

THE PARABLE OF THE TEN VIRGINS

QUITE a long time ago, in 1896, I ventured to suggest that there was a good case for the genuineness of the longer reading (*viz.* 'the bridegroom *and the bride*') in Matt. xxv 1. This was in 'The Old Latin and the Itala' (p. 52), a technical work on a particular branch of textual criticism, and I was not surprised that no one took any notice. Three years later I was asked to write a Preface to P. M. Barnard's collection of the quotations of Clement of Alexandria, and as I wished to draw attention to the matter I dragged in an allusion to Matt. xxv 1 in my final paragraph (p. xix). No response! Then in 1903 there appeared my elaborate article 'Text and Versions' in *Encyclopaedia Biblica*, which at the time and since got a good deal of praise: on col. 4991, prominent among the few, the very few, passages where I suggested that the text of Westcott and Hort might be deserted, I discussed the reading of Matt. xxv 1. And that this time there should be no mistake, and that my readers might realize that the question at issue was not the turn of a phrase, but the interpretation of the whole scene set forth in the Parable, I gave my interpretation in as full a style as was accordant with the compressed methods of an Encyclopaedia. Still no response, no protests—in fact, no notice at all.

Since 1903 have appeared the Commentaries of Mr Willoughby Allen (1907), of Mr A. Plummer (1909), of Dr McNeile (1915), of Dr Montefiore (2nd ed. 1927), and now of Mr Levertoff and Prof. Goudge (1928). Neither of these discusses the interpretation given in *Encycl. Biblica*. Mr Allen, whose idea comes nearest, calls *and the bride* 'a natural but thoughtless interpolation'. Mr Plummer calls the insertion 'not very intelligent'. Dr McNeile thinks the words 'probably genuine', but places the scene at the house of the bride's father. Dr Montefiore (*Syn. Gosp.* ii 316) calls the virgins 'half bridesmaids, half bride', and also places the marriage at the bride's house. Mr Levertoff and Prof. Goudge call the addition 'interesting', but they leave it at that. They go on, however, to interpret the Ten Virgins as being the Bride's bridesmaids! They tell us that the Parable gives us 'a vivid picture of an Oriental wedding. At night the bridegroom is expected at the house of the bride, that he may take her to his own home. She and her bridesmaids await the moment. These latter will go forth to meet him when the cry is heard that he is near. The bride has ten maids of honour.' That there is some inherent difficulty in this presentation Mr Levertoff and Prof. Goudge seem to be aware, for their note on *ver.* 5 remarks

that 'We expect a bridegroom of all people to be punctual'. Quite so; but it may be remarked that the same does not quite apply to a bride, and a procession that includes the bride as well as the bridegroom might very well be behind time.

I make these preliminary remarks as my excuse for presenting a view of the Parable of the Ten Virgins in full, which, if it is familiar and obvious, at least does not seem to be obvious to those who have publicly commented on it.

First of all, then, as to the moral or application. This is simple and obvious. It is:—Keep watch, be ready; otherwise you may find yourself excluded from the happiness of the life of the age to come, although your general intentions may have been good. So far as the Parable goes there is set forth no particular doctrine of the Church in general or of vocations within the Church. The Virgins stand for all the Disciples, for any Disciples: that they represent the Disciples, not the world in general, is shewn by the fact that they are going forth to meet the Bridegroom.

But now, leaving the application, let us consider the tale. Who are the 'virgins'? Not bridesmaids in our sense, whose duty is to be in continuous attendance on the bride. Further, it is the bridegroom who finally sends away the foolish ones: he therefore is the master of the house. The scene therefore takes place at the bridegroom's house, not at that of the bride's father. It is the same situation as in Lk. xiii 25, and something like that in Lk. xii 35-8, where the master of certain slaves expects to find them watching when he returns from the marriage-feast—obviously his own marriage-feast. In Matt. xxv (and Lk. xiii) there is a difference from what we find in Lk. xii: unready *slaves* are punished by the master, 'dichotomized'—whatever that may mean—or flogged.¹ But the '*virgins*' are simply told to go away, so that we must infer that they did not belong to the bridegroom. Thus they do not belong to the bridegroom and they are not bridesmaids of the bride. We must infer that they have no rights at all to share in the feast; they are neither of the family, nor of the household, nor are they invited guests. They are called 'virgins': I imagine that 'girls', or even 'little girls', would represent the sense intended better for the modern reader.²

¹ 'Dichotomize him' is no doubt a mistranslation of the original Aramaic for 'assign him the same portion as is given to unfaithful slaves': see C. C. Torrey in *Studies in the History of Religions*, presented to C. H. Toy (1912), p. 314.

² A wedding is a great event to little girls in the East. Mrs Poole (sister of E. W. Lane) writes from Cairo in August, 1842, 'The wedding processions . . . the rear is brought up by the contributions of children from many of the houses *en route*' (*The Englishwoman in Egypt*, vol. i, p. 62).

The view that I take is that the scene is laid at or near the bridegroom's house, that the ten girls are neighbours' children, fellow-townsmen of the bridegroom but not his particular friends, and that their plan was to light up the approach to the bridegroom's house as a welcome, in return for which they would hope to have some share in the rather promiscuous hospitality of an oriental festivity. Thus, to fit the characters into the religious scheme, the bridegroom and the bride and the bridegroom's companions who accompany the pair on the way from the home of the bride's father correspond to the Son of Man and all his Angels, while the ten girls correspond to the Disciples. I have said 'Son of Man' and 'Disciples' rather than 'Christ' and 'the Church', for it is not even necessary, so far as this Parable is concerned, to identify the Son of Man with Jesus. The Coming of the new age is what is in the foreground: as I understand the matter, the whole Parable might have been spoken by John the Baptist. In my opinion it may be dated, like Lk. xii 35-40, at any time in the Ministry. The point is not that the delay will be long absolutely, but only that the delay may be longer than some may be prepared for.

But it may be asked, is the picture as thus described true to oriental custom? Did the bridegroom fetch his bride home from her father's house? The answer is that the bridegroom did sometimes go some way to meet his bride on her way to his house, for we have a curious instance of this in a tragic tale told in 1 Macc. ix 37-42. The 'children of Jambri', i.e. the beni Ya'mri, who lived at Medaba, had captured and killed John, brother of Judas Maccabaeus, soon after the latter's death. The surviving brothers determined on revenge, and hearing that a great marriage was about to be made by one of these beni Ya'mri with 'one of the great nobles of Canaan' who seems to have lived at 'Ammān,¹ now the capital of Transjordan, they lay in wait upon the track. They saw (*ver.* 39) 'a great ado and much baggage', i.e. the bride being escorted by her family and friends, and then 'the bridegroom came forth, and his friends and his brethren, to meet them with timbrels and minstrels and many weapons'. All this was some way outside Medaba, where the bridegroom lived. The Maccabaeans liers-in-wait then fell upon the unsuspecting *cortège*, and so 'the marriage was turned into mourning, and the voice of their minstrels into lamentation'. Had the liers-in-wait not been there the procession would have been met by the bridegroom and his friends, and the bridal pair would have reached the bridegroom's house in safety, but it is obvious that the exact time of their home-coming would have been incalculable.

¹ The text of 1 Macc. ix 37 says the bride was being brought ἀπο Ναδαβαθ, but (as Clermont-Ganneau saw) this is a faulty translation of מנרבת (= מן רבת 'from Rabbath'), i. e. from Rabbath Ammon.

Neighbours who might have wished to give the party a welcome on arrival would have had to be prepared to sit up late.

Some such account of the 'virgins' as I have given seems to be needed, if we are to take account of the various features of the scene which I have stressed, *viz.* the fact that it is the bridegroom who refuses to admit them, and that they receive no punishment but exclusion. As for the text of Matt. xxv 1, it is obvious that on this view it is a mere matter of literary expression. The bride, whether explicitly mentioned or not, must be thought of as with the bridegroom, not with the expectant girls.

I suggest that the longer text is the true text, and that the various reading (i. e. the omission of 'and the bride') was caused by an early reviser who had less interest in the consistency of the picture than in the Christian conception of the expected second coming of the Lord Jesus to claim His Bride the Church. The conception of the Church as the Bride of Christ was familiar to, if not originated by, St Paul; and it is appropriate and attractive in its place. But it remains a metaphor which can be followed out or dropped; it is not always inevitable, and I am quite sure it is not the metaphor implied in the Parable of the Ten Virgins.

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CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA, *STROMATA*, 2. 18, AND THE MEANING OF 'HYPOSTASIS'

NEAR the end of this chapter, in § 96 of the *G.C.S.* edition, and on page 479 of Potter, occurs a passage of great interest from the point of view of interpretation. Clement has been discussing the clemency of the Law, and finally illustrates his point by reference to the treatment of fruit-trees. They are ordered, he says, to be tended and pruned for three years, but to gather fruit from immature trees is forbidden: only in the fourth year is fruit to be plucked, after the tree has attained maturity. He proceeds thus: 'this figure of husbandry may be taken as a manner of instruction, teaching that we ought to eradicate the suckers of sins and the barren weeds of the mind which spring up alongside the productive fruit, until the scion of faith is matured and grown strong. For in the fourth year (since time is needed too for the person under firm instruction), the quartette of virtues [i. e. spiritual states] is consecrated to God, τῆς τρίτης ἤδη μόνης συναπτούσης ἐπὶ τὴν τοῦ κυρίου τετάρτην ὑπόστασιν.'

The MS and Potter write *μόνης*. With this reading Potter labours to