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The Great Text Commentary.

THE GREAT TEXTS OF REVELATION.

REVELATION XXII. 14.

'Blessed are they that wash their robes, that they may have the right to come to the tree of life, and may enter in by the gates into the city.'—R.V.

The first Beatitude that Jesus Christ spoke from the Mountain was, 'Blessed are the poor in spirit.' The last Beatitude that He speaks from heaven is, 'Blessed are they that wash their robes.' And the act commended in the last is but the outcome of the spirit extolled in the first. For they who are poor in spirit are such as know themselves to be sinful men; and those who know themselves to be sinful men are they who will cleanse their robes in the blood of Jesus Christ.

I always regard this as a test text. I should like to ask every Sunday-school teacher, every district visitor, every worker in an inquiry room, to take it, just as it stands, and expound it. And if he stumbles over it, or muddles it, I should like to send him back for a while to a form in God's school, there to learn Christ from Christ Himself, before he ventures to teach others. I said 'learn *Christ*'; not theologies, not systems of doctrine, but Christ. Christ is here in every word, Christ Jesus, God's Anointed Saviour of poor sinners; 'all and in all' to souls. If a man cannot preach Christ from this passage, He does not know the Gospel so as to be a fit teacher either of babes, or of strong men. It is not a difficult passage, if a man has first the root of the matter in him, and then has sat, as a little child, at the feet of the Holy Ghost to be taught, as He alone can teach, God's beautiful equipoise of truth.¹

The text tells us (1) who are the Blessed of the last Beatitude, and (2) what are their privileges. The Blessed are 'they that do his commandments,' or, as in the Revised Version, according to another reading, 'they that wash their robes.' Their privileges are right of access to the Tree of Life and entrance through the gates into the City.

I. The Blessed.

II. Their Privileges.

1. Entrance into the City.
2. Access to the Tree of Life.

I.

THE BLESSED.

We are face to face at once with a difficulty of reading. The A.V. has 'Blessed are they that do

¹ A. C. Price, *Fifty Sermons*, ii. 105.

his commandments,' following one reading; the R.V. 'Blessed are they that wash their robes,' following another. The difference, which seems so great in English, is due to the exchange of only a few letters in Greek. But the change from the Authorized Version to the Revised is generally hailed by expositors as a relief. 'Blessed are they that do his commandments,' says Maclaren,² 'carries us back to the old law, and has no more hopeful a sound in it than the thunders of Sinai. If it were, indeed, amongst Christ's last words to us, it would be a most sad instance of His 'building again the things he had destroyed.' It is relegating us to the dreary old round of trying to earn heaven by doing good deeds; and I might almost say it is 'making the Cross of Christ of none effect.' The fact that that corrupt reading came so soon into the Church and has held its ground so long, is to me a very singular proof of the difficulty which men have always had in keeping themselves up to the level of the grand central Gospel-truth: 'Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but by his mercy, he saved us.'

Dean Vaughan speaks even more strongly against the reading. If this is the saying of Christ, he says, we must bow to it. If it pleased Him to leave as His last word to the Churches this condemning sentence, it is not for us to remonstrate or to rebel. If it was the will of Christ to re-place His Church, by the very latest of His revelations, on a footing of meritorious obedience, it must be so, and, though with downcast looks and tottering steps, we must set ourselves to follow. Yet we cannot check the rising thought, 'We trusted that it had been he who should have redeemed man.'

But is there this difference between the readings? There is, and more than this difference, if they who 'do his commandments' have not yet 'washed their robes'; or if, to put it from the other side, the washing of the robes were not one of the commandments that had to be done, and indeed the sum and substance of them. It is quite true that our right of access to the Tree of Life is

² *A Year's Ministry*, 1st ser. 43.

not of works, but of grace; yet when we have been saved by grace we proceed to keep the commandments of God. This is the evidence of our salvation, and the enjoyment of it. 'If a man love me, he will keep my words'—that is doing His commandments—'and my Father will love him, and we will come unto him, and make our abode with him' (Jn 14²³)—that is enjoying access to the Tree of Life.

Swete has some difficulty in deciding between the readings. If the Greek letters were changed in the course of transcription, he thinks it slightly more probable that 'wash their robes' arose out of 'do his commandments' than that the reverse occurred. But, the evidence of the documents is in favour of 'wash their robes'; and in the Johanneine Writings the phrase is 'keep his commandments,' 'do' occurring only once, in 1 Jn 5². On the whole, then, he thinks, 'wash their robes' may with some confidence be preferred.

I. I need not remind you, I suppose, says Maclaren,¹ how continually this symbol of the robe is used in Scripture as an expression for moral character. This Book of the Apocalypse is saturated through and through with Jewish implications and allusions, and there can be no doubt whatever that in this metaphor of the cleansing of the robes there is an allusion to that vision which the Apocalyptic seer of the Old Covenant, the prophet Zechariah, had when he saw the High Priest standing before the altar clad in foul raiment, and the word came forth, 'Take away the filthy garments from him.' Nor need I do more than remind you how the same metaphor is often on the lips of our Lord Himself, notably in the story of the man that had not on the wedding garment, and in the touching and beautiful incident in the Parable of the Prodigal Son, where the exuberance of the father's love bids them cast the best robe round the rags and the leanness of his long-lost boy. Nor need I remind you how Paul catches up the metaphor, and is continually referring to an investing and a divesting—the putting on and the putting off of the new and the old man. In this same Book of the Apocalypse, we see, gleaming all through it, the white robes of the purified soul: 'They shall walk with me in white, for they are worthy.' 'I beheld a great multitude whom no man could number, who had washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.'

All three made their way to the beautiful valley of Ivirna, where the lands of the chief Manaune were situated. The

welkin rang with merry shouts of *Kua tau mai Rori!* ('Rori is found!') The news spread all over the island the same day, so that crowds came to see this poor fellow. And a miserable skeleton he was, his skin almost black through continual exposure. A feast was made for him by the people of Ivirna, but he scarcely tasted the unaccustomed food. He was then led in procession round the island by his protector and others; the crowning point was for him to bathe in Rongo's Sacred Fountain, in token of his being cleansed from a state of bondage and fear, and being allowed to participate freely in all the good things of the dominant tribe.²

This mysterious robe, which answers nearly to what we mean by character, is made by the wearer. That is a solemn thought. Every one of us carries about with him a mystical loom, and we are always weaving—weave, weave, weaving—this robe which we wear, every thought a thread of the warp, every action a thread of the weft. We weave it, as the spider does its web, out of its own entrails, if I might so say. We weave it, and we dye it, and we cut it, and we stitch it, and then we put it on and wear it, and it sticks to us. Like a snail that crawls about your garden patches, and makes its shell by a process of secretion from out of its own substance, so you and I are making that mysterious thing that we call character, moment by moment. It is our own self, modified by our actions. Character is the precipitate from the stream of conduct which, like the Nile Delta, gradually rises solid and firm above the parent river and confines its flow.³

2. The foul robes can be cleansed. Our text does not state the method. That has already been declared. 'They washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb' (7¹⁴). In his Epistle St. John has the same paradox: 'The blood of Jesus his Son cleanseth us from all sin' (1 Jn 1⁷). John saw the paradox, and he saw that the paradox helped to illustrate the great truth which he was trying to proclaim, that the red blood whitened the black robe, and that in its full tide there was a limpid river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding out of the Cross of Christ.

3. But it is not a past washing only that is spoken of here. It is also a daily washing of the robes of the redeemed even now. It is not, 'Blessed are they that have washed.' The Greek is the perpetual present—'Blessed are they that keep washing.' Having once washed the whole body in the fountain opened for sin and for uncleanness, they have need constantly to wash the feet, soiled afterwards, and again and again, by contact with the dust and the miry clay of this world. 'Blessed are they that evermore wash their robes,' by an ever-repeated application of the

² Gill, *From Darkness to Light in Polynesia*, p. 234.

³ A. Maclaren, *ibid.* 46.

¹ *A Year's Ministry*, 1st ser. 45.

'blood of sprinkling' alike to the accusing conscience and to the sin-stained life.

It is a most dangerous thing to fall into the habit of letting any committed sin pass *sub silentio* (as it were) between man and his soul. Scripture indeed counsels no morbid self-scrutiny. Harm may be done by it. A man may walk timidly and slavishly before God by reason of it. We are not taught that many express words, or perhaps any express words, need pass about particular wrong thoughts, acts, or words, in direct converse on the subject between God and the soul. But if so, it must be because the intercourse is so thorough that it need not be microscopic. The man does not wash each separate spot and stain, because he washes the whole robe, and them with it. One way or another, the tablets of memory and the tablets of conscience and the tablets of life must be sponged clean every evening—and in only one way, by what Scripture calls 'the blood of the Lamb'—that is, the Atonement made once for all for all sin, applied in earnest faith to the individual man's heart and soul in the sight of God.¹

I have been told that in this district in days gone by, those who were communicants of the Church might be known by the 'washings' on the ropes in their greens, or, if they had no greens, on the dykes and hedges near their houses on the week before the communion Sabbath. And on one communion Sabbath morning, as I had occasion to go over the dewy fields very early, I met a working man near a rock in the middle of a field well away from the town, to whom I said, when I came up to him, 'Dear me, James, you are early about.' To which he replied, 'Ay, I always come out at sunrise on the communion Sunday to prepare'; and then something told me quite plainly that he had been at prayer at the rock-side before I had appeared.²

4. The washing of their robes is done by the Blessed themselves. 'Blessed are they that wash their robes.' On the one hand is all the fulness of cleansing; on the other is the heap of dirty rags that will not be cleansed by you sitting there and looking at them. The two must be brought into contact. How? By the magic band that unites strength and weakness, purity and foulness, the Saviour and the penitent; the magic band of simple affiance, and trust and submission to the cleansing power of His death and of His life.

Six centuries ago there lived a youth of almost intolerable arrogance, arising from a sense of his own superiority, who, thwarted in love, thwarted in ambition, thwarted in every lofty aim for his country, beguiled by the dazzling wild beast of impurity, tempted by the gaunt wolf of avarice, torn by the lion of fierce anger, trying in vain to save himself by external conformity and by donning the girdle of a Franciscan Tertiary, eating the bitter bread of exile, and swallowing the salt tears of infinite disappointment, felt even in middle

life that he had lost his way completely in the wild and savage forest, and could not reach the sunny hill of moral order and holiness. Yet he, too, taught by the grace of God to face the eternal realities, to see the things that are, and to see them as they are, see sin as it is and himself as he was, did climb strugglingly by the steep hill of penitence, and pass through the purifying flame, and became the greatest singer of the Christian Church—the mighty Dante.³

II.

THEIR PRIVILEGES.

Their privileges are two: Right to come to the Tree of Life and Entrance into the City. Now the Tree of Life is in the midst of the Paradise of God, and the Paradise is in the centre of the City of God. So we come first through the gates into the City.

I. *Entrance into the City.* The City is the society of the Redeemed. In relation to Christ it is spoken of as a Bride. In relation to the followers of Christ themselves as a City, the City in which they dwell together.

In the old world the whole power and splendour of great kingdoms was gathered in their capitals, Babylon and Nineveh in the past, Rome in the present. To John the forces of evil were all concentrated in that city on the Seven Hills. To him the antagonistic forces which were the hope of the world were all concentrated in the real ideal city which he expected to come down from heaven—the New Jerusalem.

What are the characteristics of this city of God into which the Blessed of the last Beatitude enter?

I. *It is a City of Social Activities.* Genesis began with a garden, man's sin sent him out of the garden. God out of evil evolves good, and for the lost garden comes the better thing, the found city. 'Then comes the statelier Eden back to man.' For surely it is better that men should live in the activities of the city than in the sweetness and indolence of the garden; and manifold and miserable as are the sins and the sorrows of great cities, the opprobria of our modern so-called civilization, yet still the aggregation of great masses of men for worthy objects generates a form of character, and sets loose energies and activities, which no other kind of life could have produced.

Paradise Lost was a garden, Paradise Regained is a city. Whatever else there was in the one, of beauty, of glory, it was a self-life. All was there, if not of luxury, if not of

¹ C. J. Vaughan, *Authorized or Revised?* 303.

² Donald M. Henry, *Whithorn*.

³ F. W. Farrar, in the *Christian World Pulpit*, xxxvii. 66.

indolence, yet at least of enjoyment and of isolation. There were no sighs or sounds of distress, to evoke the nobler feelings of pity and sympathy, or the nobler activities of helping and ministering. Even the spiritual life of Paradise, if we may not with reverence speak of it as selfish, was yet a life self-concentrated and self-contained, redeemed only from an unlovely exclusiveness, on the one side by there being none to shut out, on the other side by its being lived in the light of a God of Love. Not until sin entered, and death by sin, was there either the family to evoke charity, or the Church to exercise communion.¹

2. *It is a City of Reunion.* Scripture leads us to associate the reunion of dead and living in a world from which all idolatry and all selfishness will have been for ever cast out by the unveiled presence of that one Person whom to know is life, whom to serve is glory. St. Paul used to speak of meeting there his own converts, Asiatic and European, and seemed to say that it would scarcely be heaven to him if they shared it not with him. 'He that raised up the Lord Jesus shall raise up us also by Jesus, and shall present us—with you.' 'What is our glory or joy or crown of rejoicing? Are not even ye in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ at His coming?' So large was his conception of the amplitude of the glory, and of its characteristic features of human sympathy as well as of Divine communion.

Surely there, amidst the solemn troops and sweet societies, the long-loved, long-lost, will be found again. I cannot believe that, like the Virgin and Joseph, we shall have to go wandering up and down the streets of Jerusalem when we get there, looking for our dear ones. 'Wist ye not that I should be in the Father's house?' We shall know where to find them.

We shall clasp them again,
And with God be the rest.²

3. *It is a City of Abiding.* The city is the emblem of security and of permanence. No more shall life be as a desert march, with changes which only bring sorrow, and yet a dreary monotony amidst them all. We shall dwell amid abiding realities, ourselves fixed in unchanging, but ever growing completeness and peace. The tents shall be done with, we shall inhabit the solid mansions of the city which hath foundations, and shall wonderingly exclaim, as our unaccustomed eyes gaze on their indestructible strength, 'What manner of stones, and what buildings are here!'—and not one stone of these shall ever be thrown down.

¹ C. J. Vaughan, *Authorized or Revised?* 307.

² A. Maclaren, *A Year's Ministry*, 1st ser., 52.

2. *Access to the Tree.* As the City is social, the Tree of Life is individual. In the City we enjoy the society of the Redeemed; at the Tree of Life we enjoy fellowship with God, a fellowship which is the peculiar privilege of each one of those who have washed their robes. We receive a name which no one knows except the Giver and the receiver of it. The promise is particular: 'If a man love me, he will keep my words: and my Father will love him, and we will come unto him, and make our abode with him.'

The tree of life stands out in the first pages of God's word as a sacramental symbol to unfallen man. It was a visible and tangible thing—a tree growing in the garden like other trees, but so inscribed with the word of God that in the use of its fruit, unfallen man could receive the spiritual assurance of God's love and favour. In this respect it differed from the other trees of the garden: they were God's permitted gifts to satisfy man's animal wants; but the tree of life has regard to the higher needs of his spiritual nature, which even then had a genuine sacramental instinct, and hungered for some tangible assurance of God's abiding grace.

When Adam sinned, the way to the tree of life was no longer open to him; and this healthful sacrament became at once forbidden fruit. In very mercy its use was forbidden to him, and put beyond his reach. Evidently its withdrawal has a peculiar solemnity about it: it is to save man from a fresh blunder and a new sin. The dream—that if only, by any means, he could retain the coveted assurance of God's love, all would be well, and all his disobedience would be neutralized, and all his sin forgotten—must at once be rudely broken. Even more than that, there is a dreadful possibility of his destroying all hope of restoration, if he rush in and claim the old symbol of God's love. For him to feed on the tree of life, when in a state of sin and anger and shame, would practically mean a second death.

But when we have washed our robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb, we have again as good a fitness to approach the Tree of Life as in primeval innocence. It is our fitness that constitutes our right. It is in being cleansed that the new right to come and eat is valid. Not unsullied innocence itself can come with surer step

to have the bread of God's own life given to it, than impurity that has been graciously cleansed away. The pardoned rebel, in his robes washed white, has a title to life as good as the angels, who have never defiled their garments.¹

‘I am going to a city
Where the living never die,
Where no sickness and no sorrow can molest;
From this body to release me.
He is speeding from on high;
He will greet me and escort me to my rest.’

Charles M. Alexander, the singer-evangelist, once told the following story of the origin of the hymn of which the above is the chorus:—

‘I always like to know how hymns came to be written, and so I asked the man who wrote this hymn how he came to do so. He told me that a friend of his went from New York City to the country. He was far gone in consumption, but in the deceptive nature of the disease thought that he was growing better day by day, till one morning he said he was so much improved in health that he was returning to the city the next day. The writer of the hymn went to see him in the afternoon, and found him in bed again. “Why,” he said, “I thought you were going to the city to-morrow?” The sick man's face lighted up, and he answered, “I'm going to a city, but it is a city where the living never die, and where no sickness and no sorrow can come.” After his death, his friend, remembering his words, wrote this hymn.’

1. Access to the Tree of Life is a matter of *right*, not of *reward*.

This we might illustrate by reference to the case of a pupil who is being promoted from a school of one grade to a school that is of a grade higher. He is promoted, not for the purpose of rewarding him for the faithful work he has done in the inferior grades, but because the superior grade is the place for him. He has acquired the ‘*right*’ to a place in that grade. That pupils are sometimes promoted before they have acquired the right, and prematurely advanced out of considerations of favouritism, is undoubtedly the fact, but advancement on such grounds invalidates the whole scheme of promotion and, in all ordinary relations,—in everything, I mean, except in religion,—is amenable to universal disapproval. Whether in schools or in matters of civil service, individual merit is regarded as the essential condition of candidature; and to set up some other principle of preferment in matters of the future world, and to assume that there is some other legitimate title to the tree of life besides simple individual *right* to the tree of life, and *right* to a residence in the celestial city, is to break with what we all recognize as justice in affairs of mundane experience, and to let our future condition be decided by a so-called system of divine determination too arbitrary and evasive to be tolerated by any reputable human civil service commission. If, then, the pupil is promoted, it is not to reward him for his work; and if he is not promoted, it is not to punish him for his lack of work.

¹ R. Waterston, *Thoughts on the Lord's Supper*, 23.

There is a place where he belongs, and in any well-regulated system of school administration the place where he belongs is the place where he will be kept or put.²

2. But if the right is more minutely examined, it will be found to be—(1) *A right of Promise*. ‘This is the promise which he promised us, even the life eternal’ (1 Jn 2²⁵). The promise is made sure by the washing of the robes in the blood of the Lamb. ‘For how many soever be the promises of God, in him is the yea: wherefore also through him is the Amen (2 Co 1²⁰).

(2) *A right of Inheritance*. ‘As many as received him, to them gave he the right to become children of God’ (Jn 1¹²). And this Johannine assurance is confirmed by St. Paul: ‘Ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus’ (Gal 3²⁶). ‘And if children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ (Ro 8¹⁷).

(3) *A right of Fitness*. This is the special right of the text, and it is as sure as the others, however astonishing that may be. ‘Made fit for the inheritance of the saints in light’—that is one thing. That is the entrance which is abundantly ministered unto us through the gates into the city. Fitness also for fellowship so close and intimate that because He lives we live also; and that ‘I live, and yet no longer I, but Christ liveth in me.’ That is the right to the Tree of Life.

Of all the tombs in Westminster Abbey, few are more interesting than that of our bright hero, King Henry v. His youth, too, was spent in idle noise, among drunken and debauched companions; but when, in our Jerusalem Chamber by the bedside of his dying father, his heart was touched for the first time by the grace of God, when from a frivolous and dissolute youth he went forth a king, not only in power, but in character, we know how he flung off his old follies and his old sins, and said to the obscene companion of his youth:

‘I know thee not, old man: fall to thy prayers;
How ill white hairs become a fool and jester!
I have long dream'd of such a kind of man,
So surfeit-swell'd, so old and so profane;
But, being awaked, I do despise my dream.
Reply not to me with a fool-born jest:
Presume not that I am the thing I was;
For God doth know, so shall the world perceive,
That I have turn'd away my former self;
So will I those that keep me company.’

If this be in part only traditional, yet when you look upon his stately tomb in the Confessor's Chapel, on the frieze that ornaments it; between the swans and antelopes of the De Bohuns you see a flaming beacon or cresset-light, which he took for his badge, ‘showing thereby,’ says an old

² C. H. Parkhurst, *A Little Lower than the Angels*, 85.

chronicler, 'that although his virtues had been formerly obscured, and lay as a dead coal, waiting for light to kindle it, by reason of tender years and evil company, notwithstanding he being now come to perfecter years and to riper understanding, had shaken off his evil counsellors, and his virtues now shine forth as a light of a cresset, which is

no ordinary light.' And you know how on his early death-bed he was heard again and again to cry aloud, as if defying the evil spirit of his youth: 'Thou liest! thou liest! my part is with my Lord Jesus Christ!'¹

¹ F. W. Farrar, *ibid.* 67.

Recent Oriental Archaeology.

By A. H. SAYCE, D.D., LL.D., PROFESSOR OF ASSYRIOLOGY IN THE UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD.

ONE of the most important works that have appeared of late years on the archæology of the ancient East is a large volume on *The Seal-Cylinders of Western Asia*, by Dr. Hayes Ward, published by the Carnegie Institution at Washington (1910). The author has made the subject peculiarly his own, and his book embodies the results of almost a lifetime's study. He has prepared the way for it by his work on the seal-cylinders in Mr. Pierpont Morgan's magnificent collection, some account of which has already been given in THE EXPOSITORY TIMES. In the present volume no less than 1315 seal-cylinders are reproduced.

For a knowledge of the mythology, religious beliefs and practices, and artistic development of early Babylonia and the countries dependent on Babylonian culture, the seal-cylinders are invaluable. But the study of them has been attended with many difficulties. It is seldom that the inscriptions which often accompany the designs throw any light upon the meaning of the latter, and the signification of the designs themselves is frequently very obscure. It is only by the use of the scientific instrument of comparison that in many cases their signification has been arrived at, and comparison needs the collection of a large number of examples before it acquires scientific value. In the course of his researches, Dr. Hayes Ward has made many discoveries, and the classes into which he has succeeded in separating the cylinders and the designs upon them, as well as the explanations he has given of them, will render his book a standard authority for many years to come.

The Syro-Hittite cylinders, of which he finds several different types, have evidently specially attracted him, and his chapters upon them are not

the least valuable in his book. They open up a new and very interesting line of study, and will help to throw light on the early relations between Babylonia, the original home of the seal-cylinder, on the one side, and the Amorites of Syria and the Hittites of Asia Minor, on the other. As far back as the copper age the seal-cylinder found its way both to Cyprus and to Troy, and it had been domesticated in Egypt long before the rise of the First Dynasty. A comparison between the seal-cylinders found in these countries with those of Babylonia ought to show to what period in Babylonian history the migration of the seal-cylinder to the West must be assigned. In Cyprus and Egypt, at any rate, it was before the age of the dynasties of Ur or of Khammu-rabi, if not before the age of Sargon of Akkad; the seal-cylinders hitherto discovered in the Hittite region indicate, on the other hand, the period of Khammu-rabi.

It is a pity that Dr. Hayes Ward was unable to give photographic reproductions of the cylinders; copies made by the hand are not always trustworthy, especially where cuneiform characters are attempted to be drawn by persons who are unacquainted with them. The actual reading of certain inscriptions, for instance, on the Syro-Hittite cylinders could never be ascertained from the printed copies of them. I could wish, too, that the book had been provided with an index.

The Abbé Martin's Assyriological work is always distinguished by careful scholarship, and his latest book¹ is a valuable addition to Assyrian philology. It is occupied with the letters dated in the reigns of Nabonidos, Cyrus, Darius, and Cambyses, which have been published by the authorities of the

¹ *Lettres néo-babyloniennes*, by Fr. Martin. Paris: Champion, 1909.