other sons come out to Jesus to urge Him to desist from His long speaking. It is but a simple narrative, but it serves to throw a side-light on that home-life now removed to Capernaum. It shows us the thoughtful, loving mother, as, forgetful of herself and full of solicitude for Him, who, she fears, will tax Himself beyond His strength, she comes out to persuade Him home. But what is the meaning of that strange answer, and the significant gesture? "Mother," "brethren"? It is as if Jesus did not understand the words. They are something He has now outgrown, something He must now lay aside, as He gives Himself to the world at large. As there comes a time in the life of each when the mother is forsaken – left, that he may follow a higher call, and be himself a man – so Jesus now steps out into a world where Mary's heart, indeed, may still follow, but a world her mind may not enter. The earthly relation is henceforth to be overshadowed by the heavenly. The Son of Mary grows into the Son of man, belonging now to no special one, but to humanity at large, finding in all, even in us, who do the will of the Father in heaven, a brother, a sister, a mother. Not that Jesus forgets her. Oh, no! Even amid the agonies of the cross He thinks of her; He singles her out among the crowd, bespeaking for her a place – the place He Himself has filled – in the heart of His nearest

earthly friend; and amid the prayer for His murderers, and the "Eloi, Eloi" of a terrible forsaking, He says to the Apostle of love, "Behold thy mother," and to her, "Behold thy son."

And so the Virgin Mother takes her place in the focal point of all the histories. Through no choice, no conceit or forwardness of her own, but by the grace of God and by an inherent fitness, she becomes the connecting-link between earth and heaven. And throwing, as she does, her unconscious shadow back within the Paradise Lost, and forward through the Gospels to the Paradise Regained, shall we not "magnify the Lord" with her? shall we not "magnify the Lord" for her, as, with all the generations, we "call her blessed"?

CHAPTER V.

THE ADORATION OF THE SHEPHERDS

Luke ii. 8-21

The Gospel of St. Mark omits entirely the Nativity, passing at once to the words and miracles of His public ministry. St. John, too, dismisses the Advent and the earlier years of the Divine Life with one solitary phrase, how the Word, which in the beginning was with God and was God, "became flesh and dwelt among us" (i. 14). St. Luke, however, whose Gospel is the Gospel of the Humanity, lingers reverently over the Nativity, throwing a variety of side-lights upon the cradle of the Holy Child. Already has he shown how the Roman State prepared the cradle of the Infancy, and how Cæsar Augustus unconsciously wrought out the purpose of God, the breath of his imperial decree being but part of a higher inspiration; and now he proceeds to show how the shepherds of Judæa bring the greetings of the Hebrew world, the wave-sheaf of the ripening harvests of homage which yet will be laid, by Jew and Gentile alike, at the feet of Him who was Son of David and Son of man.

It is generally supposed that these anonymous shepherds were residents of Bethlehem, and tradition has fixed the exact spot where they were favoured with this Advent apocalypse, about a thousand paces from the modern village. It is a historic fact that there was a tower near that site, called Eder, or "the Tower of the Flock," around which were pastured the flocks destined for the Temple sacrifice; but the topography of ver. 8 is purposely vague. The expression "in that same country," written by one who both in years and in distance was far removed from the events recorded, would describe any circle within the radius of a few miles from Bethlehem as its centre, and the very vagueness of the expression seems to push back the scene of the Advent music to a farther distance than a thousand paces. And this view is confirmed by the language of the shepherds themselves, who, when the vision has faded, say one to another, "Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing that is come to pass;" for they scarcely would have needed, or used, the adverbial "even" were they keeping their flocks so close up to the walls of the city. We may therefore infer, with some amount of probability, that whether the shepherds were residents of Bethlehem or not, when they kept watch over their flocks, it was not on the traditional site, but farther away over the hills. Indeed, it is difficult, and very often impossible, for us to fix the precise locality of these sacred scenes, these bright points of intersection, where Heaven's glories flash out against the dull carbon-points of earth; and the voices of tradition are at best but doubtful guesses. It would

almost seem as if God Himself had wiped out these memories, hiding them away, as He hid the sepulchre of Moses, lest the world should pay them too great a homage, and lest we might think that one place lay nearer to heaven than another, when all places are equally distant, or rather equally near. It is enough to know that somewhere on these lonely hills came the vision of the angels, perhaps on the very spot where David was minding his sheep when Heaven summoned him to a higher task, passing him up among the kings.

While the shepherds were "watching the watches of the night over their flock," as the Evangelist expresses it, referring to the pastoral custom of dividing the night into watches, and keeping watch by turns, suddenly "an angel of the Lord stood by them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them." When the angel appeared to Zacharias, and when Gabriel brought to Mary her evangel, we do not read of any supernatural portent, any celestial glory, attending them. Possibly because their appearances were in the broad daylight, when the glory would be masked, invisible; but now, in the dead of night, the angelic form is bright and luminous, throwing all around them a sort of heavenly halo, in which even the lustrous Syrian stars grow dim. Dazzled by the sudden burst of glory, the shepherds were awed by the vision, and stricken with a great fear, until the angel, borrowing the tones and accents of their own speech, addressed to them his message, the message he had been commissioned to bring: "Be not afraid; for behold, I bring you good tidings of

great joy which shall be to all the people: for there is born to you this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord." And then he gave them a sign by which they might recognize the Saviour Lord: "Ye shall find a babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, and lying in a manger."

From the indefinite wording of the narrative we should infer that the angel who brought the message to the shepherds was not Gabriel, who had before brought the good tidings to Mary. But whether or not the messenger was the same, the two messages are almost identical in structure and in thought, the only difference being the personal element of the equation, and the shifting of the time from the future to the present tense. Both strike the same key-note, the "Fear not" with which they seek to still the vibrations of the heart, that the Virgin and the shepherds may not have their vision blurred and tremulous through the agitation of the mind. Both make mention of the name of David, which name was the key-word which unlocked all Messianic hopes. Both speak of the Child as a Saviour – though Gabriel wraps up the title within the name, "Thou shalt call His name Jesus;" for, as St. Matthew explains it, "it is He that shall save His people from their sins." Both, too, speak of Him as the Messiah; for when the angel now calls Him the "Christ" it was the same "Anointed" one who, as Gabriel had said, "should reign over the house of Jacob for ever;" while in the last august title now given by the angel, "Lord," we may recognize the higher Divinity – that He is, in some unique, and to us incomprehensible sense, "the Son of

the Most High" (i. 32). Such, then, is the triple crown the angel now bears to the cradle of the Holy Child. What He will be to the world is still but a prophecy; but as He, the Firstborn, is now brought into the world, God commands all the angels to worship Him (Heb. i. 6); and with united voice – though the antiphon sings back over a nine months silence – they salute the Child of Bethlehem as Saviour, Messiah, Lord. The one title sets up His throne facing the lower world, commanding the powers of darkness, and looking at the moral conditions of men; the second throws the shadow of His throne over the political relations of men, making it dominate all thrones; while the third title sets up His throne facing the heavens themselves, vesting Him with a supreme, a Divine authority.

No sooner was the message ended than suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying —

"Glory to God in the highest,
And on earth peace among men in whom He is well pleased."

The Revised Version lacks the rhythmic qualities of the Authorized Version; and the wordy clause "among men in whom He is well pleased" seems but a poor substitute for the terse and clear "good-will toward men," which is an expression easy of utterance, and which seemed to have earned a prescriptive right to a place in our Advent music. The revised rendering, however,

is certainly more in accord with the grammatical construction of the original, whose idiomatic form can scarcely be put into English, except in a way somewhat circuitous and involved. In both expressions the underlying thought is the same, representing man as the object of the Divine good-pleasure, that Divine "benevolence" – using the word in its etymological sense – which enfolds, in the germ, the Divine favour, compassion, mercy, and love. There is thus a triple parallelism running through the song, the "Glory to God in the highest" finding its corresponding terms in the "peace among (or to) men in whom He is well pleased on earth;" while altogether it forms one complete circle of praise, the "good-pleasure to man," the "peace on earth," the "glory to God" marking off its three segments. And so the song harmonizes with the message; indeed, it is that message in an altered shape; no longer walking in common prosaic ways, but winged now, it moves in its higher circles with measured beat, leaving a path from the cradle of the Infancy to the highest heavens all strewn with *Glorias*. And what is the triplicity of the song but another rendering of the three august titles of the message – Saviour, Messiah, Lord? the "Saviour" being the expression of the Divine good-pleasure; the "Messiah" telling of His reign upon earth who is Himself the Prince of peace; while the "Lord," which, as we have seen, corresponds with "the Son of the Most High," leads us up directly to the "heavenlies," to Him who commands and who deserves all doxologies.

But is this song only a song in some far-distant sky – a sweet

memory indeed, but no experience? Is it not rather the original from which copies may be struck for our individual lives? There is for each of us an advent, if we will accept it; for what is regeneration but the beginning of the Divine life within our life, the advent of the Christ Himself? And let but that supreme hour come to us when place and room are made for Him who is at once the expression of the Divine favour and the incarnation of the Divine love, and the new era dawns, the reign of peace, the "peace of God," because the "peace *with* God, through our Lord Jesus Christ." Then will the heart throw off its *Glorias*, not in one burst of song, which subsides quickly into silence, but in one perpetual anthem, which ever becomes more loud and sweet as the day of its perfected redemption draweth nigh; for when the Divine displeasure is turned away, and a Divine peace or comfort takes its place, who can but say, "O Lord, I will praise Thee"?

Directly the angel-song had ceased, and the singers had disappeared in the deep silence whence they came, the shepherds, garnering up their scattered thoughts, said one to another (as if their hearts were speaking all at once and all in unison), "Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing that is come to pass which the Lord hath made known unto us." The response was immediate. They do not shut out this heavenly truth by doubt and vain questioning; they do not keep it at a distance from them, as if it only indirectly and distantly concerned themselves, but yield themselves up to it entirely; and as they go hastily to Bethlehem, in the quick step and in the

rapid beating of their heart, we can trace the vibrations of the angel-song. And why is this? Why is it that the message does not come upon them as a surprise? Why are these men ready with such a perfect acquiescence, their hearts leaping forward to meet and embrace this Gospel of the angels? We shall probably find our answer in the character of the men themselves. They pass into history unnamed; and after playing their brief part, they disappear, lost in the incense-cloud of their own praises. But evidently these shepherds were no mean, no common men. They were Hebrews, possibly of the royal line; at any rate they were Davids in their loftiness of thought, of hope and aspiration. They were devout, God-fearing men. Like their father Jacob, they too were citizens of two worlds; they could lead their flocks into green pastures, and mend the fold; or they could turn aside from flock and fold to wrestle with God's angels, and prevail. Heaven's revelations come to noble minds, as the loftiest peaks are always the first to hail the dawn. And can we suppose that Heaven would so honour them, lighting up the sky with an aureole of glory for their sole benefit, sending this multitude to sing to them a sweet chorale, if the men themselves had nothing heavenly about them, if their selfish, sordid mind could soar no higher than their flocks, and have no wider range than the markets for their wool?

"Let but a flute

Play 'neath the fine-mixed metal,

Then shall the huge bell tremble, then the mass

With myriad waves concurrent shall respond

In low, soft unison."

But there must be the music hidden within, or there is no unison. And we may be sure of this, that the angel-song had passed by them as a cold night-wind, had not their hearts been tuned up by intense desire, until they struck responsive to the angel-voice. Though they knew it not, they had led their flock to the mount of God; and up the steps of sacred hopes and lofty aspirations they had climbed, until their lives had got within the circle of heavenly harmonies, and they were worthy to be the first apostles of the New Dispensation.

In our earthly modes of thinking we push the sacred and the secular far apart, as if they were two different worlds, or, at any rate, as opposite hemispheres of the same world, with but few points of contact between them. It is not so. The secular is the sacred on its under, its earthward side. It is a part of that great whole we call duty, and in our earthly callings, if they are but pure and honest, we may hear the echoes of a heavenly call. The temple of Worship and the temple of Work are not separated by indefinable spaces; they are contiguous, leaning upon each other, while they both front the same Divine purpose. Nor can it be simply a coincidence that Heaven's revelations should nearly always come to man in the moments of earthly toil, rather than in the hours of leisure or of so-called worship. It was from his shepherding the burning bush beckoned Moses aside; while Heaven's messenger found Gideon on the threshing-floor, and

Elisha in the furrow. In the New Testament, too, in all the cases whose circumstances are recorded, the Divine call reached the disciples when engaged in their every-day task, sitting at the receipt of custom, and casting or mending their nets. The fact is significant. In the estimate of Heaven, instead of a discount being put upon the common tasks of life, those tasks are dignified and ennobled. They look towards heaven, and if the heart be only set in that direction they lead too up towards heaven. Our weeks are not unlike the sheet of Peter's vision; we take care to tie up the two ends, attaching them to heaven, and then we leave what we call the "week-days" bulging down earthward in purely secular fashion. But would not our weeks, and our whole life, swing on a higher and holier level, could we but recognize the fact that all days are the Lord's days, and did we but attach each day and each deed to heaven? Such is the truest, noblest life, that takes the "trivial rounds" as a part of its sacred duties, doing them all as unto the Lord. So, as we sanctify life's common things, they cease to be common, and the earthly becomes less earthly as we learn to see more of heaven in it. In the weaving of our life some of its threads stretch earthward, and some heavenward; but they cross and interlace, and together they form the warp and woof of one fabric, which should be, like the garment of the Master, without seam, woven from the top throughout. Happy is that life which, keeping an open eye over the flock, keeps too a heart open towards heaven, ready to listen to the angelic music, and ready to transfer its rhythm to their own hastening feet or their

praising lips.

Our Evangelist tells us that they "came in haste" in search of the young Child, and we may almost detect that haste in the very accents of their speech. It is, "Let us now go across even to Bethlehem," allowing the prefix its proper meaning; as if their eager hearts could not stay to go round by the ordinary road, but like bees scenting a held of clover, they too must make their cross-country way to Bethlehem. Though the angel had not given explicit directions, the city of David was not so large but that they could easily discover the object of their search – the Child, as had been told them, wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger. It has been thought by some that the "inn" is a mistranslation, and that it really was the "guest-chamber" of some friend. It is true the word is rendered "guest-chamber" on the other two occasions of its use (Mark xiv. 14; Luke xxii. 11), but it also signified a public guest-house, as well as a private guest-chamber; and such evidently is its meaning here, for private hospitality, even had its "guest-chamber" been preoccupied, would certainly, under the circumstances, have offered something more human than a stable. That would not have been its only alternative.

It is an interesting coincidence, and one serving to link together the Old and the New Testament, that Jeremiah speaks of a certain *geruth*, or inn, as it may read, "which is by Bethlehem" (Jer. xli. 17). How it came into the possession of Chimham, who was a Gileadite, we are not told; but we are

told that because of the kindness shown to David in his exile by Barzillai, his son Chimham received special marks of the royal favour, and was, in fact, treated almost as an adopted son (1 Kings ii. 7). What is certain is that the *khan* of Bethlehem bore, for successive generations, the name of Chimham; which fact is in itself evidence that Chimham was its builder, as the well of Jacob retained, through all the changes of inheritance, the name of the patriarch whose thought and gift it was. In all probability, therefore, the "inn" was built by Chimham, on that part of the paternal estate which David inherited; and as the *khans* of the East cling with remarkable tenacity to their original sites, it is probable, to say the least, that the "inn of Chimham" and the inn of Bethlehem, in which there was no room for the two late-comers from Nazareth, were, if not identical, at any rate related structures – so strangely does the cycle of history complete itself, and the Old merge into the New. And so, while Prophecy sings audibly and sweetly of the place which yet shall give birth to the Governor who shall rule over Israel, History puts up her silent hand, and salutes Beth-lehem Ephratah as by no means the least among the cities of Judah.

But not in the inn do the shepherds find the happy parents – the spring-tide of the unusual immigration had completely flooded that, leaving no standing-place for the son and daughter of David – but they find them in a stable, probably in some adjoining cave, the swaddled Child, as the angels had foretold, lying in the manger. Art has lingered reverently and long over

this stable scene, hiding with exquisite draperies its baldness and meanness, and lighting up its darkness with wreaths of golden glory; but these splendours are apocryphal, existing only in the mind of the beholder; they are the luminous mist of an adoring love. What the shepherds do find is an extemporized apartment, mean in the extreme; two strangers fresh from Nazareth, both young and both poor; and a new-born infant asleep in the manger, with a group of sympathizing spectators, who have brought, in the emergency, all kinds of proffered helps. It seems a strange ending for an angel-song, a far drop from the superhuman to the subhuman. Will it shake the faith of these apostle-shepherds? Will it shatter their bright hope? And chagrined that their auroral dream should have so poor a realization, will they return to their flocks with heavy hearts and sad? Not they. They prostrate themselves before the Infant Presence, repeating over and over the heavenly words the angels had spoken unto them concerning the Child, and while Mary announces the name as "Jesus," they salute Him, as the angels had greeted Him before, as Saviour, Messiah, Lord; thus putting on the head of the Child Jesus that triple crown, symbol of a supremacy which knows no limit either in space or time. It was the *Te Deum* of a redeemed humanity, which succeeding years have only made more deep, more full, and which in ever-rising tones will yet grow into the Alleluias of the heavens. Saviour, Messiah, Lord! these titles struck upon Mary's ear not with surprise, for she has grown accustomed to surprises now, but with a thrill of wonder. She could not yet spell

out all their deep meaning, and so she pondered "them in her heart," hiding them away in her maternal soul, that their deep secrets might ripen and blossom in the summer of the after-years.

The shepherds appear no more in the Gospel story. We see them returning to their task "glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen," and then the mantle of a deep silence falls upon them. As a lark, rising heavenward, loses itself from our sight, becoming a sweet song in the sky, so these anonymous shepherds, these first disciples of the Lord, having laid their tribute at His feet – in the name of humanity saluting the Christ who was to be – now pass out of our sight, leaving for us the example of their heavenward look and their simple faith, and leaving, too, their *Glorias*, which in multiplied reverberations fill all lands and all times, the earthly prelude of the New, the eternal Song.

CHAPTER VI.

THE VOICE IN THE WILDERNESS

When the Old Testament closed, prophecy had thrown upon the screen of the future the shadows of two persons, cast in heavenly light. Sketched in outline rather than in detail, still their personalities were sufficiently distinct as to attract the gaze and hopes of the intervening centuries; while their differing, though related missions were clearly recognized. One was the Coming One, who should bring the "consolation" of Israel, and who should Himself be that Consolation; and gathering into one august title all such glittering epithets as Star, Shiloh, and Emmanuel, prophecy reverently saluted Him as "the Lord," paying Him prospective homage and adoration. The other was to be the herald of another Dispensation, proclaiming the new kingdom and the new King, running before the royal chariot, even as Elijah ran before Ahab to the ivory palace at Jezreel, his voice then dying away in silence, as he himself passes out of sight behind the throne. Such were the two figures that prophecy, in a series of dissolving views, had thrown forward from the Old into the New Testament; and such was the signal honour accorded to the Baptist, that while many of the Old Testament characters appear as reflections in the New, his is the only human shadow thrown back from the New into the Old.

The forerunner thus had a virtual existence long before the time of the Advent. Known by his synonym of Elias, the prophesied, he became as a real presence, moving here and there among their thoughts and dreams, and lighting up their long night with the beacon-fires of new and bright hopes. His voice seemed familiar, even though it came to them in far-distant echoes, and the listening centuries had caught exactly both its accent and its message. And so the preparer of the way found his own path prepared; for John's path and "the way of the Lord" were the same; it was the way of obedience and of sacrifice. The two lives were thus thrown into conjunction from the first, the lesser light revolving around the Greater, as they fulfil their separate courses – separate indeed, as far as the human must ever be separated from the Divine, yet most closely related.

Living thus through the pre-Advent centuries, both in the Divine purpose and in the thoughts and hopes of men, so early designated to his heraldic office, "My messenger," in a singular sense, as no other of mortals could ever be, it is no matter of apology, or even of surprise, that his birth should be attended by so much of the supernatural. The Divine designation seems to imply, almost to demand, a Divine declaration; and in the birth-story of the Baptist the flashes of the supernatural, such as the angelic announcement and the miraculous conception, come with a simple naturalness. The prelude is in perfect symphony with the song. St. Luke is the only Evangelist who gives us the birth-story. The other three speak only of his mission,

introducing him to us abruptly, as, like another Moses, he comes down from his new Sinai with the tables of the law in his hands and the strange light upon his face. St. Luke takes us back to the infancy, that we may see the beginnings of things, the Divine purpose enwrapped in swaddling clothes, as it once was set adrift in a rush-plaited ark. Before the message he puts the man, and before the man he puts the child – for is not the child a prophecy or invoice of the man? – while all around the child he puts the environment of home, showing us the subtle, powerful influences that touched and shaped the young prophet-life. As a plant carries up into its outmost leaves the ingredients of the rock around which its fibres cling, so each upspringing life – even the life of a prophet – carries into its farthest reaches the unconscious influence of its home associations. And so St. Luke sketches for us that quiet home in the hill-country, whose windows opened and whose doors turned toward Jerusalem, the "city of the great" and invisible "King." He shows us Zacharias and Elisabeth, true saints of God, devout of heart and blameless of life, down into whose placid lives an angel came, rippling them with the excitements of new promises and hopes. Where could the first meridian of the New Dispensation run better than through the home of these seers of things unseen, these watchers for the dawn? Where could be so fitting a receptacle for the Divine purpose, where it could so soon and so well ripen? Had not God elected them to this high honour, and Himself prepared them for it? Had He not purposely kept back all earlier, lower shoots, that

their whole growth should be upward, one reaching out towards heaven, like the palm, its fruit clustering around its outmost branches? We can easily imagine what intense emotion the message of the angel would produce, and that Zacharias would not so much miss the intercourse of human speech now that God's thoughts were audible in his soul. What loving preparation would Elisabeth make for this child of hers, who was to be "great in the sight of the Lord"! what music she would strike out from its name, "John" (the Grace of Jehovah), the name which was both the sesame and symbol of the New Dispensation! How her eager heart would outrun the slow months, as she threw herself forward in anticipation among the joys of maternity, a motherhood so exalted! And why did she hide herself for the five months, but that she might prepare herself for her great mission? that in her seclusion she might hear more distinctly the voices that spake to her from above, or that in the silence she might hear her own heart sing?

But neither the eagerness of Elisabeth nor the dumbness of Zacharias is allowed to hasten the Divine purpose. That purpose, like the cloud of old, accommodates itself to human conditions, the slow processions of the humanities; and not until the time is "full" does the hope become a realization, and the infant voice utter its first cry. And now is gathered the first congregation of the new era. It is but a family gathering, as the neighbours and relatives come together for the circumcising of the child – which rite was always performed on the corresponding day of the week

after its birth; but it is significant as being the first of those ever-widening circles that moving outwards from its central impulse, spread rapidly over the land, as they are now rapidly spreading over all lands. Zacharias, of course, was present; but mute and deaf, he could only sit apart, a silent spectator. Elisabeth, as we may gather from various references and hints, was of modest and retiring disposition, fond of putting herself in the shade, of standing behind; and so now the conduct of the ceremony seems to have fallen into the hands of some of the relatives. Presuming that the general custom will be observed, that the first-born child will take the name of the father, they proceed to name it "Zacharias." This, however, Elisabeth cannot allow, and with an emphatic negative, she says, "Not so; but he shall be called John." Persistent still in their own course, and not satisfied with the mother's affirmation, the friends turn to the aged and mute priest, and by signs ask how they shall name the child (and had Zacharias heard the conversation, he certainly would not have waited for their question, but would have spoken or written at once); and Zacharias, calling for the writing-table, which doubtless had been his close companion, giving him his only touch of the outer world for the still nine months, wrote, "His name is John." Ah, they are too late! the child was named even long before its birth, named, too, within the Holy Place of the Temple, and by an angel of God. "John" and "Jesus," those two names, since the visit of the Virgin, have been like two bells of gold, throwing waves of music across heart and home, ringing

their welcome to "the Christ who is to be," the Christ who is now so near. "His name is John;" and with that brief stroke of his pen Zacharias half rebukes these intrusions and interferences of the relatives, and at the same time makes avowal of his own faith. And as he wrote the name "John," his present obedience making atonement for a past unbelief, instantly the paralyzed tongue was loosed, and he spake, blessing God, throwing the name of his child into a psalm; for what is the *Benedictus* of Zacharias but "John" written large and full, one sweet and loud magnifying of "the Grace and Favour of Jehovah"?

It is only a natural supposition that when the inspiration of the song had passed away, Zacharias' speech would begin just where it was broken off, and that he would narrate to the guests the strange vision of the Temple, with the angel's prophecy concerning the child. And as the guests depart to their own homes, each one carries the story of this new apocalypse, as he goes to spread the evangel, and to wake among the neighbouring hills the echoes of Zacharias' song. No wonder that fear came upon all that dwelt round about, and that they who pondered these things in their hearts should ask, "What then shall this child be?"

And here the narrative of the childhood suddenly ends, for with two brief sentences our Evangelist dismisses the thirty succeeding years. He tells us that "the hand of the Lord was with the child," doubtless arranging its circumstances, giving it opportunities, preparing it for the rugged manhood and the rugged mission which should follow in due course; and that

"the child grew, and waxed strong in spirit," the very same expression he afterwards uses in reference to the Holy Child, an expression we can best interpret by the angel's prophecy, "He shall be filled with the Holy Ghost even from his mother's womb." His native strength of spirit was made doubly strong by the touch of the Divine Spirit, as the iron, coming from its baptism of fire, is hardened and tempered into steel. And so we see that in the Divine economy even a consecrated childhood is a possible experience; and that it is comparatively infrequent is owing rather to our warped views, which possibly may need some readjustment, than to the Divine purpose and provision. Is the child born into the Divine displeasure, branded from its birth with the mark of Cain? Is it not rather born into the Divine mercy, and all enswathed in the abundance of Divine love? True, it is born of a sinful race, with tendencies to self-will which may lead it astray; but it is just as true that it is born within the covenant of grace; that around its earliest and most helpless years is thrown the ægis of Christ's atonement; and that these innate tendencies are held in check and neutralized by what is called "prevenient grace." In the struggle for that child-life are the powers of darkness the first in the field, outmarching and outmanœuvring the powers of light? Why, the very thought is half-libellous. Heaven's touch is upon the child from the first. Ignore it as we may, deny it as some will, yet back in life's earliest dawn the Divine Spirit is brooding over the unformed world, parting its firmaments of right and wrong, and fashioning a new Paradise. Is

evil the inevitable? Must each life taste the forbidden fruit before it can attain to a knowledge of the good? In other words, is sin a great though dire necessity? If a necessity, then it is no longer sin, and we must seek for another and more appropriate name. No; childhood is Christ's purchased and peculiar possession; and the best type of religious experience is that which is marked by no rapid transitions, which breaks upon the soul softly and sweetly as a dawn, its beginnings imperceptible, and so unremembered. So not without meaning is it that right at the gate of the New Dispensation we find the cradle of a consecrated childhood. Placed there by the gate, so that all may see it, and placed in the light, so that all may read it, the childhood of the Baptist tells us what our childhood might oftener be, if only its earthly guardians – whose hands are so powerful to impress and mould the plastic soul – were, like Zacharias and Elisabeth, themselves prayerful, blameless, and devout.

Now the scene shifts; for we read he "was in the deserts till the day of his showing unto Israel." From the fact that this clause is intimately connected with the preceding, "and the child grew and waxed strong in spirit" – the two clauses having but one subject – some have supposed that John was but a child when he turned away from the parental roof and sought the wilderness. But this does not follow. The two parts of the sentence are only separated by a comma, but that pause may bridge over a chasm wide enough for the flow of numerous years, and between the childhood and the wilderness the narrative would almost compel

us to put a considerable space. As his physical development was, in mode and proportion, purely human, with no hint of anything unnatural or even supernatural, so we may suppose was his mental and spiritual development. The voice must become articulate; it must play upon the alphabet, and turn sound into speech. It must learn, that it may think; it must study, that it may know. And so the human teacher is indispensable. Children reared of wolves may learn to bark, but, in spite of mythology, they will not build cities and found empires. And where could the child find better instructors than in his own parents, whose quiet lives had been passed in an atmosphere of prayer, and to whom the very jots and tittles of the law were familiar and dear? Indeed, we can scarcely suppose that after having prepared Zacharias and Elisabeth for their great mission, working what is something like a miracle, that she and no one else shall be the mother of the forerunner, the child should then be torn away from its natural guardians before the processes of its education are complete. It is true they were both "well stricken in years," but that phrase would cover any period from threescore years and upwards, and to that threescore the usual longevity of the Temple ministrants would easily allow another twenty years to be added. May we not, then, suppose that the child-Baptist studied and played under the parental roof, the bright focus to which their hopes, and thoughts, and prayers converged; that here, too, he spent his boyhood and youth, preparing for that priestly office to which his lineage entitled and designated him? for why should not

the "messenger of the Lord" be priest as well? We have no further mention of Zacharias and Elisabeth, but it is not improbable that their death was the occasion of John's retirement to the deserts, now a young man, perhaps, of twenty years.

According to custom, John now should have been introduced and consecrated to the priesthood, twenty years being the general age of the initiates; but in obedience to a higher call, John renounces the priesthood, and breaks with the Temple at once and for ever. Retiring to the deserts, which, wild and gloomy, stretch westward from the Dead Sea, and assuming the old prophet garb – a loose dress of camel's hair, bound with a thong of leather – the student becomes the recluse. Inhabiting some mountain cave, tasting only the coarse fare that nature offered – locusts and wild honey – the new Elias has come and has found his Cherith; and here, withdrawn far from "the madding crowd" and the incessant babble of human talk, with no companions save the wild beasts and the bright constellations of that Syrian sky, as they wheel round in their nightly dance, the lonely man opens his heart to God's great thoughts and purposes, and by constant prayer keeps his clear, trumpet voice in drill. Evidently, John had seen enough of so-called "society," with its cold conventionalities and hypocrisies; his keen eye had seen only too easily the hollowness and corruption that lay beneath the outer gloss and varnish – the thin veneer that but half concealed the worminess and rottenness that lay beneath. John goes out into the desert like another scapegoat, bearing deep within his

heart the sins of his nation – sins, alas, which are yet unrepented of and unforgiven! It was doubtless thoughts like these, and the constant brooding upon them, which gave to the Baptist the touch of melancholy that we can detect both in his features and his speech. Austere in person, with a wail in his voice like the sighing of the wind, or charged at times with suppressed thunders, the Baptist reminds us of the Peri, who

"At the gate
Of Eden stood disconsolate."

Sin had become to John an awful fact. He could see nothing else. The fragments of the law's broken tables strewed the land, even the courts of the Temple itself, and men were everywhere tripping against them and falling. But John did see something else; it was the day of the Lord, now very near, the day that should come scathing and burning "as a furnace," unless, meanwhile, Israel should repent. So the prophet mused, and as he mused the fire burned within his soul, even the fire of the Refiner, the fire of God.

Our Evangelist characterizes the opening of John's ministry with an official word. He calls it a "showing," a "manifestation," putting upon the very word the stamp and sanction of a Divine appointment. He is careful, too, to mark the time, so giving the Gospel story its place among the chronologies of the world; which he does in a most elaborate way. He first reads the time

on the horoscope of the Empire, whose swinging pendulum was a rising or a falling throne; and he states that it was "the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Cæsar," counting the two years of his joint rule with Augustus. Then, as if that were not enough, he notes the hour as indicated on the four quarters of the Hebrew commonwealth, the hour when Pilate, Herod, Philip, and Lysanias were in conjunction, ruling in their divided heavens. Then, as if that even were not enough, he marks the ecclesiastical hour as indicated by the marble time-piece of the Temple; it was when Annas and Caiaphas held jointly the high priesthood. What is the meaning of this elaborate mechanism, wheels within wheels? Is it because the hour is so important, that it needs the hands of an emperor, a governor, three tetrarchs, and two high priests to point it? Ewald is doubtless right in saying that St. Luke, as the historian, wished "to frame the Gospel history into the great history of the world" by giving precise dates; but if that were the Evangelist's main reason, such an accumulation of time-evidence were scarcely necessary; for what do the subsequent statements add to the precision of the first – "In the fifteenth year of Tiberius"? We must, then, seek for the Evangelist's meaning elsewhere. Among the oldest of the Hebrew prophecies concerning the Messiah was that of Jacob. Closing his life, as Moses did afterwards, with a wonderful vision, he looked down on the far-off years, and speaking of the coming "Seed," he said, "The sceptre shall not depart from Judah, nor a lawgiver from between his feet, until Shiloh come" (Gen. xlix. 10). Might not

this prophecy have been in the thought of the Evangelist when he stayed so much longer than his wont to note times and seasons? Why does he mention Herod and Pilate, Philip and Lysanias, but to show how the sceptre has, alas, departed from Judah, and the lawgiver from between his feet, and how the chosen land is torn to pieces by the Roman eagles? And why does he name Annas and Caiaphas, but to show how the same disintegrating forces are at work even within the Temple, when the rightful high priest can be set aside and superseded by the nominee of a foreign and a Pagan power? Verily "the glory has departed from Israel;" and if St. Luke introduces foreign emperors, tetrarchs, and governors, it is that they may ring a muffled peal over the grave of a dead nation, a funeral knell, which, however, shall be the signal for the coming of the Shiloh, and the gathering of the people unto Him.

Such were the times – times of disorganization, disorder, and almost despair – when the word of God came unto John in the wilderness. It came "upon" him, as it literally reads, probably in one of those wonderful theophanies, as when God spake to Moses from the flaming bush, or as when He appeared to Elijah upon Horeb, sending him back to an unfinished task. John obeyed. Emerging from his wilderness retreat, clad in his strange attire, spare in build, his features sharp and worn with fasting, his long, dishevelled hair telling of his Nazarite vow, he moves down to the Jordan like an apparition. His appearance is everywhere hailed with mingled curiosity and delight. Crowds come in ever-increasing numbers, not one class only, but all classes – priests,

soldiers, officials, people – until it seemed as if the cities had emptied themselves into the Jordan valley. And what went they "out for to see"? "A reed shaken with the wind"? A prophesier of smooth things? A preacher of revolt against tyranny? Nay; John was no wind-shaken reed, he was rather the heavenly wind itself, swaying the multitudes at will, and bending hearts and consciences into penitence and prayer. John was no preacher of revolt against the powers that be; in his mind, Israel had revolted more and more, and he must bring them back to their allegiance, or himself die in the attempt. John was no preacher of smooth things; there was not even the charm of variety about his speech. The one burden of his message was, "Repent: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." But the effect was marvellous. The lone voice from the wilderness swept over the land like the breath of God. Borne forwards on a thousand lips, it echoed through the cities and penetrated into remotest places. Judæa, Samaria, and even distant Galilee felt the quiver of the strange voice, and even from the shore of the Northern Sea men came to sit at the feet of the new teacher, and to call themselves John's disciples. So widespread and so deep was the movement, it sent its ripples even within the royal palace, awaking the curiosity, and perhaps the conscience, of Herod himself. It was a genuine revival of religion, such as Judæa had not witnessed since the days of Ezra, the awaking of the national conscience and of the national hope.

Perhaps it would be difficult, by any analysis of ours, to discover or to define the secret of John's success. It was the

resultant, not of one force, but of many. For instance, the hour was favourable. It was the Sabbath year, when field-work was in the main suspended, and men everywhere had leisure mind and hand lying, as it were, fallow. Then, too, the very dress of the Baptist would not be without its influence, especially on a mind so sensitive to form and colour as the Hebrew mind was. Dress to them was a form of duty. They were accustomed to weave into their tassels sacred symbols, so making the external speak of the eternal. Their hands played on the parti-coloured threads most faithfully and sacredly; for were not these the chords of Divine harmonies? But here is one who discards both the priestly and the civilian dress, and who wears, instead, the rough camel's hair robe of the old prophets. The very dress would thus appeal most powerfully to their imagination, carrying back their thoughts to the time of the Theocracy, when Jehovah was not silent as now, and when Heaven was so near, speaking by some Samuel or Elijah. Are those days returning? they would ask. Is this the Elias who was to come and restore all things? Surely it must be. And in the rustle of the Baptist's robe they heard the rustle of Elijah's mantle, dropping a second time by these Jordan banks. Then, too, there was the personal charm of the man. John was young, if years are our reckoning, for he counted but thirty; but in his case the *verve* and energy of youth were blended with the discretion and saintliness of age. What was the world to him, its fame, its luxury and wealth? They were only the dust he shook from his feet, as his spirit sighed for and soared after

Heaven's better things. He asks nothing of earth but her plainest fare, a couch of grass, and by-and-by a grave. Then, too, there was a positiveness about the man, that would naturally attract, in a drifting, shifting, vacillating age. The strong will is magnetic; the weaker wills follow and cluster round it, as swarming bees cluster around their queen. And John was intensely positive. His speech was clear-cut and incisive, with a tremendous earnestness in it, as if a "Thus saith the Lord" were at his heart. John's mood was not the subjunctive, where his words could eddy among the "mays" and "mights;" it was plainly the indicative, or better still, the imperative. He spoke as one who believed, and who intensely felt what he believed. Then, too, there was a certain nobleness about his courage. He knew no rank, no party; he was superior to all. He feared God too much to have any fear of man. He spoke no word for the sake of pleasing, and he kept back no word – even the hot rebuke – for fear of offending. Truth to him was more than titles, and right was the only royalty. How he painted the Pharisees – those shiny, slimy men, with creeping, sinuous ways – with that dark epithet "brood of vipers"! With what a fearless courage he denounced the incest of Herod! *He* will not level down Sinai, accommodating it to royal passions! Not he. "It is not lawful for thee to have her" – such were his words, that rolled in upon Herod's conscience like a peal of Sinai's thunder, telling him that law was law, that right was more than might, and purity more than power. Then, too, there was something about his message that was attractive. That word "the kingdom

of heaven" struck upon the national heart like a bell, and set it vibrating with new hopes, and awaking all kinds of beautiful dreams of recovered pre-eminence and power.

But while all these were auxiliaries, factors, and co-efficients in the problem of the Baptist's success, they are not sufficient in themselves to account for that success. It is not difficult for a man of superior mental attainment, and of strong individuality, to attract a following, especially if that following be in the direction of self-interest. The emotions and passions of humanity lie near the surface; they can be easily swept into a storm by the strong or by the pathetic voice. But to reach the conscience, to lift up the veil, and to pass within to that Most Holy of the human soul is what man, unaided, cannot do. Only the Divine Voice can break those deep silences of the heart; or if the human voice is used the power is not in the words of human speech – those words, even the best, are but the dead wires along which the Divine Voice moves – it is the power of God.

"Some men live near to God, as my right arm
Is near to me; and then they walk about
Mailed in full proof of faith, and bear a charm
That mocks at fear, and bars the door on doubt,
And dares the impossible."

Just such a man was the Baptist. He was a "man of God." He lived, and moved, and had his being in God. Self to him was an extinct passion. Envy, pride, ambition, jealousy, these were

unknown tongues; his pure soul understood not their meaning. Like his great prototype, "the Spirit of the Lord God" was upon him. His life was one conscious inspiration; and John himself had been baptized with the baptism of which he spoke, but which he himself could not give, the baptism of the Holy Ghost and of fire. This only will account for the wonderful effects produced by his preaching. John, in his own experience, had antedated Pentecost, receiving the "power from on high," and as he spoke it was with a tongue of fire, a voice in whose accent and tone the people could detect the deeper Voice of God.

But if John could not baptize with the higher baptism, usurping the functions of the One coming after, he could, and he did, institute a lower, symbolic baptism of water, that thus the visible might lead up to the invisible. In what mode John's baptism was administered we cannot tell, nor is it material that we should know. We do know, however, that the baptism of the Spirit – and in John's mind the two were closely related – was constantly referred to in Scripture as an effusion, a "pouring out," a sprinkling, and never once as an immersion. And what was the "baptism of fire" to the mind of John? Was it not that which the prophet Isaiah had experienced, when the angel touched his lips with the live coal taken from the altar, pronouncing over him the great absolution, "Lo, this hath touched thy lips; and thine iniquity is taken away, and thy sin purged" (Isa. vi. 7)? At best, the baptism of water is but a shadow of the better thing, the outward symbol of an inward grace. We need not

quarrel about modes and forms. Scripture has purposely left them indeterminate, so that we need not wrangle about them. There is no need that we exalt the shadow, levelling it up to the substance; and still less should we level it down, turning it into a playground for the schools.

Thus far the lives of Jesus and John have lain apart. One growing up in the hill-country of Galilee, the other in the hill-country of Judæa, and then in the isolation of the wilderness, they have never looked in each other's face, though they have doubtless heard often of each other's mission. They meet at last. John had been constantly telling of One who was coming after – "after," indeed, in order of time, but "before," infinitely before, in pre-eminence and authority. Mightier than he, He was the Lord. John would deem it an honour to kneel down before so august a Master, to untie and bear away His shoes; for in such a Presence servility was both becoming and ennobling. With such words as these the crier in the wilderness had been transferring the people's thought from himself, and setting their hearts listening for the Coming One, so preparing and broadening His way. Suddenly, in one of the pauses of his ministrations, a Stranger presents Himself, and asks that the rite of baptism may be administered to Him. There is nothing peculiar about His dress; He is younger than the Baptist – much younger, apparently, for the rough, ascetic life has prematurely aged him – but such is the grace and dignity of His person, such the mingled "strength and beauty" of His manhood, that even John, who never

quailed in the presence of mortal before, is awed and abashed now. Discerning the innate royalty of the Stranger, and receiving a monition from the Higher World, with which he kept up close correspondence, the Baptist is assured that it is He, the Lord and Christ. Immediately his whole manner changes. The voice that has swept over the land like a whirlwind, now is hushed, subdued, speaking softly, deferentially, reverentially. Here is a Presence in which his imperatives all melt away and disappear, a Will that is infinitely higher than his own, a Person for whom his baptism is out of place. John is perplexed; he hesitates, he demurs. "I have need to be baptized of Thee, and comest Thou to me?" and John, Elias-like, would fain have wrapped his mantle around his face, burying out of sight his little "me," in the presence of the Lord. But Jesus said, "Suffer it now: for thus it becometh us to fulfil all righteousness" (Matt. iii. 15).

The baptism of Jesus was evidently a new kind of baptism, one in which the usual formulas were strangely out of place; and the question naturally arises, Why should Jesus submit to, and even ask for, a baptism that was so associated with repentance and sin? Could there be any place for repentance, any room for confession, in the Sinless One? John felt the anomaly, and so shrank from administering the rite, till the reply of Jesus put His baptism on different ground – ground altogether clear of any personal demerit. Jesus asked for baptism, not for the washing away of sin, but that He might "fulfil all righteousness." He was baptized, not for His own sake, but for the world's

sake. Coming to redeem humanity, He would identify Himself with that humanity, even the sinful humanity that it was. Son of God, He would become a true Son of man, that through His redemption all other sons of men might become true sons of God. Bearing the sins of many, taking away the sin of the world, that heavy burden lay at His heart from the first; He could not lay it down until He left it nailed to His cross. Himself knowing no sin, He yet becomes the Sin-offering, and is "numbered among the transgressors." And as Jesus went to the cross and into the grave mediatorially, as Humanity's Son, so Jesus now passes into the baptismal waters mediatorially, repenting for that world whose heart is still hard, and whose eyes are dry of godly tears, and confessing the sin which He in love has made His own, the "sin of the world," the sin He has come to make atonement for and to bear away.

Such is the meaning of the Jordan baptism, in which Jesus puts the stamp of Divinity upon John's mission, while John bears witness to the sinlessness of Jesus. But a Higher Witness came than even that of John; for no sooner was the rite administered, and the river-bank regained, than the heavens were opened, and the Spirit of God, in the form of a fiery dove, descended and alighted on the head of Jesus; while a Voice out of the Unseen proclaimed, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." And so the Son of man receives the heavenly, as well as the earthly baptism. Baptized with water, He is now baptized with the Holy Ghost and with fire, anointed with the unction

of the Holy One. But why should the Holy Spirit descend upon Jesus in the form of a dove, and afterwards upon the disciples in the form of cloven tongues of fire? We can understand the symbolism of the cloven tongues; for was not their mission to preach and teach, spreading and establishing the kingdom by a consecrated speech – the Divine word carried forward by the human voice? What, then, is the meaning of the dove-form? Does it refer to the dove of the Old Dispensation, which bearing the olive-leaf in its mouth, preached its Gospel to the dwellers in the ark, telling of the abatement of the angry waters, and of a salvation that was near? And was not Jesus a heavenly Dove, bearing to the world the olive-branch of reconciliation and of peace, proclaiming the fuller, wider Gospel of mercy and of love? The supposition, at any rate, is a possible one, while the words of Jesus would almost make it a probable one; for speaking of this same baptism of the Spirit, He says – and in His words we can hear the beat and whir of dove-wings – "He anointed me to preach good tidings to the poor: He hath sent me to proclaim release to the captives, ... to set at liberty them that are bruised" (iv. 18).

The interview between Jesus and John was but brief, and in all probability final. They spend the following night near to each other, but apart. The day after, John sees Jesus walking, but the narrative would imply that they did not meet. John only points to Him and says, "Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world;" and they part, each to follow his separate path,

and to accomplish his separate mission.

"The Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world." Such was John's testimony to Jesus, in the moment of his clearest illumination. He saw in Jesus, not as one learned writer would have us suppose, the sheep of David's pastoral, its life encircled with green pastures and still waters – not this, but a lamb, "the Lamb of God," the Paschal Lamb, led all uncomplaining to the slaughter, and by its death bearing away sin – not either the sin of a year or the sin of a race, but "the sin of the world." Never had prophet so prophesied before; never had mortal eye seen so clearly and so deeply into God's great mystery of mercy. How, then, can we explain that mood of disappointment and of doubt which afterwards fell upon John? What does it mean that from his prison he should send two of his disciples to Jesus with the strange question, "Art Thou He that cometh, or look we for another?" (vii. 19). John is evidently disappointed – yes, and dejected too; and the Elias still, Herod's prison is to him the juniper of the desert. He thought the Christ would be one like unto himself, crying in the wilderness, but with a louder voice and more penetrating accent. He would be some ardent Reformer, with axe in hand, or fan, and with baptism of fire. But lo, Jesus comes so different from his thought – with no axe in hand that he can see, with no baptism of fire that he can hear of, a Sower rather than a Winnower, scattering thoughts, principles, beatitudes, and parables, telling not so much of "the wrath to come" as of the love that is already come, if men will but repent

and receive it – that John is fairly perplexed, and actually sends to Jesus for some word that shall be a solvent for his doubts. It only shows how this Elias, too, was a man of like passions with ourselves, and that even prophets' eyes were sometimes dim, reading God's purposes with a blurred vision. Jesus returns a singular answer. He says neither Yes nor No; but He goes out and works His accustomed miracles, and then dismisses the two disciples with the message, "Go your way, and tell John what things ye have seen and heard; how that the blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, to the poor the Gospel is preached. And blessed is he, whosoever shall not be offended in Me." These words are in part a quotation from John's favourite prophet, Isaiah, who emphasized as no other prophet did the evangelistic character of Christ's mission – which characteristic John seems to have overlooked. In his thought the Christ was Judge, the great Refiner, sifting the base from the pure, and casting it into some Gehenna of burnings. But Jesus reminds John that mercy is before and above judgment; that He has come, "not to condemn the world," but to save it, and to save it, not by reiterations of the law, but by a manifestation of love. Ebal and Sinai have had their word; now Gerizim and Calvary must speak.

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