

## THE WATER OF LIFE.

BY THE EDITOR.

THE accompanying picture represents a piece of Chinese statuary which was imported to this country by Japanese traders. It was courteously sent me as a present by Mr. Joseph M. Wade, of Boston, Mass., the same gentleman who was recently honored by the Emperor of Japan with the decoration of the "Order of the Double Light Rising Sun," in recognition of the interest he has shown in Japanese art and manufacture. Mr. Wade took special interest in this piece of statuary, because when he saw it in the store, the little Oriental tradesman, who could scarcely speak English, explained to him the meaning of the group by saying: "It is the wise man who tells the youth going to the well to fetch water, that if he will listen to his words he will give him the water of life." Since the little pagan knew nothing of Christ's words addressed to the Samaritan woman at the well, we must assume that the nations of Eastern Asia possess a legend quite similar to our own tradition. Being interested in Oriental lore, Mr. Wade bought the piece and called my attention to this curious coincidence.

The porcelain group before us is indeed interesting on account of the idea incorporated in it; and I see in the sage seated near the well a Taoist philosopher. This is indicated by the garb of the venerable gentleman, which is Chinese in style, but late enough to show the Mongolian queue, which, however, is not visible in the reproduction here given. He is certainly not a Buddhist priest, and the subject of conversation renders it unlikely that we have a Confucianist before us.

Taoism is the oldest religion of China, and it has incorporated into its fabric all kinds of most ancient superstitions, a prominent place among which is hold by the idea of the elixir of life. This notion is by no means limited to the Chinese, but may be regarded as an ancient heirloom from prehistoric ages. That the elixir of

life was originally considered as the water of life is more than probable, for we know that the Babylonians too, in their ancient religious poetry, speak not only of the tree of life and the fruits of the tree of life but also of the water of life.<sup>1</sup>

To us of the West, who are accustomed to the sayings of the New Testament, the term "water of life," at once reminds us of Christ, and to find the same or a similar expression used in the in-



"I WILL GIVE THEE WATER OF LIFE."  
(Chinese porcelain.)

terior of China seems to us perplexing; but it is only natural that these thoughts should be preserved and purified, here as well as there, into more or less philosophical or moral ideas. While the original conception of the water of life is to be understood as an actual well that would confer immortality, and while the foun-

<sup>1</sup>These traditions have been discussed in a special article in *The Monist*, Vol. X., Nos. 2 and 3, under the title: "The Food of Life and the Sacrament."

tain of youth, even at the time of the discovery of America, was still believed to be possible in the literal sense of the word, the thought was frequently understood allegorically, and this is obviously the significance in which the term is used in the New Testament. Jesus apparently alludes to the popular notion of the water of life, but he interprets the legend and merely utilises the myth to impress upon his hearer the blessing of his teachings.

The Taoist sage in Mr. Wade's porcelain group exhibits a similar stage in the development of the ancient myth. The Taoist sage is ready to impart to the youth the higher doctrines of a nobler life, and his method of addressing him, if not the same as, is yet analogous to, the words recorded in the Gospel of St. John, iv. 14. While the myths of "the water of life" and also "the elixir of life," "the fountain of youth," etc., both in China and in Europe, may have very easily been derived from one and the same ancient tradition, we need not assume that the artist who fashioned the present group ever heard of the story of Christ and the Samaritan woman. The parallelism, although surprising, is quite natural.