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The Great Text Commentary.

THE GREAT TEXTS OF GENESIS.

GENESIS XXVIII. 16, 17.

'And Jacob awaked out of his sleep, and he said, Surely the Lord is in this place; and I knew it not. And he was afraid, and said, How dreadful is this place! this is none other but the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.'

EXPOSITION.

'Surely the Lord is in this place.'—Jacob was not unaware of the omnipresence of the Deity; what astonished him was that Jehovah should thus reveal Himself far away from the shrines where He was worshipped. Rebekah had gone to one of these to inquire of Jehovah (chap. 25²²), and probably to a shrine in the very neighbourhood of the place where Jacob was sleeping. But first Abraham and then Isaac had for so long made Beersheba their home, that Jacob probably knew little about the sanctity of the spot, and felt himself far away from all the religious associations of his youth, and from that 'presence of Jehovah' which in antediluvian times had also been supposed to be confined to certain localities (chap. 4⁸).—PAYNE SMITH.

THIS was, most probably, the place later distinguished by the presence of the holy tabernacle, where sacrifices were offered and vows were fulfilled. It cannot therefore surprise us that this spot was considered as pre-eminently holy. For although the glory of God pervades the universe, so that not even the heaven of heavens can hold it, some localities were deemed as His special abodes, where men assemble, pour out their hearts, and obtain peace; for as long as religion is connected with a visible worship it will be impossible for the human mind to divest itself of the notion that there are certain places more properly hallowed by the Divine presence.—KALISCH.

'I knew it not.'—He knew it not; but he knows it now—knows it in the access of strength, knows it in the promise of hope, knows it in the celestial voice and the ineffable light. All the common interests of life—the avocations, the amusements, the cares, the hopes, the friendships, the conflicts—all are invested with a dignity and an awe unsuspected before. Reverence is henceforth the ruling spirit of his life. This monotonous round of commonplace toils and commonplace pleasures is none other than the house of God. This barren stony thoroughfare of life is the very portal of heaven.—LIGHTFOOT.

'How dreadful is this place.'—The manifestation of God must always inspire awe and dread, but not fear: for where He reveals Himself, there is the 'gate of heaven'—the appointed entrance for prayer now, and for admission to the glorified life hereafter.—PAYNE SMITH.

'The house of God.'—Peculiarly God's dwelling-place, where Jacob had come into more direct contact with God than anywhere else.—DODS.

'The gate of heaven.'—The 'gate of heaven' seems to

stand in contradistinction to 'house of God'; and as the latter refers to the place where Jacob had rested, the former alludes to the entrance of heaven, through which the angels came down upon the earth, and at which the Lord was standing. 'Gate of heaven' is, therefore, not synonymous with 'heavenly abode,' or with 'house of God'; though the word *gate* is sometimes used for the whole dwelling or house.—KALISCH.

THE entrance to the spiritual world; which shows that he did not consider God to be confined to the spot where he had slept, but that somehow at this spot there was a way of access to God. In the face of the promise of v. 16, 'I am with thee in all places whither thou goest,' it is impossible that Jacob can have thought of God as confined to one spot.—DODS.

METHODS OF TREATMENT.

I.

The Lord is in this Place.

By the Rev. S. A. Brooke, M.A.

Jacob's first impression was surprise, his second fear, his third the sense of a spiritual presence.

1. *Surprise.*—Unlike the stirring life of Esau, his had been commonplace and monotonous. Long-continued ease at home leads a man to rest on the outward and visible. He is apt to become selfish; trifles become great duties, and the world without and his duty to it a mere dream. Now Jacob is torn from the comfortable and customary and finds himself in a new world, the spiritual, where he meets God. So we live for years the life of custom and commonplace, thinking the chatter of our home the murmur of the world, absorbed in its interests, when, suddenly, we are awakened. It may be love, or the death of love, the sense of sin or a nation's agony for freedom that arouses us. We start with surprise and awaking cry, 'What is this? Surely God is here, and I knew it not.' Until we have this vision we are not men, and he who has seen it is never the same again. Are you still living the old life, in the world and not above it, *unsurprised*? Then ask with prayer what your ignorance means and wring from God the answer.

2. *Fear.*—It was inherent in Jacob's character. It spoilt him in his early days, but he had manly

stuff in him, and he subdued it, and afterwards it was lifted into veneration of God. His present fear was caused partly by the sense of sin, partly by realizing the presence of the Invisible. No one who does not know God can feel himself touched by God without fear. If he only feels Him as a dreadful power the result will be superstition, but if he knows and loves Him the result is veneration. From that hour the love that casts out fear began to stir in Jacob's heart. He began to realize not an angry Being, but One who loved him and would care for him. As he grew, selfishness died; only love and awe and trust were left. Then the degrading fear departed, for perfect reverence for the Highest frees a man from the fear of anything lower. To that Jacob attained at last when he stood with dignity before Pharaoh, unashamed before kings because he revered the highest King. His weak spirit had grown into strength.

3. *The Sense of God's Presence.*—He had thought of God as dwelling in heaven. He found Him in Bethel also. As life went on he found other places full of God. At last he reached a great conclusion—God was everywhere. We go farther and find God in all the universe—in all thought, in man, in nature, in history; not only in the miraculous, or in great events, but in the common life of common men. And the thought makes life beautiful. David on the hills of Bethlehem, Paul and Silas in the dungeon, the martyrs in the arena saw the vision of Jacob, and it was to them the house of God, the gate of heaven. But the thought is solemn also, that we are in God's house, that every deed is done in His sight, every word is heard, every thought known to Him. Find your way to heaven in your daily work. Refuse its duties, neglect its opportunities, and it is to you the gate of hell, but God's presence makes everything divine, and out of the most commonplace life will rise steps to the Father's house.

II.

The Gate of Heaven.

By the Rev. Thomas Green, M.A.

A gate has two uses—for admission and exclusion. When it is open it furthers progress, when shut it prevents it.

1. The expression 'gate of heaven' implies a

place not walled round in such a way that there is no escape for those within nor entrance for those without. Heaven may be entered by those who will, but the gate may also be closed for ever. Some men make out that the gate can never be shut, that all go to heaven, but indiscriminate admission is not God's intention for human souls, He keeps the right to lock out and lock in.

2. What passes through this gate? (1) Christ came—not only angels as in Jacob's vision, but the Son of God—to take our nature and redeem us. Again He passed back in triumph when He had finished His work. (2) Prayer passes the gate, for it is open to the prayers of the humble and contrite heart. (3) Christ opened the kingdom of heaven to all believers. Our loved ones have gone through the gate. We see this side of it, and it looks dark, but on the other side the light of God shines for ever. The angels came and returned; the Lord Jesus came and returned, but He left us His promise, 'Lo! I am with you always, even to the end of the world.' He is with us still, or we should be hopeless of reaching the other side of the gate.

We cannot tell how soon we may be called upon to pass through the gate, but we must desire that when it is finally closed, we may be among those to whom an 'entrance is ministered abundantly.'

ILLUSTRATIONS.

In proportion as we gain the sense of God's presence we are safe in the very tumult of life, in the very thick of the strife of tongues. For this presence protects our own individuality; it protects us so that we do not lose ourselves, and become, as we are often apt to do, almost a mechanical part of the world and the society in which we live; sinking into a routine in which we lose more and more the sense of responsibility. We certainly need this, a clear and ever-deepening sense of our own separate and solitary individuality, with all its consciousness of personal responsibility and the dignity of personal life. And the first thing that the realization of God's Presence does for any man is to deepen this sense of his own personality and responsibility. He lives in a Presence which is stronger than all the influences round him; that Presence isolates him, frees him from the tyranny of the standards and judgments of the little coteries which make his world, and gives him new standards to judge himself by.—B. W. MATURIN.

In one of his poems Lowell tells the story of an ancient prophet who made a pilgrimage far into the wilderness until he reached the holy hill Mount Sinai. He had been

conscious that for some reason God's Presence had deserted him, and he had set out for the sacred mountain, confident that there if anywhere, he should find it again. And so he stood on the hillside, and prayed to God to give him a sign. He bowed his head, and waited for the answer to his prayer. He expected something wonderful, perhaps a loud peal of thunder. He heard nothing; not even a breath of wind stirred the air. But suddenly, while his eyes were cast on the ground at his feet, the tuft of moss before him burst open, and a little violet sprang through. In a moment it flashed upon him how blind he had been; he remembered that just before he left home his little daughter had come running to him, to give him a nosegay of precisely the same flowers. These flowers grew at his own door; he saw them every day; he had no need to come so far for them. He had been careless of the little things which, put together, made up the sum of his life from day to day, and he was now taught that these should have been his first care.—W. MOODY.

LOOK into your own soul, and what do you find there? Yes, ye yourselves are the temple of the living God. He is there—there, whether you will or not. Through your reason, through your conscience, through your remorse and regrets, through your capacity of amendment, through your aspirations and ideals, He speaks to you. You are His coinage. His image and superscription are stamped upon you. Aye, and He has also re-stamped you, re-created you, in Christ Jesus by the earnest of His Spirit. If it be true of your body that it is fearfully and wonderfully made, is it not far more true of your soul? Henceforward you will regard yourself with awe and reverence as a sanctuary of the Eternal Goodness. You will not, you dare not, profane this sanctuary. Here is the true self-respect—nay, not self-respect, for self is abased, self is overawed, self veils the face and falls prostrate in the presence of Infinite Wisdom and Purity and Love thus revealed. Surely, surely the Lord was in this place—in this poor, self-seeking, restless, rebellious soul of mine, and I thought it a common thing, I went on my way heedless, I followed my own devices and desires, I knew it not.—J. B. LIGHTFOOT.

GOD is never so far off as even to be near:—

He is within! Our spirit is the home He holds most dear.
To think of Him as by our side is almost as untrue,
As to remove His throne beyond those skies of starry blue,
So all the while I thought myself homeless, forlorn, and weary,
Missing my joy, I walked the earth—myself God's sanctuary.—FABER.

THERE is a saying of Hazlitt's, bold, and at first seeming wondrous true: 'In the days of Jacob there was a ladder between heaven and earth; but now the heavens have gone farther off, and become astronomical.'—G. DAWSON.

THOU hast been with me in the dark and cold,
And all the night I thought I was alone;
The chariots of Thy glory round me rolled,
On me attending, yet by me unknown.

Why did I murmur underneath the night,
When night was spanned by golden steps to Thee?
Why did I cry disconsolate for light,
When all Thy stars were bending over me?

The darkness of my night has been Thy day;
My stony pillow was Thy ladder's rest;
And all Thine angels watched my couch of clay
To bless the soul, unconscious it was blest.

I'll build a monument to that dead pain,
In whose sore anguish conscious life was given;
And write on loss the record of the gain,
'This was the house of God, the gate of heaven.'—

G. MATHESON.

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