

OUR LORD'S USE OF THE OLD TESTAMENT.

ST. MATTHEW xxiv. 29-34.

CANON FARRAR, in the course of his chapter on "The Home at Nazareth" in his *Life of Christ*, has some interesting remarks upon the nature of the training and culture that the child Jesus must have there received, and implies that the "profound and ready knowledge of the Scriptures, which He afterwards displayed, must have been largely due to the study of them in those quiet years during which He 'increased in wisdom and stature.' That his knowledge of the sacred writings was deep and extensive—that in fact He must almost have known them by heart—is clear, not only from his direct quotations, but also from the numerous allusions which He made to the Law and to the *Hagiographa*, as well as to Isaiah, Jeremiah, Daniel, Joel, Hosea, Micah, Zechariah, Malachi, and, above all, to the Book of Psalms."¹ This thorough knowledge of the ancient Scriptures is of course recognized by all Commentators upon the Gospels, to whatever school they belong; but it sometimes seems as if, like many other truths which are accepted in theory, it was too often lost sight of in practice, and not properly acknowledged to be (what to a great extent it really is) a key to the meaning of our Lord's discourses. We are apt to forget how the Old Testament formed the entire literature of the Jews, and how it was the sole subject of study among them, even more than the Bible was among the Puritans of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when "England became the people of a book, and that book was the Bible."² "The power of the book over the mass of Englishmen shewed itself in a thousand superficial ways, and in none more conspicuously than in the influence it

¹ Farrar's "Life of Christ," vol. i. p. 90.

² Green's "Short History of the English People," p. 447.

exerted on ordinary speech. It formed the whole literature which was practically accessible to ordinary Englishmen; and when we recall the number of common phrases which we owe to great authors, the bits of Shakespeare, or Milton, or Dickens, or Thackeray, which unconsciously interweave themselves in our ordinary talk, we shall better understand the strange mosaic of Biblical words and phrases which coloured English talk two hundred years ago. The mass of picturesque allusion and illustration which we borrow from a thousand books our fathers were forced to borrow from one; and the borrowing was the easier and more natural that the range of the Hebrew literature fitted it for the expression of every phase of feeling. When Spenser poured forth his warmest love-notes in the 'Epithalamion' he adopted the very words of the Psalmist, as he bade the gates open for the entrance of his bride. When Cromwell saw the mists break over the hills of Dunbar, he hailed the sun-burst with the cry of David: 'Let God arise, and let his enemies be scattered. Like as the smoke vanisheth, so shalt Thou drive them away.' Even to common minds this familiarity with grand poetic imagery in prophet and apocalypse gave a loftiness and ardour of expression that, with all its tendency to exaggeration and bombast, we may prefer to the slipshod vulgarisms of to-day."¹

Mr. Green's words in the passage just quoted will apply, *mutatis mutandis*, to the Jewish nation two thousand years ago; and we shall never understand the New Testament aright, unless we have thoroughly grasped this truth. When we have once realized it fully, and are on the look out for allusions, references, and glances back to the Old Testament on every page, we have taken a first step on the road towards a right understanding of it. But it is difficult to realize it thoroughly. A great part of the Old Testament—say the Prophets, and the Minor Prophets

¹ "History of the English People," vol. iii. p. 11.

especially—is so unfamiliar to the ordinary English reader, and indeed to the mass of students of the New Testament, that it requires a great effort of mind, and a special training, to throw ourselves back into the position of those to whom our Lord's discourses were first spoken; and to realize how quick and ready they would be to catch allusions and references to books that formed a part of their ordinary everyday life, even more than the Gospels do of our own. The truth is that the student ought to approach the study of the New Testament through that of the Old, instead of taking it first and as an independent study, as is generally done now. There may of course be great difficulties in the way of this in many cases; but, at least, no student should be without Grinfield's invaluable "Editio Hellenistica" of the New Testament, in which he will find passages of the Septuagint illustrative of the text set forth at length, a reference to which will often guide him to the right interpretation of a difficult passage far more surely than the ablest of the ordinary Commentaries.

I propose to test the truth of these remarks by a consideration of a part of the difficult discourse given in St. Matthew xxiv. This discourse was spoken on the Mount of Olives, in answer to the question of the four apostles, Peter, James, John, and Andrew, "When shall these things be? and what shall be the sign of thy coming, and of the end of the world?" Of the familiarity of *two* of these four apostles, viz. Peter and John, with the Old Testament in all its parts, we have ample evidence from their own writings, which teem with allusions to it; and there is no reason to think that James and Andrew were less familiar with the sacred text than their brothers. If, then, we find that, in this discourse, our Lord is taking up and repeating passage after passage of the Old Testament, we may be sure that the allusions and references would be at once caught by those who heard Him; and that the right interpretation

of his words must depend, to a great extent, on the meaning of the passages of the Prophets from which they are drawn.

The first part of the discourse, as far as Verse 28 in St. Matthew's report, is comparatively easy, and is allowed by all critics to refer, *in the main*, to the period that terminated with the destruction of Jerusalem; and there is no sort of difficulty in referring it *entirely* to that period. It is in the following Verses (Verses 29-34) that the greatest difficulties are found. These are referred, by the majority of Commentators, mainly, if not exclusively, to the Second Advent. Dean Alford, for example, writes thus: "In what follows from this verse (ver. 29) the Lord speaks mainly and directly of *his great second coming*. Traces there are (as *e.g.* in the literal meaning of ver. 34) of slight and indirect allusions to the destruction of Jerusalem; as there were in the former part to the great events of which that is a foreshadowing:—but no direct mention." To the same effect Professor Plumptre, in the "Commentary for English Readers," edited by Bishop Ellicott, writes as follows: "From this point onwards the prophecy takes a wider range, and passes beyond the narrow limits of the destruction of Jerusalem to the final coming of the Son of Man." There are, however, two very serious difficulties connected with this view, which are evaded, rather than answered, by Commentators as a general rule, viz.: (1) the events of these Verses are directly connected by a note of time with that which goes before and refers by general confession to the destruction of Jerusalem. ("*Immediately after* the tribulation of these days," etc. [εὐθέως δὲ μετὰ τὴν θλίψιν, κ.τ.λ.] St. Matt. "But in these days, after that tribulation," etc. [ἀλλὰ ἐν ἐκείναις ταῖς ἡμέραις μετὰ τὴν θλίψιν ἐκείνην]: St. Mark.) In the face of such a very definite note, it is surely outside the mark to assert, as Dean Alford does, that the Lord was speaking "without regard to the interval," an interval which has already extended to nearly two

thousand years; and Professor Plumptre's explanation can hardly be deemed more satisfactory. (2) Verse 34 directly implies that all that has been prophesied up to that point should happen in the lifetime of that generation: "Verily, I say unto you, this generation shall not pass till all these things be fulfilled." The natural meaning of these words is certainly that the fulfilment would take place within forty years, the period of a "generation" in Scripture; and this is beginning to be freely conceded by the majority of critics,¹ although they seem hardly conscious how fatal it is to that interpretation of the previous Verses which refers them to the end of all things.

We see, then, that the notes of time at the beginning and end of this passage directly suggest the application of the intermediate Verses, not to the Second Advent, but to the destruction of Jerusalem and the establishment of the Christian Church. It remains to examine the Verses in question, and see whether they are applicable to those two closely connected events, and whether those who first heard the words could have understood them in this sense; and I shall endeavour to establish the following points: (1) that the Verses in question are all drawn from the Old Testament prophecies; (2) that the passages quoted directly refer to the destruction of cities and the establishment of a church; and consequently (3) that those who heard the words, and who had asked the questions in answer to which they were spoken, could only have put this meaning upon them. Let us take the verses in question one by one.

Verse 29. "*But immediately after the tribulation of those days shall the sun be darkened, and the moon shall not give her light, and the stars shall fall from heaven, and the*

¹ Meyer's comment appears to be strictly accurate: "*ἡ γενεὰ αὐτῆν, i.e. the present generation, which γενεὰ with αὐτῆν means throughout in the New Testament. Matt. xi. 16; xii. 41, 42, 45; xxiii. 36; Mark viii. 12, 13; Luke vii. 31; xi. 29, 30, 31, 32, 50, 51. Cf. Heb. iii. 10 (Lachmann).*"

powers of the heavens shall be shaken." Commentators, as a rule, refer us to Isaiah xiii. 10, xxxiv. 4, Ezekiel xxxii. 7, Joel ii. 30, as parallel passages; but they fail to insist on the fact that the Verse is really a direct quotation from Isaiah xiii. 10 and xxxiv. 4. If the passages are placed side by side this will be at once apparent.

MATTHEW xxiv. 29.

The sun shall be darkened, and the moon shall not give her light.

(καὶ ἡ σελήνη οὐ δώσει τὸ φέγγος αὐτῆς.)

And the stars shall fall from heaven.

(οἱ ἀστέρες πεσοῦνται ἐκ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ.)

And the powers of the heavens shall be shaken.

(καὶ αἱ δυνάμεις τῶν οὐρανῶν σαλευθήσονται.)

ISAIAH.

(xiii. 10) The sun shall be darkened in his going forth, and the moon shall not cause her light to shine.

(LXX. καὶ ἡ σελήνη οὐ δώσει τὸ φῶς αὐτῆς.)

(xxxiv. 4) the host of heaven shall be dissolved.

(LXX. τακήσονται πᾶσαι αἱ δυνάμεις τῶν οὐρανῶν.)

And all their host shall fall down.

(LXX. καὶ πάντα τὰ ἄστρα πεσεῖται.)

The order of the two last clauses, it will be seen, is reversed in the Gospel; but the whole Verse is evidently drawn directly from the two passages in Isaiah, which refer respectively to the destruction of Babylon and of Edom. Is it not clear, then, that the reference would at once be caught by the Apostles, and that they would see that their Master was taking up the language in which the Prophet had described the destruction of the world-powers, and applying it to the holy city, which should be as Babylon or as Edom? Just as Malachi had closed his prophecy with a solemn warning that Israel might incur the fate of the Canaanites who had been driven out before them, "Lest I come and smite the land with a ban," (וְהָרַס) as if to say that, could Israel resemble the Canaanites in character, it will also

necessarily share the fate of that people ; so the Lord would say that Jerusalem shall be destroyed as were the world-powers, whose sins it was imitating. It is, it may be added, a strong confirmation of this view that St. Peter quotes the similar passage in Joel ii., in his discourse on the day of Pentecost, and refers it to what was then happening, and not to the end of all things, as might have been expected.

Verse 30. "*And then shall appear the sign (τὸ σημεῖον) of the Son of Man in heaven.*" It would be wearisome to collect all the suggestions that have been offered as to *what* this sign is to be. The favourite explanations either identify the "sign" with the Son of Man, as Bengel (*Ipse erit signum sui*), or take it of the cross ; but it appears to have escaped notice that in those passages of the Old Testament where Isaiah speaks of a standard the Septuagint renders the word **דגל** by *σημεῖον* no less than *four* times (xi. 12 ; xiii. 2 ; xviii. 3 ; xxxiii. 23), by *σημαία* once (xxx. 17), and by *σύσσημον* three times (v. 26 ; xlix. 22 ; lxii. 10). The word is only found in Isaiah in two other places (xi. 10 ; xxxi. 9), and there the Septuagint has quite missed its meaning, as it has in three out of the five passages where it is found in Jeremiah ; while in the two remaining ones (xxviii. 12, 27, Heb. li. 12, 27), it is rendered by *σημεῖον*. Is it not fair to conclude from this that the word which the Lord actually used (if he spoke in Aramaic) was **דגל** or **דגלגל**, both of which are used in the Targum for "standard," and that when he spoke of the "sign of the Son of Man" appearing in heaven He was alluding to such passages as these ? "In that day there shall be a root of Jesse, which shall stand for an *ensign* of the people ; to it shall the Gentiles seek : and his rest shall be glorious. And it shall come to pass in that day, that the Lord shall set his hand again the second time to recover the remnant of his people, which shall be left, from Assyria, and from Egypt, and from Pathros, and from Cush, and from Elam, and from Shinar, and from Hamath, and from

the islands of the sea. And He shall set up an *ensign* for the nations, and shall assemble the outcasts of Israel, and gather together the dispersed of Judah from the four corners of the earth" (Isaiah xi. 10-12). "Behold I will lift up mine hand to the Gentiles, and set up my *standard* to the people, and they shall bring thy sons in their arms, and thy daughters shall be carried upon their shoulders" (Isaiah xlix. 22). "Go through, go through the gates; prepare ye the way of the people; cast up, cast up the highway; gather out the stones; lift up a *standard* for the people" (Isaiah lxii. 10). All these passages refer to the establishment of a catholic church, and nobody thinks of interpreting the details literally, or of inquiring *what* the standard is. Would, then, the Apostles, whose minds would be thoroughly familiar with them and revert to them at once, be troubled by the difficulties that perplex modern Commentators, and not rather take the words as purely figurative, just as we ourselves do the similar passages of the Old Testament?

"*And all the tribes of the earth shall mourn.*" The reference here is confessedly to Zechariah xii. 12-14, verses that immediately follow the passage "they shall look on Me whom they pierced," which is quoted by St. John (xix. 37) as having received a fulfilment at the Crucifixion. This of itself leads us to expect that the words which follow have their reference to the era that commenced with the Crucifixion and all the events that followed close upon it, and not to a far distant future. The passage, Zechariah xii. 1-xiii. 6, forms a section by itself; and, if read as a whole, will easily be seen to refer to the establishment of the Christian Church, and the outpouring of the Spirit of Grace upon the inhabitants of Jerusalem, so that they should bitterly repent of the death of Messiah, and purify themselves from all iniquity. "The time and full commencement of the fulfilment," writes Keil, on Verse 10 *seq.*, "shews itself in the success which attended the preaching of Peter on the first

day of Pentecost, namely, in the fact that three thousand were pricked in their heart with penitential sorrow on account of the crucifixion of their Saviour, and were baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins (Acts ii. 37-41), and in the further results which followed the preaching of the Apostles for the conversion of Israel (Acts iii. 5)."¹

"*And they shall see the Son of Man coming in the clouds of heaven, with power and great glory.*" The allusion to Daniel vii. 13, 14, is noted by all Commentators; but the majority of them have failed to point out that the prophecy refers, not to the consummation of the kingdom at the last day, but to the setting up of the kingdom on earth, *i.e.* the establishment of the Christian Church. If the verses be read in connexion with what goes before, instead of being isolated and severed from the context, this will be perfectly clear. The Prophet first sees the four beasts (the first like a lion, the second like a bear, etc.), representing four great world-powers; and then, after this, he says: "I saw in the night visions, and behold *one like a Son of Man came with the clouds of heaven,*" etc. "The dominion which had been exercised by tyrants was henceforward to be entrusted to the saints of the Most High. The former rulers had come forth from the sea, the symbol of all confusion and instability; the Divine Ruler came from heaven."² And that the interpretation which connects this prediction with the establishment of the Church on earth, rather than with the end of all things, is the true one, is rendered almost a certainty by the fact that the very same passage is referred to by our Lord during his trial before the high priest; and that the vision of the Son of Man is then spoken of, not as in the far distant future, but as being "from henceforth" (*ἀπάρτι* in St. Matthew xxvi. 64; *ἀπὸ τοῦ νῦν*, Luke xxii.

¹ Keil on the Minor Prophets, vol. ii. p. 389.

² Dr. Westcott, in the Speaker's Commentary, on St. John i.

69); clearly implying that it was a spiritual vision to begin at once. And again, when the same passage is referred to in St. Matthew xvi. 28 (=Mark ix. 1; Luke ix. 27) the vision is placed apparently in the lifetime of some of those standing by. We conclude then that the expression, where it occurs in this 24th chapter, has no other reference than that, and is to be referred to the "coming of the Son of Man" which took place when the Christian Church was established upon the ruins of Judaism.

Verse 31. "*And He shall send his angels with a great sound of a trumpet*" (or "with a great trumpet," *μετὰ σάλπιγγος μεγάλης*: Tisch.) "*and they shall gather together his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.*" The general thought, and in part the phraseology, of this Verse is drawn from Isaiah xxvii. 12, 13, and Zechariah ii. 6. The first of these passages runs as follows: "And it shall come to pass in that day that the Lord shall beat off from the channel of the river unto the stream of Egypt, and *ye shall be gathered* (LXX. *συναγάγετε*) *one by one*, O ye children of Israel. And it shall come to pass in that day that *the great trumpet shall be blown* (LXX. *σαλπιούσι τῇ σάλπιγγι τῇ μεγάλῃ*), and they shall come, which were ready to perish in the land of Egypt, and shall worship the Lord in the holy mount at Jerusalem."

Here we notice (1) the blowing of the great trumpet, and (2) the gathering together of God's people, both of which ideas reappear in our Lord's words. The allusion in Isaiah is, confessedly, to the restoration of the Israel of God, and the establishment of a Church (whether it be Jewish or Christian) on earth: why then should we seek for a further reference to the last judgment in words of our Lord plainly drawn from those of the Prophet? It may be well to note too that in Isaiah xviii. 3 we find the blowing of the trumpet connected with the setting up of the standard (as also in Jer. iv. 5, 6, 21; li. 27); a combination which

illustrates and lends some support to the interpretation here proposed of these verses of St. Matthew: viz., that they refer to the trumpet call of the gospel, and the gathering together of the elect of God into a visible Church on earth.

The second passage which would appear to have been in our Lord's mind, and which would certainly have been recalled to the Apostles by his words, is Zechariah ii. 6; a passage directly referring to the restoration of Israel in this world: "Ho, ho, come forth and flee from the land of the north, saith the Lord: for I have spread you abroad *as the four winds of heaven*" (LXX. διότι ἐκ τῶν τεσσάρων ἀνέμων τοῦ οὐρανοῦ συνάξω ὑμᾶς, words that must have occurred to the Apostles at once when they heard ἐπισυνάξουσιν τοὺς ἐκλεκτοὺς αὐτοῦ ἐκ τῶν τεσσάρων ἀνέμων, while the following words ἀπ' ἄκρων οὐρανῶν ἕως ἄκρων αὐτῶν would have suggested the similar promise in Deut. xxx. 4: "If any of thine be driven out unto the outmost part of heaven, from thence will the Lord thy God gather thee": LXX. ἐὰν ᾗ ἡ διασπορά σου ἀπ' ἄκρου τοῦ οὐρανοῦ ἕως ἄκρου τοῦ οὐρανοῦ, ἐκεῖθεν συνάξει σε Κύριος ὁ Θεός σου).

There only remains the mention of *the angels* to be considered in this Verse. A little thought, however, will shew that there is nothing in it against the interpretation here proposed; for (1), if we take "angels" in the ordinary sense of the word, we are surely not prepared to deny their ministry on behalf of the faithful now in this world. If angels ministered to the Son of Man on earth, were they not also agents in the establishment of the Church which He came to found? But (2) there is no need to restrict the term to "angels" properly so called. An ἄγγελος had been spoken of by Malachi as preceding the coming of Jehovah, and preparing his way before Him; and this ἄγγελος is again and again interpreted, in the New Testament, of the Baptist. Is there then any difficulty in taking the words before us of the messengers of the New Covenant? (Com-

pare the use of ἄγγελος in Luke vii. 24; ix. 52.) On the whole, however, when we consider that the subject is described from a heavenly point of view, it seems more probable that the *unseen* agents are described than that the human instruments in the work are mentioned. But, whichever interpretation be adopted, there is nothing whatever in it that militates against the application of the words to the founding of the Christian Church.

The following Verses (Verses 32, 33) neither admit nor require any illustration from the Old Testament. They merely form a warning to the Apostles not to neglect the signs of the times; and at least suggest that "all these things" that have just been spoken of shall happen in their lifetime; a view which appears to be rendered certain by the following verse, to which allusion has been already made: "Verily I say unto you that this generation shall not pass till all these things be fulfilled." And then, after the parenthetical confirmation of the truth of his words, "Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away," there follows: "But of that day and hour knoweth no man, no, not the angels of heaven, but my Father only."

And here I cannot but think that Bengel was right in pointing out the change from ταῦτα to ἐκείνος: "All *these things*," viz. the things just described, shall happen in the lifetime of this generation; but of THAT DAY knoweth no man. According to this view ἡ ἡμέρα ἐκείνη is put absolutely for the judgment day, as in many other passages of the New Testament (cf. Matt. vii. 22; Luke x. 12; 2 Thess. i. 10; 2 Tim. i. 12, 18; iv. 8), and the whole discourse up to this point refers (as we have seen that it well may) to the destruction of Jerusalem and the foundation of the Christian Church; thus giving a direct and clear answer to the first two questions of the disciples, "When shall these things (the destruction and desolation of the temple)

be, and what shall be the sign of thy coming?" While the discourse from Verse 36 onwards refers to their third question concerning the end of the world (*ἡ συντέλεια τοῦ αἰῶνος*, for which expression compare Chapters xiii. 39, 40, 49, and xxviii. 20). They, in their questions, had not clearly distinguished between these events, nor, according to the ordinary interpretation of the discourse, did our Lord in his answer. But, according to the view here advocated, He plainly distinguished between the two comings, gave full details in prophetic language and imagery drawn from the Old Testament concerning the *first*, and marked out its date as taking place during the lifetime of his hearers; while of his *final* coming (*παρουσία*) He distinctly refused to tell them, and grounded his refusal upon the fact that "of *that* day and hour knoweth no man, no, not the angels which are in heaven, *neither the Son*, but the Father" (St. Mark xiii. 32).

This interpretation, it seems to me, is simple, and far more consistent, and when we take into consideration how much of the discourse is drawn from the Old Testament prophets, more *natural*, than that which has been commonly accepted. And I may add that it seems to be supported by the closing words of St. Matthew's Gospel, where our Lord promises that his presence shall be with the disciples "until the end of the world," thus distinguishing between his first *παρουσία* which includes his spiritual presence with his Church, and his final one at "the consummation of the age."

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