

THE OVERTURE OF ANGELS

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The Overture of Angels by Henry Ward Beecher

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HENRY WARD BEECHER

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Overture of Angels

BY

HENRY WARD BEECHER



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1870

Publishers' Advertisement.

THIS little book is issued with a double intent. Complete in itself, it comes to the public most appropriately as a Christmas offering. And yet it bears reference to other topics and broader views than those of which it treats, and gives evidence of being, as it is, a fragment from a larger work. It is that portion of Mr. Beecher's "Life of Jesus, the Christ," which depicts the scenes and events clustering about the birth of our Lord. And the Publishers not only hope that it will be accepted as peculiarly harmonious with the happy Advent season, but believe that the mode in which it presents the record of those holy and precious scenes will arouse a still deeper interest in the forthcoming volume.



HAD it been the design of Divine Providence that the Gospels should be wrought up like a poem for literary and artistic effect, surely the narrative of the angelic appearances would have glowed in all the colors of an Oriental morning. They are, indeed, to those who have an eye to discern, a wonderful and exquisitely tinted prelude to the dawn of a glorious day. It is not to be supposed that the earth and its dull inhabitants knew what was approaching. But heavenly spirits knew it. There was move-

ment and holy ecstasy in the Upper Air, and angels seem, as birds when new-come in spring, to have flown hither and thither, in songful mood, dipping their white wings into our atmosphere, just touching the earth or glancing along its surface, as sea-birds skim the surface of the sea. And yet birds are far too rude, and wings too burdensome, to express adequately that feeling of unlabored angelic motion which the narrative produces upon the imagination. Their airy and gentle coming would perhaps be better compared to the glow of colors flung by the sun upon morning clouds that seem to be born just where they appear. Like a beam of light striking through some orifice, they shine upon Zacharias in the Temple. As the morning light finds the flowers, so found they the mother of Jesus. To the shepherds' eyes they filled the midnight arch like auroral beams of light; but not as silently, for they sang, and more marvellously than when "the morning stars sang together and all the sons of God shouted for joy."

The new era opens at Jerusalem. The pride with which a devout Jew looked upon Jerusalem can scarcely be imagined in our prosaic times.

Men loved that city with such passionate devotion as we are accustomed to see bestowed only on a living person. When the doctrine of immortality grew more distinctly into the belief of holy men, no name could be found which would make the invisible world so attractive as that of the beloved city. NEW JERUSALEM was the chosen name for Heaven.

Upon this city broke the morning rays of the Advent. A venerable priest, Zacharias, belonging to the retinue of the Temple, had spent his whole life in the quiet offices of religion. He was married, but childless. To him happened a surprising thing.

It was his turn to burn incense, — the most honorable function of the priestly office. Upon the great altar of sacrifice, outside the holy place, the burnt-offering was placed. At a signal the priest came forth, and, taking fire from this altar, he entered the inner and more sacred place of the Temple, and there, before the altar of incense, putting the fragrant gum upon the coals, he swung the censer, filling the air with wreaths of smoke. The people who had gathered on the outside, as soon as the smoke ascended silently sent up

their prayers, of which the incense was a symbol.
"And there appeared unto him an angel of the Lord, standing on the right side of the altar."

That he trembled with fear and awe is apparent from the angel's address,— "Fear not!" The key-note of the new dispensation was sounded! Hereafter, God was to be brought nearer, to seem less terrible; and a religion of the spirit and of love was soon to dispossess a religion of ceremonials and of fear.

"Fear not, Zacharias: for thy prayer is heard;
And thy wife Elisabeth shall bear thee a son,
And thou shalt call his name John.
And thou shalt have joy and gladness;
And many shall rejoice at his birth.
For he shall be great in the sight of the Lord,
And shall drink neither wine nor strong drink;
And he shall be filled with the Holy Ghost even from
his mother's womb.
And many of the children of Israel shall he turn to the
Lord their God.
And he shall go before him in the spirit and power of
Elias,
To turn the hearts of the parents to the children,
And the disobedient to the wisdom of the just;
To make ready a people prepared for the Lord."