

great that we *make* the evidence we cannot find. But, granting the personal element, it is possible to find all movement in this one direction, and it is mostly a matter of patience and faith who shall find it. Dr. Grattan Guinness has both faith and patience. It is no new enterprise with him. To

this his life has been given; and he has found that this study of Christ in the midst is a heaven on earth to him, an earnest of that fulness of truth and joy, when, following the eyes of all the redeemed in heaven, his eyes also shall look, and lo! in the midst a Lamb as it had been slain!

## Christ Preaching to the Spirits in Prison.

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WHAT a strange fascination there is about the difficult texts of Scripture! How many, for example, have exercised their wits in the attempt to put a feasible interpretation on 1 Peter iii. 18-20! Let us hope that the motive has been higher than that which leads men to waste their time and ingenuity upon a Chinese puzzle. Is it not rather a conviction that if we could only place ourselves in the position of the writer, we should not find his words so hard to be understood, and that if we could only ascertain his meaning, it might throw an unexpected light upon the whole surrounding context?

In the April number of THE EXPOSITORY TIMES there is a brief reference to a friendly review of Dr. Salmond's admirable book on the *Christian Doctrine of Immortality*, by Professor Davison in the *Methodist Recorder*. The only point on which he differs from Professor Salmond is his interpretation of this knotty text. We cannot accept the view given by either of the Professors, and would like, as briefly as possible, to give our reasons for preferring the exegesis of the passage hinted at by St. Augustine and Archbishop Leighton, but first elaborated by the late John Brown, D.D., of Edinburgh, the distinguished father of the not less distinguished John Brown, M.D., the author of *Rab and his Friends*.

Before stating and defending this view, however, let us lay down two preliminary positions, which ought to be regarded as axiomatic—1. The true interpretation of this difficult and much-disputed text must bring it into connexion with the previous context. Obviously there is no break in the reasoning of the apostle from the thirteenth verse to the end of the chapter. The connecting particle 'for,' with which the eighteenth verse begins, shows that

it flows as obviously from the previous statement as the river St. Lawrence does from Lake Ontario. And 2. It must give some reasonable account of the purpose of the apostle in his sudden and unexpected introduction of Noah and the men of his time. Any interpretation which fails to explain the connexion of the three verses under consideration with what goes before, or which gives no plausible reason for the specific reference to Noah and the antediluvians, may be at once discarded.

Two letters of the Apostle Peter have been preserved, and if we find in one of them a very distinct reference to the glory of Christ, as he was privileged to see it, on the Mount of Transfiguration, we need not wonder that the other should contain an allusion to the power of the risen Saviour as he witnessed it on the day of Pentecost, one of the most memorable days not only in his life, but in the history of the Church of God. Yet the allusion in the one case is much more vague than in the other, for this reason, that while he did not scruple to introduce himself in a scene where he was a mere spectator, humility leads him to suppress his own personality when by introducing it he might seem to share the honours of that day with his exalted Lord. And so it is possible to read this remarkable passage at the close of the third chapter of his First Epistle without seeing that it refers to the eventful day of Pentecost, and that its very obscurity arises from the writer's studied omission of his own name.

The apostle had been encouraging those who were suffering for righteousness' sake. 'For it is better,' he tells them, 'if the will of God be so, that ye suffer for well-doing than for evil-doing.' He reminds them that Christ also once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, that He might bring

us to God, the obvious inference being, Why should not the disciple be as his Master, and the servant as his lord? But now he proceeds to remind them of the marvellous results that flowed from these undeserved sufferings of Christ, suggesting to them the hope that a like happy issue might follow in their case. Christ suffered even unto death. He was 'put to death in flesh (*σαρκί*), but quickened in spirit' (*πνεύματι*). That is to say, after, and in consequence of, the death of His mortal body, He received from the Father a vast accession of spiritual life, to be communicated by Him as Head and Mediator to His body the Church. This is the only meaning that can be given to *ζωοποιηθεὶς* in this place. It cannot mean that He was literally *made alive* in spirit, for His spirit never died. It can only mean that His possession of spiritual life as Mediator, and His power of communicating it to men, were vastly increased. Nor was it long before this was manifest to all. Now it is here that the modest reverence of the apostle gives a tinge of obscurity and mystery to his statements. He proceeds to draw a contrast between the little success that followed the preaching of Noah during a period of one hundred and twenty years, and the great success of his own preaching, when three thousand were converted in one day. But, lest he should even appear to glory in his own exploits, he is careful to suppress the very mention of his name, and to describe the matter from a heavenly and spiritual point of view, representing Christ as having been the preacher on both occasions, and human spirits as having been the hearers.

He is not to be understood as saying that Jesus after His death, whether before His resurrection or subsequently to that event, went and preached the gospel to the lost spirits in the place of woe. We agree with Dr. Salmond in repudiating this interpretation. It is an entirely superficial view of the apostle's words, having no relation to the context, except upon the assumption, which the words do not warrant, that He succeeded in releasing these imprisoned spirits, and bringing them to the heavenly glory. It is inconsistent with the general tenor of Scripture teaching, which everywhere represents the issues of the present life as final and eternal. And on this view of the passage we are met with the fatal objection—'Why should the offers of divine mercy have been limited to the antediluvians, who were specially great sinners, and had resisted for long years the appeals of two such preachers of

righteousness as Enoch and Noah?' Professor Davison, who thinks that Christ personally preached to the spirits of men in Hades, thinks that He did not preach the gospel to them, but only proclaimed Himself there to be 'Lord both of the dead and of the living.' But this interpretation does not fit in to the preceding context, as it was no great reward for our Lord's sufferings that He should go and make this proclamation in the world of spirits, and it throws no light upon the reference to Noah and the men of his time. It may be added, that in the New Testament the word *κηρῶσω*, when it stands alone, without anything to indicate the nature of the announcement, always signifies to preach the gospel.

Looking at the passage now before us in the light of the preceding context, and reading between the lines, we take this to be its meaning, that when Noah preached to the men before the Flood, and Peter to the multitudes in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost, under all this diversity of scene and circumstances the spiritual eye might have discerned one and the same thing—Christ preaching to the spirits of men in the prison-house of sin (Isa. xlix. 8, 9, lxi. 1). The two cases being thus essentially the same, how did it come to pass that the issue was so widely different, in the one instance only eight souls being saved out of the world's population during a ministry of one hundred and twenty years, in the other three thousand being converted in one day? (This last is the suppressed apodosis which must be restored to make the passage intelligible and to point the contrast.) To what was this diversity of result to be ascribed? Not to the superiority of Peter's preaching to that of Noah. Lest any should imagine that, the apostle sinks the mention of his own name entirely, regardless of the obscurity in which the whole subject is thus involved. The cause of the difference is to be found in the vast accession of life-giving power which Christ, as the Mediator, obtained as the result of His death and subsequent resurrection.

This view of the meaning of the words fits into the whole context, and even explains the ghostly and mysterious aspect of the passage which has made it so perplexing to commentators. It is better, says the apostle to his persecuted fellow-Christians, to suffer for well-doing than for evil-doing. Christ had the same thing to endure, and the purpose of His sufferings was to bring us to

God. That result was accomplished, after He had suffered even unto death, in a manner and to an extent which could not otherwise have been realised. His sufferings reached their climax when He was put to death in the flesh. But that was immediately followed by such an astonishing increase of spiritual power, that, having gone (*προεβήεις*)<sup>1</sup> in His resurrection-body to heaven, He preached in spirit on earth with the most wonderful and blessed results to men who were in essentially the same condition as those to whom in antediluvian days His preaching had been of no avail.

If it be asked, Why does the apostle introduce the clause, 'While the ark was a preparing?' the obvious answer is, To show how long God bore with that generation, and how long Christ preached to them by the ministry of Noah to no purpose. The case of Noah and his contemporaries having thus been adduced as a parallel, and yet a contrast to the case of those to whom Christ had preached at Pentecost, the apostle is led to mention another point in which some analogy might be seen. The inmates of the ark were saved through water, δι' ὕδατος. In like manner the waters of baptism, which had a place of such importance on the day of Pentecost, save us who believe. But he hastens to say, Not the outward baptism, which only cleansed the body, but the spiritual baptism, of which that was a mere symbol. That is here said to save us objectively, by the power of Christ's resurrection, and subjectively, by the good conscience toward God which, in virtue of Christ's finished work crowned by His resurrection from the dead, we are enabled to attain. The concluding verse of the chapter brings out this additional thought, in perfect keeping with the purpose which the apostle has in hand, that Christ's sufferings even unto death not merely issued in the success of His cause and the salvation of souls on earth, but in His being exalted to the right hand of God in heaven, angels and authorities and powers being made subject unto Him.

Now, what are Professor Salmond's objections to this view? He thinks it 'overlooks the fact that Christ Himself, and neither the apostles nor Christ by the apostles, is the proper subject of whom the preaching is affirmed.' Not as we have

<sup>1</sup> Note that this is the very word used in ver. 22, of Christ's ascension, *προεβήεις εἰς οὐρανόν*, which seems just an expansion and explanation of the word as used in ver. 19.

put the case. We admit, nay we maintain, that Peter ascribes the preaching to Christ Himself, and that it is his entire self-effacement that makes the passage elliptical and obscure. Peter says that Christ, having gone (*sc.* to heaven), nevertheless preached to the spirits in prison; and then he leaves his readers to fill up the picture from their own knowledge, as if he had said: 'I need not tell you with what wonderful results.' Nor is this the only place in which this apostle represents the exalted Saviour as coming in spirit to this earth with the message of salvation. For at the close of his address to the multitudes at the Beautiful Gate of the temple, we find him saying, 'Unto you first God, having raised up His Son Jesus, sent Him to bless you, in turning away every one of you from His iniquities.'

Again, Dr. Salmond thinks 'it puts an extreme, metaphorical sense on the phrase, "spirits in prison?"' The passages we have quoted from Isaiah sufficiently prove that to speak of sinners as being in prison, and needing to be set free, is a scriptural form of expression. And as to their being called '*spirits* in prison,' that naturally arose from two circumstances: first, that it is Christ in spirit and not in the flesh that is the preacher, which makes it natural that his hearers too should be regarded from a spiritual and not from a carnal point of view; and second, that the apostle wishes to eliminate all those accidental circumstances in which one man differs from another, that he may the better bring out the fact that Christ's hearers before the Flood and on the day of Pentecost were in all essential points the same, though the results in the two cases were so very different.<sup>2</sup>

Dr. Salmond's third objection has no relevancy whatever to the view above given, which certainly does not 'fail to account for the prominence given to the building of the ark,' and does not 'take the disobedient of Noah's time simply as types of the disobedient of the apostle's time.'

In conclusion, let us look at Dr. Salmond's own interpretation, and see whether it meets the re-

<sup>2</sup> This meets an objection that might be taken to our view, namely, that Christ did not, by the ministry of His apostles, preach to the same persons as were in the days of Noah disobedient. Of course not; but He preached to men in essentially the same spiritual condition, and that is what the sacred writer says. In the same way it might be said: 'At the close of the sixth century, St. Austin preached the gospel to the Britons, who, in the days of Julius Cæsar, were painted savages.'

quirements of the case. He says: 'It refers the scene of the preaching to earth instead of Hades, and the time of the preaching to Noah's day instead of the period between Christ's death and resurrection. It takes the preacher to have been Christ Himself in His pre-incarnate activity, and the preaching to have been in the form of the divine warnings of the time, the spectacle of the building of the ark, and the various tokens of God's long-suffering.' So far as it goes we subscribe to all this. It is all included in the view we have endeavoured to present. But if this was all that the apostle meant, it is difficult to conceive for what purpose he introduced the statement. What tempted him, when speaking of Christ's death in the flesh and subsequent quickening in spirit, suddenly to go back to events that had happened more than two thousand years before, and that could throw no light whatever on the connexion between the death and the quickening? And what connexion has this preaching in the days of Noah with the previous context? How was it fitted to comfort and encourage those who suffered for well-doing? Dr. Salmond courageously faces this question, but nothing could well be more unsatisfactory than the answer which he gives. It is this: 'Look to your Lord's example. . . . Think what the issue of injurious suffering was to Him; if He suffered even unto death as regards the mortal side of His being, He was raised as regards the spiritual with new powers.' Yes, had he only followed out that suggestion, and found in the reference to Noah's time an illustration of comparative failure before these new powers had been received, he would have hit the mark. But instead of that, he says: 'Look back on the remote past, ere He had appeared in the flesh. Reflect how then, too, He acted in this gracious way, how He went and preached to the guilty generation of the Flood, making known to those grossest of wrong-doers, by the spectacle of the ark a-building, the word of His servant Noah, and the varied warnings of the time, His will to save them. And consider that He has still the same graciousness of will—of which baptism is the figure; that He can still save oppressed righteous ones as He saved the believing souls of Noah's house; that all the more can He now save such, seeing that in His exalted life He has all the powers of heaven subject to Him.'

What we object to in this interpretation is that

the reference to the time of Noah, if it was meant merely to bring out the graciousness of Christ, has no relevancy to the case of those suffering Christians to whom the apostle is writing. Plainly his purpose was to show them that, as in these sufferings they were following in the footsteps of the Master, they might expect to be rewarded as He was. He suffered in flesh, but was immediately thereafter quickened in spirit, in which quickened spiritual power He preached—to whom? To Noah's generation? Surely not, for He did not receive this quickening till after His death upon the cross. Besides, the utter failure of that preaching to save more than one family out of the whole antediluvian world would have been anything but a proof of enhanced spiritual power, and anything but an encouragement to those who were suffering for righteousness' sake. No, the idea of Christ's graciousness, as shown by His dealings with the men of Noah's time, has nothing whatever to do with the subject of which the apostle is speaking. And Professor Salmond seems to be half conscious of this from the way in which in the end of the paragraph he slides into the idea of the *enhanced power* of Christ to save, now that all the powers of heaven are subject to Him. This is the real point of the apostle's argument. According to the view we have been advocating, the want of success of Christ's preaching to the antediluvians serves as a foil, or dark background, to set off the power with which since His death and resurrection He has been endued. But according to Professor Salmond's view, which ignores or repudiates any such implied comparison, the reference to the times of Noah comes in as an awkward and irrelevant digression. We grant that as we have represented it the passage is somewhat elliptical, that the implied contrast is left to be supplied by the intelligence of his readers. But we have assigned a sufficient reason for Peter's abstaining from being so explicit as he might have been. The motive was an honourable one, well worthy of a devoted servant of Jesus Christ. And surely it is better to admit an ellipsis which can be so easily supplied, rendering the passage luminous and the argument conclusive, than to suppose that the apostle, in the most gratuitous and unexpected way, drags in a reference to Old Testament history, which has no real bearing on the matter in hand, and only serves to involve his argument in hopeless obscurity and confusion.