

THE DESCENT INTO EGYPT.

ST. MATTHEW ii. 13-15.

THE explanation usually given of this event in our Lord's childhood is that it was a device necessary to preserve the Infant's life, intended, as regards its form, to fulfil an Old Testament prophecy. And with this explanation the whole significance of the incident is supposed to be exhausted. Negative critics, somewhat naively accepting as complete this statement of its place and purpose in the career of Jesus, find no difficulty in excising as a mythical excrescence an event in itself so improbable, and connected by such a slender and isolated attachment to the main body of the life. But if it can be shewn that the flight into Egypt was no mere expedient of rescue, but is, on the contrary, a moulding factor of continuous influence in Christ's life, giving to the subsequent stream of his fortunes a quite novel character and direction, then we shall have rendered the short and easy method of excision a much more difficult operation, while what was a point of defensive weakness will be turned into a position of offensive strength. For it is certain that every new exhibition of organic and teleological continuity in the narratives of the Gospels (regarded merely as narratives) renders more and more untenable that theory which represents our Gospel record as an agglomeration of

myths sporadically produced in time and space, and randomly crystallized upon a slender thread of actual history. An adequate exposition is commonly the best apologetic.

The Divine purpose of our Lord's incarnation required that during his days on earth He should share the experience of ordinary human life. It was therefore essential that He should not be recognized and treated as superhuman. The prince who will really become acquainted with the slights poverty endures must do so *incognito*. And his *incognito* must not be a public secret, but an impenetrable and unsuspected disguise. Therefore it is that, in the Old Testament, the prophetic foreshadowings of the Messiah's intrinsic grandeur are so obscure and imperfect. Therefore it is that all through his ministry He veiled his glory, habitually calling Himself, not the Son of God, but the Son of Man. Had He perpetually flashed the brightness of his glory in men's eyes, it would have been impossible for the Divine Will to be executed, that by wicked hands the Lord of Glory should be crucified and slain. Had not his inner grandeur been so carefully shrouded that, not only the people, but also his friends and disciples, so far from treating Him as a superhuman being, habitually regarded Him as a man like themselves, that other Divine purpose had been frustrated which decreed that He should be in all points tried like as we are; a decree that secured for Him that normal human experience which, acquired on earth, has been carried to heaven, and through the memory of which He can still be touched with the feeling of our infirmities.

This principle in the providential ordering of the circumstances of our Lord's life seems to furnish the clue to a right understanding of the place and purpose of the Descent into Egypt. For, as a matter of fact, the Egyptian exile had a quite paramount influence in procuring for Jesus the social and moral environment indispensable for the acquisition of such an experience. So far from being determined by Herod's deadly designs, and having its powers exhausted in the rescue of the Holy Child, the tyrant's hate was only its occasion, while its real purpose was to exert a decisive and abiding effect on the immediate and future setting of the Saviour's earthly career, so fashioning it as to accomplish the Divine design. Thus, instead of being a detail of subsidiary interest, it is practically the most important occurrence in the Infancy; and our estimate of it must be shaped accordingly. We must consider it, not as a temporary expedient whose value is spent in obviating a threatened danger, but as a fountain-head of far-reaching influence—a momentous fact whose *raison d'être* is to be sought, not in its evanescent occasion, but in its prospective action. We are dealing, not with an effect, but with a cause, having its face not turned to the past but directed to the future. It is not a simple episode, but a crisis and a turning-point, in our Lord's career.

That it *is* a real crisis, and not merely an episode, a glance at the history reveals. For it makes a clear break and division in the life, so that the parts on either side are distinct and dissimilar. The stream is indeed deflected, and placed on quite another plane of movement. Up to this point his advent in the

world had been signalized by startling portents, by miraculous annunciations, by angelic carols, by mysterious stars. Shepherds hasten to worship at his cradle, wise men come to wonder and adore, venerable seers and saintly women greet Him with prophetic ecstasy and holy gladness; so that even Jerusalem began to be stirred with awe and expectation. Suddenly, from all this atmosphere of marvel and adoration, with strange contrast of terror and helplessness, the Infant is snatched away in hurried midnight flight to Egypt; whence, after a period of concealment, He is brought back, not to Bethlehem, where his fame still lingered, but to secluded Nazareth, where the wonder of his birth was quite unknown. And now, in this new plane and section of his life, no portents declare his exalted character, no adoring crowds kneel before Him. Quietly He grows up in a humble home, treated as an ordinary child by his parents, by his companions, and by the whole circle of his neighbours, who do not even suspect his miraculous advent, nor know the high prophecies that heralded his ministry.

What were the reasons for this abrupt and remarkable transition? I think they are these. It was meet that his birth should be marked by marvels; needful that the parents' faith in their Child's grand destiny should be aroused by prophecy, miracle, and adoration; good, too, that in Bethlehem and Jerusalem expectation should be awakened, and the hearts of waiting saints comforted. But it was meet, also, and imperative, that after a certain point all this should cease; for, otherwise, the Divine plan of his life could not have been carried out. Had no Herod's jealous

fear put an end to the glory and acclamation, had portents continued to force men, by an overawing blaze of splendour, to recognize the Infant King, how different would have been his career! Forced into such premature publicity, accepted as the Christ on such unsatisfactory grounds, claimed by men whose Messianic hopes were earthly and ambitious, He could never have known the simple life of a lowly human child, the tenderness of a mother's love, the trials and temptations, the thoughts, hopes, and fears of ordinary boyhood, youth, and manhood. He could not have acquired that natural human experience and discipline which He came to acquire. He might have been the great Messianic King, adored by his countrymen, but not the Man of Sorrows, acquainted with grief. He could not have lived his life of humiliation, nor died his atoning death of shame.

It was indispensable, therefore, that the career of the miraculous Child should be transferred from the plane of marvel and publicity in which it was moving to the secluded and obscure level on which the children of men obtain their earlier training and experience. It was necessary that He should be withdrawn from the notoriety which was already becoming dangerous, and placed in retirement, where He would be unrecognized, and secure alike from intrusive adulation and impatient expectancy. But this change of environment could not possibly be accomplished at Bethlehem. Nor, indeed, as regards the parents, could it be secured without a seeming reversal of their hopes. How then could the task of extricating the Child, and diverting the

stream of his fortunes into the new channel, have been better accomplished than by the sudden forced departure in ignominious flight from Bethlehem, the compulsory concealment for a considerable period in Egypt, and the subsequent return to the quiet and seclusion of Nazareth? It was a sort of catastrophe which, as nothing less could have done, carried his life into a new atmosphere, making a great and definitive break in the course of events, rescuing his youth from the eager but misguided enthusiasm of the people, constraining his very parents to reticence till the time for manifesting Himself had come, and procuring for Him the possibility of a normal experience of human existence.

As an instance of the wide and far-reaching effects of this occurrence of our Lord's infancy in determining the subsequent external mould and setting wherein his experiences were formed, consider the powerful and continuous influence it must have had in fashioning the attitude of Mary and Joseph towards the wondrous Child of promise. Besides the very practical lesson on the prudence of keeping to themselves the marvellous escort of wonder and hope with which He had been ushered into the world, this abrupt and harsh vicissitude of fortune must have had a large and potent effect on their personal dispositions, and on their relation to their Charge. Possessed as they then were with worldly and unspiritual notions of the Messianic King, had not the splendour of the dawn been quickly dashed with storm and gloom, they might have cherished in their hearts thoughts of ambition, selfish dreams, and arrogant hopes, which would have made a discord in

the music of that holy childhood, and, intruding prematurely and mistakenly, would have distorted the fair development of its unsullied innocence. Sharing as they did the false ideas prevalent of the Messiah's mission, they could not safely be trusted with the certitude of his dignity, for their ignorant faith would have urged them into misguided and disastrous action. Because of this immaturity, it was requisite that their hope should be deferred, their confidence shaken, their expectation perplexed, so as to restrain them from hurtful meddling and untimely prompting. It was, in plain words, necessary to shake their exultant but unchastened faith sufficiently to restrain them from venturing any act upon their own responsibility, and to make them content to ponder the past wonders in the secrecy of their hearts, leaving the Child, undisturbed by any premature disclosures, to receive in the slow process of his Father's own teaching the undistorted disclosure of the work He had to do. How effectual on his human parents this education by adversity was, we see from the fact that Jesus was treated in his home, not as a supernatural Infant, but simply as a child, which would have been impossible had marvel and worship continued to attend Him. Moreover, while the flight from Herod, with its seeming eclipse of the dawning promise of glory, served to crush their undue anticipations, it must also, with its foreshadowing of a future not all prosperous, have prepared their hearts for that later revelation of the true destiny of Him whose earthly throne was to be the cross, and his crown a crown of thorns. The mother's sharp pang of terror for her son's life was

the first presaging thrust of the sword that was to pierce through Mary's heart. And the chill gloom of that fear-haunted night was the earliest falling of that shadow of the cross which hovered, like a soul of care, even in the brightest sunshine of that fair life. The chastening memory of proud dreams rudely broken by that midnight agony of dread, and the patient resignation of lowly submission learned during the Egyptian exile, cannot but have contributed in many ways to make the relation of the parents to their sacred Charge more reverent and true and solemn.

Striking confirmation of the justness of this conception of the real purpose served by the Descent into Egypt is furnished by the allusion to Old Testament history which the Evangelist makes when he ends his narrative with the words, "That it might be fulfilled which was spoken of the Lord by the prophet, Out of Egypt have I called my son!" We say allusion to Old Testament history, because it is not fair to assume from this passing reference, made with the customary citation - formula of the period, that the writer supposed the words to be a direct prediction of Christ, which they certainly are not.¹ The prophet is expressly speaking of Israel; and what the Evangelist means by the quotation, is to call attention to the fact that the nation's sojourn in Egypt, with the subsequent restoration, is

¹ It seems hardly necessary to call attention to the impropriety of reading the quotation-formula as if it implied that the Egyptian banishment was brought about by Providence in order to fulfil the prophecy. Even were this a direct prediction, surely it were more natural to say that the occurrence was foretold because it was to happen, than that the event happened because it was foretold; that prophecy conformed itself to the future history, rather than that the history was determined by an arbitrarily-framed prophetic programme.

prophetic of what befell the Infant Jesus. For the one event is typical of the other, in the sense that from the first the second might be expected, since the unchangeableness of the Divine Will, working straight on toward a set purpose on fixed principles that determine uniformity of action, may be counted on in like situations to produce like *dénouements*. This being the foundation of the prophetic power of types, we shall feel the full foreshadowing force of the present instance only when the closeness of the analogy between the two events is appreciated; and that is much greater than is commonly supposed. Naturally enough, the Evangelist emphasizes only the matter-of-fact resemblance in the identity of Egyptian banishment and Divine restoration. But besides this external similarity, with our clue we shall discover also identity of inner motive and underlying design.

The household of Jacob had to leave the Promised Land and descend into Egypt, because their lives were imperilled by a famine, just as had the Infant Jesus, his life being menaced by Herod's hate. But as in the latter case the true purpose was to secure for the Redeemer the kind of life essential for the performance of his work, so, in the other, the grand object accomplished was to remove the Redemption People from a position which would have been fatal to their Divine destiny, and to place them in an environment that would secure their normal and necessary development. For we find that the treasure of the monotheistic and redemptive religion confided to the house of Jacob, depending as it did for its safety on their national separateness, was

in imminent hazard from intermarriage with the nomad families of Canaan, who—shepherds like themselves—were ready enough to form such alliances. Therefore it was that, on occasion of the famine, they were transferred to Egypt, where their national isolation was ensured, since, as we read, “every shepherd is an abomination unto the Egyptians.” And not till Egypt had served its end, and through the exile God had hindered his great purpose from being frustrated, did He triumphantly bring his people back to the Land of Promise. Now, inasmuch as the Almighty will unchangeably execute his redemptive decree, the Divine action in this event was typical and prophetic of what would be done in a similar emergency. Thus, in a very profound and wide sense, the Old Testament story was a foreshadowing of the New Testament event; while the accuracy of our understanding of the purpose of the latter is confirmed by the identity of motive in the former.

It is of course true that the applicability of such prophetic reference in the type to subsequent events could not be perceived beforehand save as a general expectation, and it may therefore be urged that it is valueless. As no doubt it is, if the sole worth of the prophetic aspect of the Divine Revelation be the pleasurable surprise afforded superstitious minds by the discovery of remarkable coincidences between prediction and fulfilment. But if the real value and purpose of the Divine manifestation be to guide, comfort, and strengthen men’s souls, then surely two of its most precious powers are the reassuring foreknowledge of God’s fidelity to his promises, and the

consequent sense of security for the future because of God's dealings in the past—both of which have their origin in the conviction of this universal prophetic character, as apart from particular predictions, of the Divine Revelation. It may well be that, for the most part, the plenitude of meaning and foreshadowing significance reveal themselves only, long after the fulfilment, to a profounder and better instructed insight. But who can tell how often the general typical import and teaching of, for instance, this same Egyptian Exile, has comforted and braced the hearts of good men in times of national captivity, reassuring them amid seeming defeat of final triumph? And when to Simeon, Anna, and the pious souls of Bethlehem, left by the Child's sudden flight disconsolate, news came that He was safe in Egypt, and, though in exile, still alive, is it so certain that none of them, struck by the resemblance, remembered amid their grief and fears how once before the people, on whose fortunes then hung the world's hope of redemption, pining in Egyptian bondage far from the Land of Promise, had seemed to be cast off by God for ever? And then, as the ancient story rose before their minds, and they recalled how the darkness had been rolled away, and out of seeming misfortune only good had come, their courage would revive, and hope return that once again, as in olden times, God would bring his Son out of Egypt, and triumphantly accomplish his purpose of mercy.

W. G. ELMSLIE.