

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Expositor* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expositor-series-1.php

deeply to be compelled to write this article; but I think all who read his criticism will allow that I have no alternative. The arguments alluded to above in favour of the South-Galatian theory and of the accuracy and first-hand character of *Acts*, drawn from the topics which he has suggested, must also wait, though they are already written out.

Let me conclude by thanking Mr. Chase for directing my attention to several points which I had not fully grasped, and for aiding me to strengthen my case so much.

W. M. RAMSAY.

MAURICE MAETERLINCK ON RUYSBROECK.

SOME years ago the Society known as *De Maetschappij der Vlaemsche Bibliophilen* re-edited the complete works of Jan van Ruysbroeck, the fourteenth century mystic, to whom his countrymen gave the title "L' Admirable." M. Maeterlinck, using the amended Flemish text, has translated the whole of Ruysbroeck's most important book, *L'Ornement des Noces Spirituelles*, and has prefixed to the volume an introduction of a hundred pages, containing extracts from other writings of Ruysbroeck, along with a critical estimate which is in some respects his own most remarkable contribution to literature.

He begins with apologies for his author. This monk of Brabant, leading a hermit's life in the forest of Soignes during the wildest years of the fourteenth century, must not be judged by the ordinary canons of style. He is awkward, often commonplace, full of repetitions, and of seeming contradictions. He has the ignorance of a child with the wisdom of a man returned from the dead. Lost in vast conceptions, he can hardly find language to describe

save part at least of this gladiatorial logomachy, which to me is very disagreeable.

the commonest things, and is puzzled how to tell us what goes on in his little monastic garden.

“Do not expect a literary production; you will see only the convulsive flight of an eagle, dizzy, blind and wounded, over snowy peaks.” Ordinary readers are warned that to begin the study of mysticism is like entering a boundless desert of the mind, where the traveller may wander helplessly till he dies of thirst. Several times in the introduction M. Maeterlinck borrows images from the volcanic scenery of Iceland, to describe the effect produced by the study of Ruysbroeck. “We have reached the utmost boundary of human thought, far within the polar circle of the mind. It is strangely cold there, strangely dark, yet everywhere there is light and flame.” Fire-sheets and ice-blocks alternate; an aurora glitters between the white crags, or the midnight sun hangs over the sea. But the blasted rocks are round us, and we do not look for roses in Iceland. Even M. Maeterlinck, whose passion for the mystics is greater than that of any modern writer, fears at times to follow to “those lonely crossroads of the spirit.” His attitude to his author might be summed up in Schiller’s lines :

“Senke nieder,
Adlergedank, dein Gefieder.
Kühne Seglerin, Phantasie,
Wirf ein muthloses Ankor hie!”

“I translated this book,” he tells us, “because I believe the writings of the mystics are the purest diamonds in the vast treasure of humanity. Some people will consider it merely the outpouring of a crazy monk, a hermit delirious with fasting and worn with fever. They will read it as a wild, dark dream, crossed with vivid lightning flashes. But just as it has been said that every man is a Shakespeare in his dreams, so we may well ask whether every man is not an inarticulate mystic, a thousand times more transcendental than any of those who have confined themselves within the

bonds of words. Is not the eye of the lover or the mother a thousand times more abstruse, more impenetrable, more mystical than this book—poor and easily explained in comparison?" To M. Maeterlinck the voices of the mystics are the only voices that really pierce the silence. Readers of his plays will remember how he is haunted by the idea of the stillness which surrounds each separate soul. "*L'âme humaine est très silencieuse—L'âme humaine aime à s'en aller seule.*" In the fourteenth century, especially, Christian souls kept silence. Europe was desolated by war, famine and the Black Death. The war in Brabant rolled almost to the gates of the Augustinian Priory of Grönendal, where Ruysbroeck spent his closing years. The bonds of society were loosened, and the expectation of the second Advent was no longer, as in the earlier middle ages, a sustaining force in the general body of believers. Everywhere was confusion, violence, endurance without hope. In the midst of it all Ruysbroeck set down as the motto of his book, "Behold, the Bridegroom cometh; go ye out to meet Him." As he meditated under the beech-trees of Soignes, it seemed that a divine inspiration bade him summon the scattered flock of Christ to adorn themselves for the heavenly marriage. They were poor and despised in this world, but the wedding garment was prepared for them, and the Spirit and the Bride said, Come. "I have not written one word," he told his friend and pupil, Gerhard Groot, "except by direct impulse and inspiration from the Holy Ghost, and in the strange and most sweet society of the Blessed Trinity." No one ever plunged more deeply into the contemplative life. In all his writings there is scarcely a hint to remind us that he had spent thirty years as the parish priest of the Eglise Sainte Gudule at Brussels. Even then indeed it had been noticed that he walked with an air of abstraction, and as one who had no eye for outward things. But far from being a mere visionary, he was admitted to have one of the

wisest and sanest heads of his time. Impatient of pretended miracles, he put down remorselessly the pretensions of a nun who persuaded the people that two angels accompanied her to the altar. There is not a hint that he practised the savage austerities of Suso; in his teaching he expressly declared that bodily suffering was not the truest penance. He instructed the young, lectured in the religious houses of the city, and was so absorbed in his work that when his mother came to visit him he declined the interruption of her society. He seemed in haste to accomplish his task, to lay aside the burden of other souls that he might care for his own. Once happily settled in his cell at Grönendal, no thought of the world outside distracted him. Already advanced in years, he took up his pen with the zest of youth. M. Maeterlinck hardly emphasizes sufficiently the note of youthfulness heard through his works. His fancy loved to linger on the white stone of the Revelation, the twelve jewels of the High Priest's breastplate, the costly needlework of the Tabernacle. The fantastic imagery of many passages of Ruysbroeck finds an echo in M. Maeterlinck's own religious thought. In his volume of lyrics, *Serres Chaudes*, where the influence of the pre-Raphaelites is so evident, the influence of the mystics is felt even more. What haunting memories there are in the following "Oraison":

" Vous savez, Seigneur, ma misère,
Voyez ce que je vous apporte;
Des fleurs mauvaises de la terre,
Et du soleil sur une morte.

Voyez aussi ma lassitude,
La lune éteinte et l'aube noire;
Et fécondez ma solitude
En l'arrosant de ta gloire.

Ouvrez, Seigneur, votre voie,
Eclairez-y mon âme lasse,
Car la tristesse de ma joie
Semble de l'herbe sous la glace."

And again, in these curious verses :—

“ Mon âme a peur comme une femme,
Voyez ce que j'ai fait, Seigneur,
De mes mains, les lys de mon âme,
De mes yeux, les cieux de mon cœur.

Ayez pitié de mes misères
J'ai perdu la palme et l'anneau ;
Ayez pitié de mes prières,
Faibles fleurs dans un verre d'eau.

Ayez pitié du mal des lèvres,
Ayez pitié de mes regrets ;
Semez le lys le long des fièvres
Et les roses sur les marais.”

The wisdom of the old monk is hardly less astonishing than his fancy. He knew no Greek, possibly no Latin ; he was without access to books, yet, as M. Maeterlinck reminds us, he was acquainted with all the philosophies of the world. He knew the Platonism of Greece, the Brahminism of India, and the Buddhism of Thibet. It is never safe to assume his ignorance. “ I could quote whole pages of Plato, of Plotinus, of Porphyry, of the Zendic books, of the Gnostics and the Kabbala, the all but inspired substance of which may be found, intact, in the writings of this humble Flemish priest. We find strange coincidences and disturbing agreements. We find more, for at times he seems to have secretly presupposed the work of his unknown predecessors. Just as Plotinus begins his stern journey at the cross-road where Plato, fearing, paused and knelt down, so we might say that Ruysbroeck awakened from a slumber of several centuries, not, indeed, the same kind of thought (for that kind of thought never sleeps), but the same kind of language as that which had fallen asleep on the mountains, where Plotinus forsook it, dazzled by the blaze of light and with his hands before his eyes, as if in presence of an immense conflagration.”

To the merely secular intelligence, however noble, M.

Maeterlinck admits that the writings of the Flemish mystic can offer little attraction. "The mirror of the human intellect is entirely unknown in this book, but there is another mirror, darker and more profound, which we hide in the inmost depths of our beings. No detail can be seen in it distinctly, nor can words be traced upon its surface, but something is seen there from time to time; is it the soul? is it God Himself? is it both at once? We shall never know, yet these all but invisible appearances are the only real rulers of the life of the most unbelieving among us. Here you will perceive nothing but the dark reflections on the mirror, and as its treasure is inexhaustible, these reflections will not be like anything we have experienced in ourselves, but, in spite of all, will have an amazing certainty." It is only to a few, however, that the mirror has anything to reveal. The old superstitious custom of covering the looking-glass in the room where a corpse was lying, lest some fearful apparition might terrify the watcher, has its counterpart in the things of the spirit. To most the mirror is veiled through life, or if unveiled, blank as the shield of Modred.

Nothing is more remarkable in the Introduction than M. Maeterlinck's passionate sympathy with his author. He would sacrifice half the classics of Europe sooner than this small book in a mediæval dialect. He takes no credit to himself for making Ruysbroeck known to modern readers. Somehow or other, his thoughts have been fertilising Europe all these centuries. The book bears no date, nor does it require one. Unseen, unheeded, the presence of the mystics has haunted the churches. In every spiritual battle they have led the van. The words they spoke in corners have been heard on the housetops. "The truths of mysticism have a strange privilege as compared with other truths: they can neither grow old nor die. There is not one truth which did not, some morning, descend upon this world, lovely in

strength and youth, covered with the wondrous dew which lies upon thoughts yet fresh and unspoken. Pass through the infirmaries of the human mind, where all thoughts are evermore coming to die—you will find there not one mystic thought. They have the immunity of the angels of Swedenborg, who progress continually towards the spring of their youth, so that the oldest angels appear the youngest.”

Some space is devoted in the Introduction to earlier translations of Ruysbroeck's writings. The most notable was that produced in the sixteenth century by Laurentius Surius, a monk of Cologne. The chief fault of his work is tameness. His elegant Latinity gives only a faint idea of “l'amour immense et barbare,” which is felt in every page of the original. Where his author uses one word, Surius gives us three or four; and at times, in despair of conveying the meaning, adds a feeble paraphrase. He trembles especially before the daring of Ruysbroeck's verses, and changes his wild flights of fancy into mild, irreproachable convent platitudes. As an instance of the language which terrified Surius, M. Maeterlinck quotes the following verse, in which Christ speaks to the soul :

“Je veux être ta nourriture,
Ton hôte et ton cuisinier,
Ma chair est bien rôtie
Sur la croix par pitié de toi;
Nous mangerons et nous boirons ensemble.”

As illustrating Ruysbroeck's delight in colour and in natural beauty, I have ventured to translate two passages, selected by M. Maeterlinck from his longest work, *Le Livre du Tabernacle Spirituel*, in which he interprets the symbolism of the Ark of the Covenant and the sacrifices of the ancient law. In the first he is speaking of the adornments of the Tabernacle: “On these four curtains of divers colours the Lord ordered Bezaleel and Aholiab to weave and to embroider with their needles many ornaments. So likewise

our obedient will and our intelligence will place upon these four colours divers ornaments of virtues. On the white colour of innocence we shall place red roses, by evermore resisting all that is evil. Thus we maintain purity and crucify our own nature, and the red roses with their sweet perfume are very lovely on the white colour. Again, upon innocence we shall embroider sunflowers, by which we mean obedience; for when the sun rises in the east, the sunflower opens towards its rays, and turns ever eagerly towards the sun, even until its setting in the west. And at night it closes and hides its colours and awaits the return of the sun. Even so will we open our hearts by obedience towards the illumination of the grace of God, and humbly and eagerly will we follow that grace so long as we feel the warmth of love. And when the light of grace ceases to awaken first emotions, and we feel the warmth of love but little, or feel it not at all, then it is night, when we shall close our heart to all that may tempt it; and so we shall shut up within ourselves the golden colour of love, awaiting a new dawn with its new brightness and its fresh emotions. And thus shall we preserve innocence always in its pristine splendour. On the blue colour, which is like the firmament, we shall embroider birds with varied plumage; in other words, we shall keep before our minds, with clear observance, the lives and the works of the saints, which are manifold. These works are their varied plumage, so gracious and so beautiful, and with this they adorned themselves and soared to heaven. They are birds which we must observe with attention; if we are like them in their plumage, we shall follow them to their eternal rest. On the purple colour (that is, violet or blood-red, meaning generosity) we shall place water-lilies; and these symbolise the free possession of all the treasures of God. On the scarlet colour we shall place bright stars, by which I mean pious and devout prayer for the good of our neighbour, and reverent

and secret communion between God and ourselves. These are the stars which illuminate with their brightness the kingdoms of heaven and of earth, and they make us inwardly light-giving and fruit-bearing, and fix us in the firmament of eternal life."

In the second passage he deals with the symbolic meaning of two stones in the breastplate:—

"In the rays of the sun the topaz surpasses in splendour all the precious stones; and even so does the humanity of our Lord Jesus Christ excel in glory and in majesty all the saints and all the angels because of His union with the eternal Father. And in this union the reflection of the Divine Sun is so clear and so glorious, that it attracts and reflects in its clearness all the eyes of saints and angels in earnest gaze, and those also of just men to whom its splendour is revealed. So likewise does the topaz attract and reflect in itself the eyes of those who behold it, because of its great clearness. But if you were to cut the topaz it would darken, while if you leave it in its natural state it will remain clear. And so too, if you try to examine and penetrate the splendour of the eternal Word, that splendour will darken, and you will lose it. But leave it as it is, and follow it with earnest gaze, and with self-abnegation, and it will give you light." . . . "The communion of saints and the forgiveness of sins are obtained by the *waves of the night*, that is, by two sacraments of the Holy Church, baptism and penance. These are the waves which by faith wash that night of darkness, sin. The chrysolite symbolises to us that article of the creed 'the communion of saints and the forgiveness of sins,' for it is like the waves of the sea, translucent and green; and besides it has gleams of gold. Even so all saints and just men are translucent by grace or by glory, and they are green by their holy life, and they gleam with the gold of the Divine love which shines through them. And these three adornments are common

to all saints and to all just persons, for they are the treasure of the holy churches, here and in eternal life. And all who by penance have put away from them the colour of the Red Sea, that is, a sinful life, are like the chrysolite."

It is much to be hoped that M. Maeterlinck may continue his study of the mystics. His volume on Novalis, announced last year but still delayed, is awaited with the utmost interest. From certain hints in the Introduction, we are led to hope that at some future time he may give us a monograph on Swedenborg, whose personality is as little known to modern readers as his grave in the Scandinavian church near the Ratcliffe Highway.

Of one mystic, at least, we have a life-like portrait. The peasants of the Flemish valleys told how when a brother of Grönendal went into the forest, he saw a tree bright with fire. Coming closer, he found his prior on his knees at the foot of it, the light surrounding him as with a glory. A few vague legends are all that history has left us of Ruysbroeck L'Admirable, but M. Maeterlinck has rekindled the flame.

JANE T. STODDART.

THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF CHRIST'S KINGDOM.

THE most explicit and elaborate description of the Righteousness which Christ requires in His subjects is given in the Sermon on the Mount. It would seem to have been the main object of this sermon to disentangle true Righteousness from all misconceptions of it, and sharply to contrast it with current imitations.

The *occasion* of this great utterance is hinted at in the words of chap. v. 17: "Think not that I am come to destroy the law or the prophets. I am not come to destroy but to fulfil." Our Lord had more than once to remove misconceptions, either actually existing or anticipated,