

The Fall of St. Peter.

BY THE VERY REV. J. M. DANSON, D.D., DEAN OF ABERDEEN.

THE Vulgate gives us a singularly inadequate equivalent for *ἐπιβαλὼν*; for, while neglecting both the physical and metaphysical connotation of the word, it simply reads: 'et *capit* flere.' And the Vulg. is followed by Luther: 'und er hob an zu weinen,' and by the Italian: 'E si mise a piagnere.' None of these renderings favours the idea that *reflexion* is the cause of St. Peter's weeping, notwithstanding the many classical examples afforded by Wetstein, Buttman, and others, which prove that *ἐπιβαλὼν* = *κατανοήσας*, and that *κατανοεῖν* = 'mente agitare' = to fix the mind upon a thing. It is evident that *ἐπιβαλὼν* has proved a veritable crux to the commentators, as the following examples of their very various renderings will demonstrate.

Beza, Raphel, Vater, and others translate *ἐπιβαλὼν* as 'cum se foras projecisset' = when he had rushed out of doors. Theophylact, Salmasius, and a good many moderns render the word as 'veste capiti injecta' = when he had thrown a covering over his head. Hammond: 'after he had cast his eyes upon Jesus.' And Lange: 'he rushed out thereupon,' viz. on the cock-crowing, as the awakening cry of Christ. First, a rushing out, as if he had an external purpose, then a painful absorption into himself and weeping. . . . Outside he found that the cry went inward and upward, and now he paused and wept.' It is quite evident that Erasmus did not accept as the full force of *ἐπιβαλὼν* the tame *capit* of the Vulg. or the ἤρξατο of D, or he would not have given us his 'prorupit in fletum.' My friend, the Rev. F. W. Christie, draws my attention to the quotation on p. 131 of Moulton's *Gram.*, vol. i., from a recently discovered papyrus — '*ἐπιβαλὼν συνέχουσεν*,' κ.τ.λ., which Moulton translates, 'he set to and dammed up.' Continuing, Moulton observes that 'if this account is right, *ἐπιβαλὼν* is the aorist coincident with the first point of the linear *ἐκλαιεν*, and the compound phrase expresses with peculiar vividness both the initial paroxysm and its long continuance, which the easier but tamer word of the other evangelists fails to do.'

After carefully weighing all the various renderings, I have come to the conclusion that our A.V.

Καὶ ἐπιβαλὼν ἔκλαιε: 'And when he thought thereon, he wept' (A.V. and R.V.).—Mark xiv. 72.

and R.V. translation is the most satisfactory, and that Casaubon's triad, adopted by Wetstein, is strikingly in harmony with the whole narrative. Peter first remembers the word, then reflects thereupon, and finally weeps! (*ἀναμνήσθη* . . . *ἐπιβαλὼν* . . . *ἐκλαιε*).

I do not think we need be surprised that the pathetic incident of Peter's fall and his passionate repentance should have filled the pens of some of our greatest poets with reflexions upon the unpredictability of the human will, the moral tragedies which beset the best of men, and the marvellous efficacy of heartfelt repentance.

Wordsworth does but re-echo Chaucer when he sings—

Repentance is a tender sprite:
If ought on earth have heavenly might,
'Tis lodged within her silent tear.

I say that these lines of Wordsworth are but a re-echo of Chaucer, who in his 'Person's Tale' (a prose composition) says: 'The thridde sign (of a good confession) is that the shrift should be full of teres, if men mowen wepe; and if they mowe not wepe with hir bodily eyen, then let hem wepe in hir herte. Swiche was the confession of Seint Peter; for after that he had forsake Jesu Christ, he went out and wept ful bitterly.'

Keble has a specially beautiful study on the text Ac 12⁶: 'When Herod would have brought him out, the same night Peter was sleeping'—'sleeping,' when in all human probability he will wake to find himself on the scaffold.

He loves and is belov'd again—
Can his soul choose but be at rest?
Sorrow hath fled away, and Pain
Dares not invade the guarded nest.

He loves and weeps—but more than tears
Have seal'd thy welcome and his love—
One look lives in him, and endears
Crosses and wrongs where'er he rove.

That gracious chiding look, Thy call
To win him to himself and Thee,
Sweetening the sorrow of his fall
Which else were ru'd too bitterly.

('St Peter's Day.')

Again, Drummond of Hawthornden, 'Divine Poems,' No. 1, and Rowlandes, 'Peter's Teares,' have made St. Peter's tears the theme of their muse.

The only other reference in English literature which I will cite is from Tennyson's 'Queen Mary.' It is only of slight importance, except for its setting.

Now Bishop of Winchester and Lord Chancellor, Gardiner (Act iii. sc. 4) is trying to extenuate his own past apostasy before the Queen and the noble-minded Pole, the Cardinal-Legate who had urged

'That under our Queen's regimen
We might go softer than with crimson rowel
And streaming lash,'

and had charged Gardiner in angry invective :

'But you, my lord, beyond all supposition,
In clear and open day were congruent
With that vile Cranmer in the accursed lie
Of good Queen Catharine's divorce,'

he (Gardiner) pleads :

'As for what I did,
I suffer'd and repented. You, Lord-Legate
And Cardinal-Deacon have not now to learn
That ev'n St. Peter in his time of fear
Denied his master, ay, and thrice, my lord.
Pole: But not for five-and-twenty years, my lord.'

Let us now pass to consider the strange, utterly strange, because unpredictable, spiritual or psychological phenomenon of St. Peter's denial, accentuated as it was with terrible blasphemy. 'Ὁ δὲ ἤρξατο ἀναθεματίζειν καὶ ὀμνῆσαι.

Working backwards in tracing this spiritual tragedy through its various stages, we come face to face almost at once with the Agony in the garden, where Peter received with the others the command, 'Watch and pray'; and then to the Institution of the Holy Eucharist, of which Peter, his feet having been already washed by the Divine condescension, was, we may be sure, a most devout communicant; backward again to his session on the Mount of Olives with Andrew and John, and his questions as to the end of all things; once more to his confession at Cæsarea-Philippi and to the scene of the Transfiguration; to his frequent interrogations as, e.g., to the scope of the parables; the number of times for which forgiveness must be given to an erring brother; to his walking on the sea; to the various miracles in which before his eyes life was given to the dead; to the miracle in his own house when his wife's mother was raised from a sick bed; and finally, back to his own personal call to 'become a fisher of men.'

The result of this retrogressive history comes to this: that here is a man who has the most splendid and almost unique opportunities of both learning from the Divine lips, and gathering from the Divine example, faith and conduct which ought to keep him in the right way; and yet, notwithstanding magnificent professions and genuine devotion; in spite of proximity to the most sacred Personality, daily audience of Divine words, daily witness of Divine power and benevolence; he fails at the very moment when the glory of a constant will might have been expected to set its face as a flint.

The warning to us all, but to the clergy especially, is most salutary. Our very familiarity with the sacred things of which we are the stewards and administrators may, as in the case of the priests at the time of the French Revolution, make us obtuse to the holiness and majesty of what our commission involves, and precipitate us at some unguarded hour into a spiritual abyss from which nothing but a heart-breaking repentance can deliver us.

Perhaps it may be well to hazard the conjecture that St. Peter's Fall is a warning as to the unsafeness of emotional religion. The life of a fisherman on a lake girded by mountains and easily lashed into perilous storms; the vision of the cold, chaste stars by night; the moaning of the winds down the funnelled gullies between the hills; the sunny calm on the blue waters on a summer day,—all favour the nurture of the poetic temperament and the spirit of mysticism. The fisherman is naturally devout, but his devotion is generally of an emotional character, and even in our own days piety and blasphemy may be found in company with each other among the 'toilers of the deep.' The more subjective the type of religion, the more powerfully does it appeal to the sons of the storm. The revivals in the north-east of Scotland have always found ardent recruits among the fishermen, a fact which supports our contention that emotionalism is the chief essence of their religion. True, we do not wish to see religion dry and legal. The emotions surely have their sanction in the command, 'Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart,' etc.

Perhaps the most effective palliative of excessive emotionalism is to be found in St. Peter's own words, written long after the tragedy of his fall: 'Sanctify the Lord God (*aliter* the Lord Christ) in your hearts' (1 P 3¹⁵). If the heart is made the Temple of the Lord, the Shechinah will both warm and enlighten the piety of the individual.