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## Symbolism in the Old and New Testaments.

BY THE REVEREND CANON BINDLEY, D.D., DENTON, NORFOLK.

RECENT study of the apocalyptic literature of the century and a half before Christ has shown that a great deal of what had usually been considered eschatological language in the New Testament is not eschatological at all, but merely stereotyped and conventional symbolism common to the later prophetic and extra-canonical writers. There was a rather large body of floating apocalyptic symbolic thought and phrase, which rose to the lips without any very close relevancy to immediate circumstances whenever the unexpected or startling was predicted or described. There is a similarity of metaphor and of phrase which shows that such figures of speech had worked themselves into the texture of ordinary thought, so that the language could be used, and would be understood as being used, in a purely symbolic sense. For instance, celestial portents are of such a nature as always to arrest attention most signally; and conversely, by a figure of speech, anything that signally arrests attention could be symbolized in terms of celestial portents. When a vulgar person ejaculates 'Thunder!' as an expression of great astonishment, he is not calling attention to an electrical disturbance in the clouds; he is merely using a symbol which connotes a startling surprise.

I want to examine a few examples of symbolism in the Old and New Testaments which, I believe, have been much misunderstood. We have to be on our guard always lest our Western matter-of-fact, prosaic literalness lead us astray when estimating facts portrayed under the forms of Oriental symbolism and poetry. We Westerners lack the rich imaginativeness of the Easterns. Our love of literalism hinders the play of the imagination, because we invariably want to materialize a mental picture presented for our contemplation. Take as an example the symbolic description of the Son of Man in the Apocalypse (Rev 1<sup>13f.</sup>)—eyes a flame of fire, feet like brass, seven stars held in the right hand, a sword proceeding out of the mouth. You cannot depict it on canvas without producing a monstrosity: it is not a picture, it is symbolism.

The light and the sun are the chief sources of life and joy; and anything which interferes with the regular supply of light is a real catastrophe; hence physical and mental horrors could, in primitive symbolism, very naturally be described as the

darkening of the sun and moon. Conversely, the portrayal of a time of great joy was represented by the figures of the moon's light equalling that of the sun, and of the sun's light being sevenfold multiplied, or of light continuing throughout eventime, or of there being no night at all (Is 30<sup>26</sup>, Zec 14<sup>7</sup>, Rev 21<sup>25</sup>). Instances of catastrophes symbolically delineated occur in several of the prophets. Isaiah wishes to describe the day of Babylon's capture by the Medes. This is how he does it (13<sup>9, 10</sup>): 'Behold, the day of the Lord cometh, with wrath and fierce anger. . . . The stars shall not give their light, the sun shall be darkened . . . and the moon shall not cause her light to shine.' Similarly Ezekiel describes the devastation of Egypt by Babylonia (32<sup>7, 8</sup>): 'When I shall extinguish thee, I will cover the heaven and make the stars thereof dark; I will cover the sun with a cloud, and the moon shall not give her light. All the bright lights of heaven will I make dark over thee, and set darkness upon thy land.' Exactly the same language is used by Joel to describe a plague of locusts (2<sup>1, 10, 11</sup>): 'The day of the Lord cometh . . . the earth quaketh, the heavens tremble: the sun and the moon are darkened, and the stars withdraw their shining: for the day of the Lord is very terrible.' And in the same chapter he uses precisely the same language to describe an exceptional outpouring of God's spirit upon all flesh (vv. 28<sup>f.</sup>). Once more, the same prophet when speaking of the judgment of the nations in the valley of Jehoshaphat (3<sup>14-16</sup>) says: 'The day of the Lord is near . . . the sun and the moon are darkened, and the stars withdraw their shining . . . and the heavens and the earth shall shake.' The point to be observed is that four totally distinct kinds of overwhelming events are all depicted under the same imagery derived from fearful portents in the sky. First, Babylon's capture by the Medes and Egypt's overthrow by Babylonia; secondly, Palestine ravaged by locusts; thirdly, the Grand Assize of the nations; and lastly, an exceptional outpouring of inspirational gifts. This shows that that kind of language was purely conventional, and was no more meant to be taken literally than the exclamation 'Thunder!' of an astonished person to-day. The unscientific mind, like the mind of a Central African now, was terror-struck by an eclipse, which interfered with

the regular and unbroken course of daylight, and that feeling riveted itself into ordinary speech for any startling occurrence.

The language used by the author of *The Assumption of Moses*—that Pharisee quietist who was an exact contemporary of our Lord—in depicting the Coming of God's Kingdom and the vindication of the righteous, is evidently drawn from the same sources as that of the prophets :

Then shall His Kingdom appear throughout His whole creation. . . .

For the Heavenly One shall arise from the throne of His Kingdom

And shall come forth from His Holy Habitation With indignation and wrath on account of His children.

And the earth shall tremble, even to its bounds shall it be shaken ;

And the lofty mountains shall be brought low, And the hills shall be shaken and fall.

The sun shall not give her light,

And the horns of the moon shall be turned into darkness and be broken,

And the whole of the moon shall be turned into blood,

And the orbit of the stars shall be disordered, And the sea shall fall into the abyss.

How favourite was the use of these apocalyptic symbols of celestial portents is seen by their reappearance in the reports of Christ's discourse on the end of the Jewish era in the destruction of Jerusalem. 'The sun shall be darkened, and the moon shall not give her light, and the stars shall fall from heaven, and the powers in the heavens shall be shaken ; and then shall they see the Son of man coming in clouds' (Mk 13<sup>24f.</sup>, Mt 24<sup>29</sup>, Lk 21<sup>25</sup>). And this end of an era was to happen in the lifetime of His hearers : 'Verily I say unto you, This generation shall not pass away till all these things be fulfilled.' Failure to recognize apocalyptic symbolism in these expressions has led to much dishonest exegesis in the commentators and to very much misunderstanding and terror on the part of ordinary readers. The same symbolism reappears in Rev 6<sup>12</sup> : 'There was a great earthquake ; and the sun became black as sackcloth of hair, and the whole moon became as blood ; and the stars of the heaven fell . . . and every mountain and island were moved out of their places.'

We may say that præternatural cosmic phenomena form part of the ordinary accompaniments of any description of a Day of Yahweh. They even seemed natural to Joel when he spoke of an extraordinary outpouring of spiritual gifts. So it does not surprise us to find St. Peter employing

Joel's language on the Day of Pentecost to explain the startling nature of the occurrence. But no one can imagine the most devout, spiritual, and enthusiastically religious European describing the Descent of the Holy Spirit as :

'Wonders in the heaven above,  
And signs on the earth beneath ;  
Blood, and fire, and vapour of smoke :  
The sun shall be turned into darkness  
And the moon into blood,  
Before the Day of the Lord come'

(Ac 2<sup>19, 20</sup>).

And yet that kind of phraseology rose quite naturally to St. Peter's lips. The sun going black and the moon swooning in blood-red eclipse are not statements of fact in prose, they are merely poetic symbolism of something portentous, startling, unusual.

No one, I suppose, would interpret Lk 10<sup>18</sup> other than symbolically. When the Seventy, on their return, related their power over demons, Christ said, 'I beheld Satan as lightning fall from heaven.' Here it is generally recognized that under a picturesque symbolic phrase He was announcing the defeat of the powers of evil and the certainty of their ultimate downfall, the promise and earnest of which He saw in His disciples' success. But the symbolism in another passage has not been so readily admitted. When our Lord said to the High Priest and the Sanhedrin, 'I say unto you that from this moment (*ἀπ' ἄρτι*, Mt 26<sup>64</sup> ; *ἀπὸ τοῦ νῦν*, Lk 22<sup>69</sup>) ye shall see the Son of man sitting on the right hand of power and coming on the clouds of heaven,' He was obviously not speaking at all of some dread day in the future—the words *ἀπ' ἄρτι* forbid such an interpretation—but He was quoting the exact words of Dn 7<sup>13</sup>, which portrayed the Judgment on the world-powers and the ushering in of the universal and everlasting Kingdom of the Saints of God. That is to say, He was employing perfectly well-known apocalyptic language to announce what His hearers would perfectly well understand meant their own speedy doom. Their judgment and His Kingdom, in this aspect of it, began from that moment. Indeed, it is quite clear from Mk 13<sup>24</sup>, Mt 24<sup>29</sup>, Lk 21<sup>27</sup>, that phrases such as 'the sun shall be darkened, and the moon shall not give her light' ; 'the stars of heaven shall fall, and the powers of heaven shall be shaken' ; and, more especially, 'the Coming of the Son of Man' are simply symbolic expressions for the end of one era and the beginning of a new one. St. Peter's use of some of these phrases of the Descent of the Spirit on the Day of Pentecost proves how utterly

mistaken we are in understanding such portents as referring to some distant day at the end of the world. There is nothing in what is called our Lord's eschatological discourse which even hints at an end of the world. Everything that is said there can be explained of the abolition of the Jewish polity in the destruction of Jerusalem. And if this be so, it is clear why the Fourth Gospel has preserved no reminiscence of this discourse. When that Gospel was written Jerusalem had fallen ;

the Holy City was no longer the centre of Jewish (or even of Christian) life, and therefore no report of Christ's words on the subject was any longer needed. The crisis had passed. But had those words contained any prediction or warnings about a final Judgment or an end of the world, the case would have been quite otherwise. We should have expected the writer to hand them on. For the author of this Gospel evidently the 'Coming' was to be understood in a spiritual sense.

## In the Study.

### *Virginibus Puerisque.*

#### Scouting for the Harbour.

BY THE REVEREND WILLIAM MAXWELL, M.A.,  
MONTROSE.

'I will guide thee with mine eye.'—Ps 32<sup>o</sup>.

THE Scout Movement has captured the imagination of the world in a wonderful way. The Jamboree at Birkenhead has focused attention on its far-reaching influence. Each nation has revealed how scouting can fit into its own natural customs, and all together have revealed in action that spirit which surmounts barriers of race and class ; which laughs at difficulties ; which defies hardships and 'smiles' through all.

What is the secret ? Scouting is a game—the greatest of all games—the game of life. Every field is a playing field. Every circumstance gives a call to play the game. Every difficulty tests the boy's physical, mental, and moral nature. Every patrol movement brings him into line to play his part in the great game. Take the simple game of 'Blindfold Drill.'

Every scout who knows the game of 'Blindfold Drill' soon discovers how hopeless his chances are of keeping in line or making progress towards the desired goal.

The long line is drawn up in perfect formation. Each scout from the properly dressed line looks straight ahead, ready for the call to advance. Then eyes are closed. Commands are issued 'Advance,' 'Right Turn,' 'Left Turn,' 'About Turn,' 'Steady.' So the orders go in any order and in quick succession. Every order is obeyed with precision. Two minutes pass in movement.

Then 'Eyes Open !' and behold you are here, while your 'Second' is yonder, and your 'Third' is nowhere within reach. Some face each other. Others have their backs to each other. Some are even in danger of falling into the ditch or the camp fire. No one is in the way of reaching the proper goal. No one could believe that the troop had been in perfect formation. Yet they have listened to orders. They have turned at the summons. They have advanced straight forward when left to do so. But in spite of their obedience they are hopelessly lost.

That is life. It is pretty much 'blindfold drill.' We obey. We turn. We advance. We do our best. But we don't get there. How the Israelites wandered in the wilderness ! They turned. They halted. They marched. They came to Massah and Meribah, Sinai and everywhere, and anywhere except to the promised land. Obedience is not enough if the eyes are closed. But the eyes are always closed. We never know what a new turn will reveal or a new step bring us to. Life is not a walk by sight, but by trust in One who knows whither we are going and can lead us in the true way.

The Scouts have another game called 'The Hidden Harbour.' That harbour is pointed out to them as their goal. One of their own number is chosen to take up the position from which he can survey the whole ocean. His voice is sounded often enough to make each scout familiar with it. Then single file is the order ; each scout holding on to the belt of the one in front. All are blindfolded. The order is given, 'March !' Then the pilot takes command. 'Steady !' and forward they go in the straight course. 'Port !' and they turn to the