

microscopic, and wholly beyond the critical or literary power of early Christianity. And its results will be purely scientific, being an induction from a large number of absolutely indisputable facts, the phenomena exhibited in certain documents.

Before examining these, however, some other preliminary questions must be considered.

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GIDEON.

THE story of that great Hebrew judge Gideon is the subject of this lecture; but before taking up his brief career, I ought to deal with two or three questions that grow out of the general subject of the conquest of Canaan by the children of Israel. The Hebrews, expelled by oppression from Egypt, lived a nomad and pastoral life for a number of years in the Sinaitic wilderness, probably with Kadesh as their centre. Apart from their religious character, they must have been very much like the Bedouin tribes: fierce, warlike, and civilized in a very poor way, but not accustomed to agriculture, to the tillage of the soil, to vintage, or olive-growing. At a certain point a strange spirit moves those Hebrew Bedouins. They unite together. They approach a fertile, cultivated country—Canaan. They have a succession of battles; they seize the country, settle in the farms, vineyards, and homesteads; ultimately and completely they dispossess the old tenants.

What shall we say as to the moral character of this transaction? Was the conquest of Canaan by the Hebrews morally justifiable, achieved as it was through the violence, bloodshed, and cruelty with which war has blackened the face of our world as far back as our eyes can see and our ears can hear? We must not let our affection or veneration for old traditions blind us to the difficulty of the question.

But common sense has suggested to me one or two considerations. First of all, our judgment is apt to be prejudiced here, because men in our time, we English people in particular, have come to think rather falsely about war. A profounder apprehension of the lovely Christlike spirit of our religion, coupled with a good many less worthy influences, such as the peaceableness and security of our seagirt life in these isles, have all combined to give us a great horror of war ; not because of the sin and iniquity of it, but because it means wounds and bloodshed, and robbery of our property, and death.

Now indubitably every rational man will say that, were our world free from selfishness and sin, war could not exist in it. Therefore it has its roots in iniquity. Nevertheless, like many other things that are evils in themselves, war may be used, under God's providential government of the world, to cure worse evils, acting remedially like the surgeon's knife, and bringing renewed life to the nation and the individual. And a careful and conscientious study of history, I am able honestly to tell you, does go to show that, in the long run, the outcome of the strife and bloodshed which we lament so much in the course of human history has not been the increase of the worst kinds of human misery. Over and over again you find that God has used war for the furtherance of righteousness and purity, and moral and religious progress.

In the second place, I wish to add another consideration. I venture to say that all of us, in our historical judgment, and in our ethical and religious teaching, probably have fallen into error, in that we overvalue mere physical human life. If anything is manifest in this world, it is that the material life counts for very little in God's sight ; that the material life is mere scaffolding, the machinery by which or the platform on which the mental, moral, and ethical life is to be built up.

All the strife of existence, all our battlings with the elements and with rivals, are educative; they are a moral discipline, and it is for this that all else exists. Manifestly therefore it must falsify all our estimates of God's providential government of the world if at any time we conceive a selfish and inordinate regard for merely physical existence. Clearly the martyrs did nobly and well when they cared nothing for bodily torture and bodily death that they might vindicate the supremacy and grandeur of moral and religious principle. Over and over again, in the pathological history of our human race, we find that God has sacrificed millions of lives to compel men to be pure and dignified in their bodily and moral habits. Apply this to war. Though it be a scourge and an exterminator, it has nevertheless a wonderful potential force in it to produce bravery, courage, ability of every description. War may thus be used to elevate the moral and mental worth of our race. I fear it is our tendency in the present day to make too much of physical comfort and physical life. On that account we recoil unduly when God has wrought out benefit for our race as a whole through terrible trial, affliction, discipline, suffering, and self-sacrifice; as, for example, by wars in which cruel despotisms, tyrannous, inferior, and sanguinary races, have succumbed before superior moral or mental worth.

I am afraid too we do not deal out fair measure to our predecessors. We are ready to censure these Hebrews or king David for the cruel treatment they often meted out to prisoners of war. We are apt to say that the men who did such things could not, along with such a low moral character, have possessed a lofty, pure revelation of God, or a knowledge of His character. But that is too hasty a judgment. Similarly we take a socialist book, describing life in the last generation, or in the present generation, in our England; we read the history of the horrors that

produced the Factory Acts—how the wealthy capitalist lived in luxury, and grudged a diminution of his income that would have made the condition of workshops and the hours of labour such as would have averted the premature death of their operatives, of men, women, and children, until Parliament stepped in. We say those men who occupied the position of capitalists were fiends. But they were nothing of the kind ; some of them were even eminent Christians. But Christianity had got into cursed blindness and ignorance on these points, and they belonged to their day and generation. At present, are we so very far above them? Is it not the fact that constantly you have great outbreaks of small-pox or scarlet fever spreading death in a hundred households which are due solely to carelessly scamped work? Have we not the horrors of the East End, and the City, and so on? But are we therefore *all* bad men? Not so. We are Christians in process of growing. These are evils we are only waking up to discover, the sins we have inherited, the Canaanites we have to destroy.

If we apply the same measure to the Hebrews, we see that there was a real progress, a real working for good in a society that, in certain moral aspects, was low and degraded. God does not demand that we should be perfect saints before He uses us to do His political, or His intellectual, or His moral, or His spiritual work in this world. He takes us as we are, as we take our little children. He teaches us the A B C and the first simple rules of arithmetic. He bears with our blunders, dulness, and ignorance ; and He lifts us towards Himself. How have I a right to say that, because there was a great deal of cruel human passion, of mere selfishness and greed, in the hearts of those Hebrews when they conquered Canaan, there nevertheless was nothing loftier? There was something very much loftier ; there was the sense of having the true God with them, and of taking possession of a kingdom for Him on

the earth. Why have I a right to say that? Because, in spite of all their iniquity and degeneracy, they never did sink down to the level of the old Canaanites. Their God was the one true God. He it was who was associated with them. That is what some of our apologists are afraid to say, and what infidels fling at our sacred history as a scoff; *viz.* that God was associated with men who were at a low level both in worship and morals. But He was with them nevertheless; He was working with them. The sin, the degradation of the nations who possessed false gods, or had lost the old teaching of the real, living God, was manifested in this, that they dragged their gods down to their own level, and made them in their own likeness. Conversely, it was the glory and the salvation of the Hebrews, this backsliding, sensual people, that their God gained greater power and ascendancy over them with time. His perfect righteousness and love shone out upon and in them. He lifted them to His level; they did not drag Him down to theirs.

Then again, as a matter of fact, the God that made our world has made this law, that wherever sin of a certain type and degree has come in, the retribution of moral obliquity and degradation has come in also, in the shape of annihilation at the hands of a superior race. That seems a cruel, hard thing; but nevertheless so it is. Moreover, to make it more mysterious, the conquering race is not always a superior race in the perfect sense. But we have not that complication here, for all old history testifies that the most blighting curse of false religion and the vilest sensuality of our world in these days lay in the religion of those Canaanites. Even classic, pagan writers say that blank atheism would have been better than that. Wherever Phœnicians established their colonies and their places of worship they introduced nameless vices and uncleannesses, and dignified them with the name of religion. And where

these things were introduced they spread, so much so that the end of the great Roman empire was hastened, its old martial strength was rooted out, by the corruption that came in a direct line from that old Canaanitish religion. To justify what was done therefore, we do not need to say that the conquerors were perfect and immaculate. All we need to be able to say is, that it was a deserved retribution, and that it was better for our world that Canaan should pass into the hands of the Hebrew nation, which has done the grandest moral and religious work for the world.

Further, the ideal, the impulse that stirred those Hebrews in the desert to go in the name of their God and take possession of that land involved the extermination of many of the inhabitants and much that was found there. They were utterly to destroy the luxuries, furniture, and machinery of that false religion. And as it was religion which at that time possessed practically all the wealth of the country, there was a tremendous destruction of property when Baal worship was done away with. Nevertheless the Israelites did not utterly annihilate the old population, because they were not able. Why were they not able? Probably because of the physical conditions, the nature of the country, which impeded military operations, the strength of the fastnesses, and so forth.

But the fact that the conquest of Canaan and the extermination of the people was only partially accomplished proved an invaluable discipline to the Hebrews. In the third chapter of the book of Judges, it is said that God providentially ordered it so. They were not allowed to settle down peacefully and to become prosperous colonists at once, but were compelled to acquire the art of war, which they would not have acquired without such discipline being put upon them. From the subject Canaanites, too, they learned agriculture, and how to keep the country in

fertility. Highest of all, the presence of these aliens was a moral and religious discipline to them.

There is a prevalent theory that the Hebrews got possession of the country, not by a great war or conquest, but rather by stratagem, by alliances, by treaties, and by inter-marriage. I do not believe in that theory; it is just the play of *Hamlet* with the part of Hamlet left out. How can you explain Old Testament history, how can you understand the Psalms, ringing as they do with pride and exultation, except on the supposition that the Israelites' memory of that great time when, under Moses and Joshua, God wrought such magnificent deeds for His people, and when Israel achieved such repute in the world's history, is accurate in the main?

Another thing is perfectly certain. The Hebrews could not have achieved that enormous feat of the subjection of Canaan, with its walled towns, even in the imperfect fashion in which they did achieve it, unless they had been welded together by some great enthusiasm. Now people living a nomadic life for any length of time rarely possess any intense consciousness of national unity. The only possible explanation of the triumph of Israel therefore is that the people were possessed by an extraordinary amount of zeal for a God that had revealed Himself in a new and startling fashion. I cannot account for Old Testament history without that absolute certainty. Now such a belief may have been rough, if you like, savage, gross, unrefined, and far removed from the spirit of Christ in its inner essence. Nevertheless nothing but a firm conviction that one great supreme God had come, and was going to work on earth, compelling them to be His soldiers and servants in achieving a career of resplendent triumph in the world's history, could have made this nation do what it did. Undoubtedly that belief inspired the soul of Moses, of Joshua, and of the army that, under him, conquered Canaan.

But when the war was over, the people settled down side by side with the Canaanites. In some cases they inhabited the same towns, which thus became half Canaanitish and half Hebrew. Moreover the Hebrews, for commerce and for agriculture, were brought into friendship with the Canaanites. Now in ancient days, all transactions, either in commerce or in agriculture, involved the performance of religious rites on both sides. But it must often have happened that a Canaanitish shrine was nearer than Jehovah's altar, and the temptation would be great to let one rite performed in common do for both. You see how easy it must have been for the Hebrews to adopt the religion of the Canaanites also. Further, the almost inevitable splitting up of the people into separate and detached communities, often dependent upon the Canaanitish neighbouring commune, tended also to assimilate the Hebrews to the Canaanites in life and in worship. This tendency had continually to be checked, and the book of Judges is one continuous exhibition of God's providential prevention of the destruction of true religion. From it we gain a last argument in defence of the Hebrew conquest. Jehovah deals with His chosen people precisely as He dealt with the heathen in that case. Whenever the Hebrew conquerors amid their Canaanite vassals had become supine, when their relation to Jehovah had grown slack, and their religious enthusiasm feeble, when selfishness, comfort, and luxury were their supreme ends in life, they in their turn became weak; the Philistines and their other enemies fell upon them, made forays into their land, seized parts of it, until by misery they were compelled to return to their loyalty and to their God, Jehovah. Read the Song of Deborah, and you will see that very principle enunciated.

I have now, I think, said quite enough on the preliminary question to enable me to tell the story of Gideon and bring out its historical, moral, and religious wealth of meaning.

Israel had fallen into a condition of lassitude, sensuality, and impotence. The Midianites, Bedouins of the desert east of the Jordan, saw their advantage, and, commencing in a small way, pushed their forays farther and farther into the land. Israel, too selfish, too detached and broken up to combine together in order to resist those forays, became subject to them township by township. Instead of assuming the offensive, they were compelled to stand on their defence.

That was the hero's opportunity, for there are always in a healthy nation heroes lying in wait for opportunity. They do not always find it, and I think one of the most pathetic things in the world's story is that so often men of magnificent, heroic character have lived in times when they have had no chance to show it. It is a crisis that brings out what men and women really are. It is when disaster comes, and the framework of ordinary society breaks down, that you discover who is really the brave man, the pure man, and who is the man of faith. There were a great many men in Israel whose spirit was gradually moved within them, and who felt that the subjection to the Midianites was intolerable. Doubtless these men talked together, saying, "It must be God's will that Israel should be restored to its proper position." One day, in a winepress hidden out of sight, a man with a flail was threshing out his wheat. He was doing it there, sneaking out of sight lest some band of the Midianites should mark it, and see that there was a good harvest there to be stolen. As he went on with his threshing a stranger greeted him: "Jehovah be with you; my valiant hero, my brave fellow; God be with you!" Now can you remember a time in your life when somebody met you, and said to you one of the common-places of life; and, instead of responding in the usual way, you broke out upon him, fell upon him, overwhelmed with indignation and fury because of his salutation?

That is what happened with Gideon. "God be with you!" said the stranger. Gideon flung down his flail. "God be with us? Don't talk nonsense, man! Would I be skulking in this winepress, would we Hebrews be cowering before those pagan Midianites, if God were with us? They say God was with us when we came out of Egypt, and that He did great miracles when Joshua conquered this land. Ah! if that is true, then He has gone away and left us now. Don't talk to me about God, when facts prove that there is no God with us." How do you think a modern minister of the orthodox type would have treated a man who had spoken in that fashion about God? Not as the angel treated Gideon. I fear the modern minister would have said, "Here is a most dangerous, blasphemous sceptic, all wrong in his views, full of heretical, unsettling dangerous feelings and ideas"; and he would have sought to argue with him and to put him right. What did the angel? He looked at him, knew he was wrong in blaming God in that fashion, but also that he was right to refuse to accept a religion that had lost all its nobility and bravery, that had no backbone in it. The angel said: "Go in this thy might, thy spirit that cannot tolerate this degradation of God's people, that rises against this wrong; go thou, and be the leader in Jehovah's name, and set things right." Gideon was utterly mistaken, wicked, sinful in blaming God. But do you see, that precisely because he could not settle down to look after his own corn while his neighbour's was being stolen, precisely because he rebelled against the customary pious phrases which cover emptiness, he was picked out to be the reformer and the deliverer of his people?

The Church would be a good deal wiser if it always took care to distinguish between the doubt of corruption and worldliness, the cold, callous, sneering doubt, and the doubt of a brave young heart that doubts because religion is so

poor an affair, that doubts because of the great wrongs in the world, because of the deeds of evil that sin works, that doubts precisely because it is crying for the reality. We should go to every such man, and say: "My brother, you are not an infidel; you are called to be a religious man beyond the common. You are not an atheist. God has hold of you, and wants you for Himself. Go and do something heroic, and show that God's religion is the mightiest force. Go and demand the reality, and win a victory for God and His kingdom such as the world has never seen yet."

I have a strong impression that a century hence, or much less than that, the most believed and accepted religious historians in the Christian Church will say that in our age some of the finest religious perceptions of where God was moving, and what Christ's heart was seeking, appeared, not within the traditional Christian Churches, but outside, and in the form of rebellion against accepted wrongs, the usages and worship of the world, and selfishness—the actual sins, and the curses of our time and of our age. I am glad it should be so. It makes me feel that God's Church and God's kingdom is a vast deal wider than the religious statistics of London, for which I have not much respect, would make it to be.

This book of Judges is a history put together from grand old stories told by father to son for generations in Canaan. Therefore there are various versions combined together, and there are things in them that are poetical and exaggerated. But I think that Gideon's story, as we have it, as it has existed for many centuries, has in it a unique power to supply stimulus and inspiration to noble-hearted young men and maidens. For see how the story goes on. Gideon has had his discontent, his complaint against God suddenly revolutionised and turned into a Divine call to do something heroic; and the man's soul responds to it. The next thing

that flashes into his soul, with the voice and power and majesty of God in it, is this, that he now comprehends that it is not God's slackness after all, but want of zeal on the part of the Israelites, their own moral degradation, their own disloyalty, that had brought them into the state they were in. "How could we Hebrews," he would say, "conquer those Midianites, while we were worshipping gross Baals and the gods of this mountain, and forgetting our own God, Jehovah?" And so the voice of God came to this man of valour, and said: "Begin at home. Set yourself right, and be quite sure that God will soon set the world right." That is the kind of thing I should like to see in many showy preachers and reformers, orthodox and unorthodox. They would do a great deal more for the regeneration of the world, if they would set their own characters and homes right.

The voice of God said to Gideon: "You are to be Israel's leader. You cannot be a leader until you do something that will make men feel that you have a right to command them. The real curse in Israel now is this Baal worship. In your father's own town there is an altar to Baal. Go and break down that altar and desecrate it, and set up an altar to Jehovah there." That night Gideon destroyed the altar of Baal, built an altar to Jehovah, and on it offered sacrifice to the true God. The next morning the population were roused to fury. Some little boy who saw the thing done said, "It was Gideon." And so Gideon and his father had to go and face the enraged populace. The Jehovah worshippers were very lukewarm. Gideon and his father stood very much alone. But the latter had a very shrewd head. When he heard that Gideon must be put to death, the old man stepped forward, and said: "Who are you that are going to be guilty of such sacrilege? An insult has been offered to great Baal, the god of light and thunder and fire; and *you* are going to take up his

cause. *You are going to put a man to death. He will be very angry with you: he means to do that himself. This god, surely he will avenge himself! I warn you, that the man who steals a march upon that god, as if he could not defend himself, angers him; he will be a dead man before night. Let Baal defend himself. Let Baal strike the man that has injured him.*" The people all felt that this was very true, and they simply did this. They all looked on Gideon, and said, "Before to-morrow morning he will die a horrible death"; and they gave him the name of Jerubbaal, *i.e.* the man that Baal is going to fight against, the man that has Baal for his antagonist, the man doomed to Baal's wrath. What happened? Nothing, and Gideon henceforth stood out as a possible bulwark of the people.

He had done a daring, a tremendous deed in the name of Jehovah. He had struck down Baal's altar, and the weak-kneed were all watching. "Will Baal avenge himself?" they asked. Baal did not, and it then appeared that Gideon had struck a blow at the superstitious worship of Baal. From that day he was a marked man. He stood out as Jehovah's champion, and was now in a position to put himself forward in a crisis.

Presently the Midianites came against Israel in great force, and Gideon blew the war trumpet. He was soon encamped upon some post of vantage in the pass by which the Midianites were going to force their way. The Midianites numbered about 135,000, perhaps not so many; the Hebrews nearly 32,500. That is to say, the Hebrews were utterly outnumbered. In a situation like that the only hope of victory is by stratagem, and stratagem does not need quantity of soldiers, it needs quality. Every man must have his wits about him and be no coward. Therefore Gideon thinned out his army, and as everybody afraid or half-hearted had to retire from the critical scene, the bulk of his army disappeared; 22,000 men went away. He

is left with 10,000 men. That is far too many for stratagem. They are all plucky fellows, but they may not all be clever fellows. He wants both courageous and capable men. He adopted a simple expedient. He had them drink. The majority of them unbuckled their swords and eased their armour, and knelt down to drink. Three hundred kept their swords on, and simply with their hands carried the water to their mouths. Gideon said to those three hundred, "You are the men I want." The men that were so eager for battle that they did not think much about their own comfort were the three hundred. The others were good, brave men, but they had not the stuff in them that was in the three hundred.

Gideon then planned to throw the Midianite camp into a panic. He took his three hundred men, and divided them into three bands, each of one hundred. Every man took a trumpet and a pitcher, with a torch hidden in the pitcher. He arranged that each of the hundreds should approach the camp of the Midianites from a different side. On a given signal from Gideon, every man broke his pitcher, took the torch in his left hand, waved it in the night, and blew his trumpet. The Midianites starting to their feet, rubbed their eyes in astonishment. Thinking that they were caught by a large number of Hebrew armies, they fell into utter confusion; and running against each other in the darkness, they slaughtered each other. Those who survived were disorganized and soon took to flight, Gideon following them in hot pursuit. He, with his own chosen followers, his three hundred, took one particular course. But it was impossible for him with this small number to complete his victory, and merely to have dispersed the Midianites was not much of a triumph. The work is not half done: he must exterminate them. To accomplish this he gives the order to the men of Ephraim to intercept the Midianites. The Ephraimites do so, while Gideon is

pursuing the main body, and the victory gained was complete. But on the return of the various bodies of his troops, there was a natural risk that the conquerors would fall out and fight among themselves. The smaller-minded among Gideon's men would meet the late comers with the taunt: "You cowards, you laggards, you left us to do it all!" The reply was naturally a hot accusation against Gideon that he had not called the Ephraimites sooner because he wished to have all the glory for himself. But Gideon had a shrewd head: he was his father's son; and so he only looked at them and said: "What are you talking about? You say we have got the best of the glory and honour? Not at all. Look at the enormous slaughter you have inflicted on the enemy, and you have captured the two leaders, the two princes. It is true that at first we took the vintage; but in this case the gleanings are far greater, bigger, and more glorious than the vintage." The historian enjoys that in the way he puts it: "Then their anger was abated toward him when he had said that." Gideon knew human nature, and his conduct here is a very useful study for those who have to lead and rule even Christian men.

The whole story of Gideon seems contrived to reveal human character. We learn from it how good work is to be done in the face of difficulties. The recreant men in his army, and the men of Succoth and Penuel, were doing their best to prevent his work being done; but, in spite of difficulty, Gideon did a great deal of good work. Gideon had the Divine vocation, but do you think he was always sure of it? No; for when the crisis came, he asked God to give him superstitious signs. That is a bad thing in Gideon. The second time he said, "O God, be not angry." What right had he to demand physical portents and marvels to make sure that he was doing God's work? It is the sight of God's face, the love of His voice, the holy

influence of His Spirit that alone can uplift men. It is the weakness of men's faith that makes them demand miracles. But God takes them even with their superstition, their weakness, their defects, and works great things by them, if only they be true to the light they have. That is the lesson of Gideon's life. There was much primitive grossness in his conception of religion, of war, and of government. Nevertheless the central, sovereign, animating power in the man's soul was an absolute conviction that whatever came he would do the will of the one true, righteous God of heaven and of earth. That made his career glorious; for in so doing he was faithful to the highest light he had access to.

W. G. ELMSLIE.

THE BOOK OF LAMENTATIONS.

OF all the poetical books of the Old Testament this is probably the one least generally known; yet it is the one about which our information is most complete. About the circumstances in which some of these books were produced we know little or nothing; we cannot fix their dates with certainty to within hundreds of years. But we can tell precisely the circumstances in which this book arose; and we can fix its date to within, at the most, a year or two; some think to within a month or two.¹

In the year 588 B.C. the city of Jerusalem was compassed round by the Babylonians, and, after a siege of two years, during which the inhabitants endured all the extremities of such a situation, it fell into the hands of the enemy, who burnt it to the ground and transported the inhabitants, a few excepted, to far off Babylon. Those who stayed behind

¹ Bleek argues that it was written between the surrender and the destruction of the city.