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THE BUDDING ROD.

THE incident of the miraculous budding of Aaron's rod in the wilderness is an acted parable, full of profound instruction, and requires and deserves that we should take special pains to get at the very heart of its meaning. It was an object lesson taught to the Israelites in their religious childhood, when they could only be taught by what they could see with their eyes and judge by their senses. It was taught to them too at a time when they specially needed to be instructed in this manner. It was not a casual lesson which had no particular significance; it was in every way suited to the circumstances, and the form which it took was shaped by the customs with which the Israelites were familiar.

A feeling of discontent had arisen in the camp. It began in the tribe of Levi, whose families were jealous of Aaron, because the high-priesthood, with all its honours and privileges, was confined to himself and to his house. They said that this was a piece of favouritism on the part of Moses, exalting his own brother over them. Aaron, they insisted, had no more right to the office than any of themselves, or indeed any of the tribes or families of Israel. They wished to revive the old patriarchal system of a household or tribal priesthood. Each man was the priest of his own family, and each chief the high-priest of his own tribe. The whole congregation were holy, and had an equal right to approach God and perform the sacred services of the tabernacle; and therefore there must be no man raised above his fellows, and allowed to exercise exclusively the higher functions of the priesthood, or else each of the heads of families must get the office in turn. With the usual blindness of unscrupulous ambition, the conspirators lost sight of the fact that the gaining of their object would have abolished all the distinctive privileges of their own tribe of Levi, as a

sacerdotal tribe specially set apart for the services of the tabernacle, and reduced it to the common level of the other tribes. They would thus be cutting the bough upon which they were standing, and hurling themselves down to a lower position than that which they already occupied. The leaders of the disaffection were Korah, Dathan and Abiram; and concealing their real purpose of usurping for themselves the place and power of Aaron and his sons, under the plausible pretext of seeking the good of all Israel, they succeeded in enlisting the sympathies of the great mass of the people; and the discontent and disorder spread from the tribe of Levi until the whole camp was in dangerous revolt.

In this crisis it was necessary for God to interfere and put an end to the strife; for it was He Himself who had appointed Aaron and his house to be His priests in perpetuity. The rebellion of the Israelites was a rebellion not against the ambition of man, but against the authority of God. In the most awful manner therefore He punished the presumptuous transgressors, and indicated His own Divinely appointed method of religious worship. The earth opened under the feet of Korah, Dathan and Abiram, and swallowed them up along with their families and possessions. A fire came from the Lord, and consumed the two hundred and fifty who were in haste to assume what they called their right to perform the ministry of the tabernacle, and who dared to offer unhallowed incense in the holy place; while of the multitude who shared in the disaffection of their leaders and murmured at their punishment, upwards of fourteen thousand perished of a grievous plague. In order to prevent all unseemly strife of that kind in future, and to show the Israelites a way that would convince them once for all who had the best right to be the high-priest of Israel, God made an experiment before their eyes.

The trial by lot is one of the oldest and most common of all human customs. It was regarded as a direct appeal in important questions to Almighty wisdom, secured from all influences of passion or prejudice. It was often associated with religious ceremonies of the most solemn character. Its use by Divine command on many interesting occasions is described in Holy Scripture. The land of Canaan was divided among the Israelites by lot ; and hence the portion of each tribe was called "the lot of his inheritance." The order of the priests' service was determined by lot. The election of Saul to be the first king of Israel was by lot ; and Matthias was chosen by lot to be the substitute of Judas among the disciples. The mode of casting the lot varied among different people and according to the nature of the occasion. Sometimes it was by sticks or wands held aloft and then allowed to fall to the ground, when their position to the right or the left determined the issue. Sometimes it was by writing the name of the persons or things in dispute on a bundle of arrows, and then drawing them out one by one from a bag. And all young people are familiar with the game in which a number of straws or bits of sticks of different lengths are concealed in the hand, their tops brought to a uniform level being alone visible, and one is asked to draw out a single stick or straw, when the longest chosen is the successful one.

The test to which the Israelites in the wilderness were put was founded upon this ancient custom, though it departed from it in some important particulars. Each prince or head of the different tribes of Israel was required to bring a rod, and lay it up all night before the ark of the Lord in the tabernacle. It was not any mere ordinary piece of wood that he was to bring, but the ancestral staff, the symbol of his authority as the priest and ruler of his own tribe and household. In the East the elder or head man of each village carries a staff with him wherever he

goes—not merely to lean upon—but as a badge of his dignity and power. This staff is from five to six feet long, and it is always made of the straight branch of a tree with the bark on it, left in its natural state. It is one of the most precious possessions of the family and is handed down from father to son, so that he who inherits it on the death of its previous possessor, becomes in turn the head of his house and the ruler of his tribe. At the present day in an eastern encampment a white-haired chief may often be seen holding such a staff in his hand at the door of his tent; and in every Mahometan town a long-robed dervish may be met frequently carrying a small stick of almond wood, which is regarded with much superstitious veneration, and believed to be capable of working miraculous cures, and which the son inherits when the father dies. The origin of the custom is very simple and natural. It means that just as a tree produces a branch which is a miniature representation of it, so the person who owns the ancestral staff is the head and representative of the house from which he sprang. We read that Jacob had such a staff, and that he worshipped God leaning upon the top of it when he gave instructions to his son Joseph regarding his burial in the Holy Land. We are told about the staff of Judah, and the staff of Moses. We have a survival of this old-world custom in the sceptre which the monarch holds in his hand when seated on the throne; in the mace of the magistrate which is the symbol of his authority as the representative of the majesty of the law; and in the bâton of the field-marshal which is the badge of the highest military rank.

We thus understand the significance of the rod or staff which each prince or head of his tribe was required to bring and lay before the ark in the tabernacle. As the staves would be all made of the same wood and would look very much alike, it was necessary, in order to distinguish

them, that each staff should have the name of its owner carved upon it. There were thirteen of the staves brought to the inner sanctuary of the tabernacle; twelve to represent the twelve tribes of Israel, and the thirteenth to represent Aaron, who was the object of dispute. The test to which they were to be put was, that whichever rod should be found in the morning covered with buds and blossoms and fruits, the person to whom it belonged would be marked out as being Divinely chosen to be the high-priest of the Lord for Israel. All night the rods lay together in the holy place in the darkness, that was in a peculiar sense the shadow of God's wing. We can imagine how eagerly the princes of Israel would gather together in the morning to ascertain the result of the experiment. And we can well believe that there would be a great disappointment, when it was found that of all the heap of rods the only one that had buds and blossoms and fruits on it was the one on which the name of Aaron was carved. The Lord had in this signal manner chosen the very man against whom they had conspired, and whom they would not have to rule over them in holy things. Bitter as must have been their disappointment when they took back their own lifeless unchanged rods which God had rejected, they had no choice but to submit. The decision had been left to the Lord, and He had shown His will in a way that did not admit of any doubt or dispute. The question was settled forever that Aaron and his house were to be the hereditary high-priests of Israel in all time coming.

It was a wonderful miracle. It was against nature. We have sometimes seen a branch in spring, which, though broken off from the tree and lying on the ground, still kept as much sap in it as enabled it to develop its buds into leaves for a short time, and look as if it were living and growing. But there was no sap at all in Aaron's rod. It was many years since it had been cut from its parent

tree. It was perfectly dry and dead ; and being constantly in the hand, it was much worn. That such an ancient piece of wood should bud and blossom seemed beforehand an utter impossibility. Then, too, the conditions in which it was placed were against nature. It is in the sunshine that the life of a tree is quickened and the sap made to flow, and the leaves to expand, and the flowers open, and the fruits form. But it was in the darkness that the rod of Aaron carried on these vital processes. It is in the open air, in fertile places, that trees usually grow and develop their parts ; but the rod of Aaron grew in the dry parched desert where there was no green thing, and within the enclosure of the sanctuary shut out from the rain and sunshine of heaven. It had no root in any stimulating soil, it had no connection with any living tree. It was the power of God working directly without any second causes that made it bud and blossom. The development of the rod, which had long before stopped because of its severance from the parent tree, was set agoing and accelerated, because it was united to His power, whose life makes all things grow ; so that what in ordinary circumstances required the slow process of months was accomplished in a single night. Aaron's rod, when exhibited to the gaze of the wondering Israelites, quelling at once their rebellion, was brought back into the sanctuary and placed in the ark as part of the regalia of Israel ; a most significant symbol to all generations of the danger of approaching God in any other way than that which He Himself had appointed, and of the certainty of God's accepting the ministry of the high-priest whom He Himself had chosen.

I have said that the miracle of the budding rod was against nature ; and I have pointed out some things in regard to which this was true. But God usually works even in His miracles along the lines of nature ; He honours the ordinary methods of His providence so far as they will go

on extraordinary occasions; He is sparing in His forth-putting of miraculous power, and as a wise Economist makes as much use of existing materials as possible. It was therefore an economy of the miracle that the ancestral staff upon which it was wrought should be made of the wood of the almond tree, which in its natural growth is the foremost of all trees, puts forth its beautiful rosy blossoms before the leaves in its haste to develop itself, and is always the first to awake from the sleep of winter under the first mild breath of spring. Hence its Hebrew name means "the hastener or waker," and there is a beautiful poetic allusion to it in words addressed to the prophet Jeremiah, which he would well understand. "The word of the Lord came unto me, saying, Jeremiah, what seest thou? And I said, I see a rod of an almond tree. Then the Lord said, Thou hast well seen; for I will hasten My word and perform it"; the word for *hasten* and for the *almond tree* being the substantive and the verbal forms of the same root. The miracle of the budding rod was also in the line of nature, inasmuch as it was a branch of an almond tree left in its natural state without being peeled or dressed, and therefore lending itself more easily as it were to the miraculous quickening. And the fact that all the stages of flowering and fruiting appeared on it at once, is in complete accordance with the fact that buds, blossoms and nuts are all found on the natural branch together at the same time. The wonder of this special miracle was also in harmony with the previous history of the rod. We have reason to believe that it was no other than the identical rod with which all the miracles of Moses and Aaron had hitherto been performed. It was the ancestral staff belonging to Aaron as the oldest of the family and the head of his father's house; and as Aaron was the mouthpiece of Moses, so the rod of Aaron was the visible instrument in the hands of Moses by which the power of God was put forth on behalf

of His people. It was identified therefore with miracles; its budding in the tabernacle was of a piece with its becoming a serpent on Horeb, and dividing the waters of the Red Sea for a passage for the Israelites. It always possessed as it were the power of developing a higher or more abundant life. And we are not astonished that "the mighty staff," "the staff of God," as it was called, which had swallowed up the staves of the magicians in the presence of Pharaoh, and thus put an end to the pretensions of a false priesthood by destroying their badge of office, should prove its immeasurable superiority to the staves of the other princes of Israel, who had dared to conspire against the authority of Aaron and to deprive him of his office, by budding and blossoming before the ark of the Lord, while theirs continued leafless and dead.

The budding rod was an appropriate symbol of the Divine election in the case of Aaron. While his own brethren of the tribe of Levi, and the other tribes of Israel, wished to strip him of his dignity, and to impoverish and make bare his life, the Giver of all life and fruitfulness crowned him with glory and honour. Through the Divine favour he obtained more abundant life, and the blessing of God made him truly rich. The darkness of trial and trouble only caused him to blossom and fruit more abundantly, like the *Cereus* and the *Night-flowering Stock*. His ancestral staff was made as beautiful and fruitful in the Divine service as a palm tree, flourishing in the courts of the Lord's house and bringing forth fruit in old age. It was endowed with the special organs by which the seed was to be formed, in token that the office of the high-priesthood was to be continued in the family of Aaron forever.

And was there not this further significance in the blossoming of the rod, that it indicated the spirit of self-sacrifice which specially belonged to the priestly office? What is the meaning of every blossom and fruit in nature? Is it

not self-sacrifice? So long as a plant puts forth branches and leaves only, it lives entirely for itself and can perpetuate its selfish existence indefinitely. But whenever it puts forth a blossom it goes beyond itself and has a regard to another life that is to spring from it, and in this unselfish effort terminates its own existence; for every plant, when it blossoms and ripens its seed, has fulfilled the great end of its life and perishes. A flower and consequently a fruit is an abortive branch, the vegetative, selfish growth being arrested and metamorphosed into the unselfish reproductive growth. And is it not instructive to notice that it is in this self-sacrifice of the plant that all its beauty comes out and culminates? The blossom and the fruit in which it gives its own life for another, are the loveliest of all its parts. God has crowned this self-denial and blessing of others with all the glory of colour and the grace of form and the sweetness of perfume and the richness of nourishment. And so the almond rod of Aaron was to blossom and fruit under the blessing of God, not for his own good alone, but for the good of all Israel. The conspirators sought the office of the high-priesthood for themselves, from selfish motives of ambition. It was the honours and emoluments connected with it that they coveted. They cared not for the privilege of Divine service and doing good to their fellows which it conferred. They lost sight altogether of the spiritual nature of the office and valued only its temporal advantages. They were thus seeking their own, not the things of others, and their rods in consequence of their utter selfishness continued barren; they produced no buds or blossoms or fruits, which are the symbols and the rewards of self-sacrifice. The ancestral staff was to be used by them merely as a rod of power to rule over their brethren, for their own glory and aggrandisement.

And the rod of bare power lording it over others produced no life or fruitfulness. It created instead a desert,

and impoverished life. The man who rules over his fellows not for their good but for his own, does them an injury and not a benefit, and does his best to make his own life poor and bare. Too many have followed in the wake of Korah, Dathan and Abiram, and seized positions of wealth and honour, not that they might be a greater blessing to their fellow creatures, but that they might confine to themselves the advantages of such positions. Kings have reigned for their own glory, and rulers have wielded the rod of office for oppression. And the idea that generally prevails in the world is that rank or wealth or power of any kind is solely for the benefit of the possessor, and not to be used as a talent and opportunity for the good of others. To this worldly idea the Divine idea of the priesthood is wholly opposed. That office was instituted to show God's unselfish treatment of man—the disinterested love that is in His heart—even for those who have rebelled against Him, and refused to love and serve Him, and His desire to save them at the cost of the death of His own Son. The priesthood was not the result of man seeking after God, but of God seeking after man, God taking the initiative. And when there was no eye to pity us, and no hand to save us, His own eye pitied and His own hand was stretched forth to save us. It was God Himself who appointed the high-priest; and as God sacrificed Himself in the appointment for the good of men, so He wished the Divinely chosen priest also to sacrifice himself for the good of men. God's priests were meant to be the servants of their fellows, even as God's own Son came not to be ministered unto, but to minister and to give His life a ransom for many. God's idea of power is service; and He is teaching us continually that the highest dignity is to be the servant of all, and the greatest blessedness to do good as we have opportunity. Every rod of influence that is wielded for the good of others inspires with new vitality, causes even the wilderness and

the solitary place to be glad and the desert to rejoice and blossom as the rose. Laid on the face of the dead, unlike Elisha's rod in the hands of the selfish Gehazi, it causes the dead to arise to newness of life. It makes the feeblest germs of goodness, in the most hostile conditions, where no light or warmth can reach them, to bud and blossom and fruit. It is the rod of self-sacrifice everywhere that brings into the world new buds, new flowers, new fruits, and beautifies and enriches the world as nothing else can do. We owe to it the whole bright growth of the natural world, and all the glory of the spiritual world.

And as God had chosen the rod of Aaron to bless the Israelites, so He had chosen Israel to be the rod of His inheritance, that in them all the families of the earth might be blessed. The whole nation was intended to be a royal priesthood, to occupy the same position of priestly service among all the other nations of the earth which Aaron occupied among the children of Israel. Its almond rod was meant to blossom and fruit for the good of all mankind. But Israel woefully fell short of this Divine intention. It kept to itself its spiritual blessings, and held itself aloof from all other nations, on the ground of its superior holiness and special enjoyment of the favour of heaven. And because of this, the fig-tree which our Lord cursed on account of its fruitlessness—bringing forth only leaves for its own glory, and not fruit for the benefit of the race—was its appropriate symbol, and it was withered from the roots, and its doom has been that no man should eat fruit of it hereafter for ever.

It is remarkable how history repeats itself. What the Israelite conspirators had meant to do to Aaron in the wilderness, the chief priests and Pharisees had meant to do to our Lord in Jerusalem. They leagued themselves together to deprive Him of His royal priesthood, and to reject His claims as the promised Messiah; and the rod of

Jesse was chosen amid the destruction of Jerusalem and the rejection of the covenant people. The Root out of a dry ground, without form or comeliness, despised and rejected of men, blossomed before God in marvellous beauty. The dry Branch, cut off from all nourishment and withered in death, found the grave to be the hiding-place of God's power, found its circumstances of distress and ruin to be the very soil from whence it should spring forth as the fruitful Bough, that was to bless all the world in a way that Israel at its best could never have done. The resurrection of Aaron's rod was the sign of Aaron's appointment to be God's high priest; the resurrection of Jesus Christ was the Divine testimony to His unchangeable priesthood. And if we are willing to accept Him as our great High Priest and atoning sacrifice, to give up all selfish worldly schemes of our own devising for our salvation, and accept God's appointed way through Christ declared plainly from the first, then for us the rod of power that subdues us and rules over us will be the source of all our blessedness. Out of the sacrifices which it causes us to make will spring our richest and most lasting satisfaction, and our own reigning under Him on earth will help to make the world fairer and happier. Our kingdom will be the throne of men's hearts, and our influence everywhere will make the barest and driest life to blossom and yield the fruit which is unto holiness and whose end is everlasting life.

HUGH MACMILLAN.