

THE NATURAL STRENGTH OF THE PSALMS.¹

FOR our present purpose it is enough to remember that the Book of Psalms is composed of several separate collections, edited by different hands and arranged for the Musical Service of the Second Temple. The dates of these are uncertain, but the whole Book was complete by 130 B.C. when its translation into Greek was already extant.

Nor need we trouble about the dates or authorship of single Psalms : and this for two reasons. The titles, which assign many of the Psalms to famous authors and even to particular episodes in their lives, appear to be due to the editors of the collections and are not reliable. Some do not agree with the contents of the verses to which they are prefixed ; and from a comparison of the Hebrew with the Septuagint, we find that the process of entitling Psalms previously anonymous continued to a late date and was pursued with arbitrariness. Whether any of the titles rest on a sound tradition it is impossible to say. Very few Psalms reflect history so minutely that we can be wholly sure of their date. Nor does the language always provide unmistakeable evidence. Pure Hebrew was written up to a late period ; conversely all the Aramaisms may not be due to the original writers ; some may have crept in upon the course of a long popular tradition. The conclusion of several moderns that we have no Psalms from the centuries before the Exile appears to me rash. David was too great a poet, as we see from his dirge on Saul and Jonathan, of too

¹ Being a Murtle Lecture delivered before the University of Aberdeen.

sensitive a heart towards the God of his people, and too closely associated with the ecstatic religious movement of his youth, to allow us to dismiss the tradition which links his name to the origins of religious Psalmody in Israel. It is improbable, also, that the epochs of the great Prophets, who delivered many of their oracles in the rhythms of poetry, did not contribute to the Psalter. But to go beyond such general inferences, and seek to prove the authorship of particular Psalms, is a precarious if not impossible task ; and that not only for the reasons given but because of the following.

Religious poetry, however personal in its origins, tends to lose many traces of these when it passes into popular use and is pressed into a national liturgy. Local and temporary features change or disappear. The feelings of the individual merge into those of the community. Additions or alterations may be made, to overtake the riper experience, the more definite doctrines or the purer tastes of later generations. Some of the early Christian hymnody grew in this way till its individual sources were overwhelmed or forgotten ; and we now hear in it the praise of the Church as a whole surging with the struggles and victories of many generations. Even our modern hymns have not escaped modification. The histories of several of these prove how at all times hymns grow, and grow—not always but frequently—from good to better.

The religious poetry of Israel suffered such changes in times when the rules of literary tradition were less severe than they are among ourselves. The Psalms bear evidence of the following. Sometimes the Divine Names were changed to suit the religious temper of a new school. Sometimes a hymn of praise to God in Nature was adapted to celebrate also His covenant mercies to His people. Sometimes two hymns of different origins, subjects and metres

were combined. And sometimes apparently the experiences or aspirations of the individual were mingled with, or absorbed in, those of the nation as a whole, till it is very difficult to know whether we should interpret certain Psalms as personal or national. This fusion was the more easy that the pious Israelite ran his own sorrows, problems and hopes into those of his people. The Israelite was Israel. His faith in God rested on her past. His piety grew out of her tribal discipline and worship; and he thought of no future for himself apart from her national ideals. The same cruel facts which baffled the destiny of the nation frustrated also his private rights—the oppressions of the innocent by the wicked—so that even in this most personal of his problems he felt himself one with her. Whether such fusion of the person and the people be original to the authors of the Psalms or due to the adaptations which I have described, we cannot separate the two. Let us cease, therefore, from the search after individual dates and authors, with whom at the best we can attain only the faintest of touches. From all such groping on hands and knees, let us stand up, and reverently look to the one essential unmistakable Figure of the Nation as a whole: Israel the real author as she has been the age-long singer of the Psalms: “our Mother of Sorrows, our mistress in pain and in patience, at whose knees we have all learned our first prayers of penitence and confession.”¹

We must, therefore, expect in the Psalms much that is national and racial. They betray the hereditary qualities of Israel; a people sprung from generations of shepherds, in whom their deserts had bred a long patience of hunger broken by fits of rancour and ferocity; untrained to speculation and incapable of sustained argument; interested in the facts of life and religion almost exclusively for their

¹ *The Book of the Twelve Prophets*, i. 435.

4 THE NATURAL STRENGTH OF THE PSALMS

practical bearing on the observer of them and his tribe ; a people to whom from time immemorial religion has been a concern more of the tribe than of the individual. First as shepherds, with the desert shepherds' dislike of fields and fear of towns, and then slowly drawn to agriculture ; they were at last concentrated with all their worship and politics upon a single city : their only altar, their highest school, their final court of appeal ; whose destruction and their long exile from her only made her the more indispensable to their faith and hope.¹

These racial qualities and political experiences resound through the Psalter. We find in it the desert-born patience, disturbed, as in the cursing Psalms, by fits of rancour, into which such patience always breaks down—whether it be bred of a famine of food or of a famine of justice. We trace the Semitic mind, dull to the ultimate problems of being and knowledge, but alert, like the sentinel of the desert-camp, to the practical meaning of phenomena for the singer himself and his tribe ; taking God and His Nature for granted, but watchful and sometimes jealous of His ways with men. We see the ancient forms of religion, subordinating the individual to the nation ; and only at the last, and then with difficulty, daring to conceive for him another life with God after he sinks from their living fellowship on earth. We recognise the Semitic imagination, incapable of sustained drama or epic ; but wonderful in its lyric music and power of vivid metaphor, whether the subject be the moral experience of men or the beauty of the world. The fondest figures of the poetry are drawn from the oldest memories of Israel, their camps and marches in the wilderness ; or from their present surroundings, the pastures of the flocks and the furrows and fields of the husbandmen, embraced by the desert and looking across

¹ See the writer's *Jerusalem*, vol. ii. ch. xi.

the sea. But over all these landscapes rise dominant the bulwarks and towers of the City of the musical name, Jerusalem, the Temple with its ceaseless smoke of sacrifice and the lines of chanting pilgrims coming up to it over the mountains.

Yet a deeper humanity moves beneath ; else the Psalter had never become the confessional of so many other races. The national forms of the feeling of the Psalms are so flexible, just by reason of their vitality, that we Western peoples have easily used them—even to particular turns of their terminology—in order to express our own struggles for liberty, our own migrations and banishments. There is, too, in the Psalms the revolt of the individual conscience against the racial tempers, the national ethics and the dogmas of the past ; against, for instance, the obdurate creed that suffering proves the guilt of the sufferer ; or against the idea that animal sacrifice and ritual are what God demands from men ; or against that hopeless outlook beyond the grave to which Semitic religions conspired in condemning the individual. All the Psalms which treat of these subjects assert a man's rights as man with God, both in this life and in that which is to come. But whether in enthusiasm for the traditional forms or in protest against them ; whether rising upon the national ideals or searching the heart of the individual or asserting his conscience ; whether in the quest for God or in the fullness of His Presence ; whether in the joy of life or in the fear of death ; whether in the quarrel for justice or in satisfaction with God's world ; whether for war or peace, doubt or faith, hate or love—the frankness, honesty and force of the Psalms are everywhere apparent : their whole-heartedness, their untamed, unstinted expression of all that was in the hearts of the men who wrote them—

Bless the Lord, O my soul,
And all that is within me, bless His Holy Name.

6 THE NATURAL STRENGTH OF THE PSALMS

For more than blessing did the souls of the Psalmists fulfil this call upon them. "I may truly name this book," says John Calvin, "the anatomy of all parts of the soul; for no one can feel a movement of the spirit which is not reflected in this mirror. All the sorrows, troubles, fears, doubts, hopes, pains, perplexities and stormy outbreaks, by which the hearts of men are tossed, have here been depicted by the Spirit to the very life." And one of our own Puritans, using the same figure, says that the Psalms are "as it were the anatomy of a man. In other portions of Scripture God speaks to us, but in the Psalms men speak to God and their own hearts." Variable as the heart, the Psalter is as hospitable to every experience, passion and purpose. Human nature is confessed with a thoroughness to which every generation of men has borne immediate testimony. And this is the secret of the Psalms' perennial strength.

Their frankness appears in many aspects. I begin with one of the darkest, the expression of Hatred and the passion for Revenge. In times of slander and persecution, the hunger for justice grew awful in the heart of the Jew, and he did not mitigate his anger before the Lord. Take these verses from Psalm cix. : with usually three, but sometimes four, and sometimes only two, stresses to the line; to my ear a natural measure for the hurried curses launched by the Psalmist at [his foe, the very irregularity of the rhythm assisting the effect.

Oh God of my praise, be not dumb!
For the mouth of the godless is opened upon me.
They speak against me with a lying tongue.
With words of hate they environ me,
They fight me for nothing!
Evil for good they return me
And hate for my love.
Oh commission the godless to judge him,

And may Satan stand his accuser!¹
 In his trial may he come forth a felon,
 And his prayer but add to his sin!
 May his days be few,
 And another receive his office!
 Let his children be orphans,
 And his wife a widow!
 His children be vagabond beggars,
 And driven out of their rookeries! . . .
 Be none to shew him a kindness,
 Nor any to pity his orphans.
 Let his father's guilt be remembered,
 Nor the sin of his mother effaced.

Or these from Psalm xxxv. 5, 6—alternately 3 and 2 stresses—

As chaff before wind let them be,
 And His Angel to drive them.
 Dark be their way and slippery,
 And His Angel to hunt them.

Or these from Psalm lviii.—4 stresses to the line—

O God, break Thou their teeth in their mouth,
 Break out the tusks of the lions, O Lord.
 Let them melt as water run down on its tracks;
 May He shoot His shafts at them, they perish!(?)
 The just shall rejoice when he sees revenge:
 His feet he shall wash in the blood of the wicked.

Or the close of Psalm cxxxvii.—

Daughter of Babylon, doomed to destruction,
 Happy who deals thee
 The dole thou dealedst to us!
 Happy who seizeth and dasheth
 On the rocks thy little ones!

This we must regard as the delirium of the conscience—
 a delirium produced by a famine of justice. Men are
 frenzied through a famine of bread. If they were not
 we should not believe the extremity of their hunger. The
 delirium is, of course, morbid, but it is genuine. And so
 with many other outbursts of hatred which might be quoted.
 They are pathological, but they are authentic: proofs

¹ Literally: *at his right hand.*

that we have in the Psalms the utterances of real men and not of professional worshippers acting out their thin show before God and the ages.

One other observation is necessary. In the horror with which we shrink from such frank prayers—whose feeling, let us remember at the same time, is as sincere as our recoil from it—we can read the measure of the great change which the teaching and example of Jesus have produced on the ethical instincts of mankind. He has mitigated the virulence of this disease of the human heart: He has altered the moral atmosphere.

The frankness of the Psalms is also evident in the expression which they give to Doubt. Belief was not easy to many of the Psalmists and they let us feel it. One symptom of this is the sudden defiance and revolt, with which some Psalms open, against “the everlasting No,”¹ emphasising by a strong initial interjection or disjunctive particle, that upon their high flight of faith they are breaking from some deep imprisonment of doubt. Thus in Psalm lxii. 1, 2—

Ah but to God be still, my soul!
From Him is my hope.
Ah but He my rock, my salvation!
My height,² I shall not waver.

Or in Psalm lxxiii.—

Ah but³ good to Israel is God,
To the pure of heart!

¹ “The Everlasting No had said: Behold, thou art fatherless, outcast, and the universe is mine (the devil’s); to which my whole Me now made answer: I am not thine, but free and for ever hate thee.” *Sartor Resartus*, 156 f. Carlyle calls this protest “the most important transaction in his life . . . in a psychological point of view.”

² *High*, or *vantage ground*.

³ אֵל. The simpler *but* in the same connexion is the conjunction וְ; e.g. Psalms xciv. 22; cii. 13, 28; ciii. 17; cix. 21 (all in the Hebrew numbering). The turn of the protest is frequently on the stronger אֵלָּהָּ = But Thou!

Sometimes it is the intolerable silence of God which weighs on the Psalmist, always in contrast to man's cries to Him, as in the line quoted already from Psalm cix. or in the similar openings of lxxxiii. and xxviii.

O God of my praise, be not dumb!
 O God, be not dumb!
 Be not silent nor still, O God.
 To thee, O my Rock, I call.
 Be Thou not deaf from me!
 Lest in the hush I lose Thee,
 And be mated with those that sink to the pit.

Or, again, it is abandonment by men and utter solitude—a soul starved of love and the light of kind faces, as in Psalm lxxxviii.

Lover and friend hast thou put far from me,
 My familiar the darkness!

As I have said elsewhere,¹ the two greatest lonelineses of life—the loneliness of death is different—are the loneliness of temptation and of power, of the depth and of the height. Religion seeks to mitigate the rigour of the first of these by recalling to the battlefields of the heart the memories of the great spirits who have already fought and conquered there; and the Psalmists, like the Prophets, are strong to remind us that in our moral struggles God Himself shall also be found on our right hand a comrade and keeper. But the Psalter has also comfort for the less remembered loneliness of the height. When a man is led to the unshareable duty of a great decision, or called to the quest for truth, or given the charge of other lives, or lifted above his fellows in authority or vision, there springs in him a yearning to cling to, and nestle in, and be shadowed by, something bigger than himself. It is perhaps a king who says in Psalm lxi.—

When my heart is overwhelmed,
 Lead me to the Rock higher than I.

¹ *Four Psalms*, 124 f.

10 THE NATURAL STRENGTH OF THE PSALMS

The most frequent cause of doubt in Israel was the problem of the fortunate wicked, and the seeming vanity of righteousness.

But I, my feet were almost gone,
My steps had wellnigh slipped,
For I was envious at the arrogant,
I saw the health of the wicked . . .
But in vain have I cleansed my heart,
And washed my hands in innocence !

Yet in this same psalm there is another note of frankness, which is easily missed by the reader. With great honesty the Psalmist confesses that not all of his doubt had been due to the facts of experience, but some also to his ignorance and bad temper.

For my heart was in ferment,
I was stung in my reins,
Yea I was brutish and knew not,
Was a beast beside Thee !

In our doubt are we always as candid as this ? Do not let us charge all our scepticism or despair on our hard experience. Some of it may be due to our short sight and shorter temper.

But among those mingled streams of hate and the passion for vengeance, of fear and complaint and doubt—over which the Spirit of God moves as over another chaos—the darkest surge is the sense of guilt. In the Psalms we see one soul after another writhing upwards from a pain which at first it does not understand with the cry : What is this that keeps God from answering me ? We see it turning like a smitten animal from the face of its master back upon its sore till at last intelligence breaks and the soul is strengthened to bear its penalty by the sheer knowledge that this is deserved. The psychology of such psalms is interesting ; for even before the man becomes assured of pardon his cowardice goes and by con-

fession he wins a certain nobility and power of endurance :
Psalm xxxii.

When I kept silence my bones did moulder,
Thorough my groaning all the day ;
For day and night Thy hand oppressed me,
My sap was turned to summer's drought,
My sin I confessed, and my guilt I hid not.
I said I will own my sin to Yahweh,
And Thou, Thou forgavest the guilt of my sin.¹

This is but a longer expression of the verse in Lamentations—

Why doth a living man complain,
A man for the punishment of his sin ?

On the subject of sin the sincerity of the Psalms is carried to a degree that disturbs and blackens their art. The cowardice of sin, the malversation or breach of trust ; the loneliness ; the shame ; the rottenness and leprosy, the equal curse on body and soul are rendered in all their ugliness. Sobs and groans, and the lamentable cries of disease borne with a bad conscience are heard, which never would have been heard had it been artfulness and not utter honesty which had been the spirit of the singers : e.g. Psalms xxxviii. 3-5, li. 3, cxxx. 3 : the first again in the long line of 4 stresses—

Nought sound in my flesh before Thy wrath,
Nor health in my bones before my sin.
For my crimes pass over my head,
Like a heavy load—too heavy for me !
Stinking, foul are my wounds for my folly.
For my rebellion I—I—know
And my sin is ever before me.
If Thou, Lord, shouldest mark iniquities,
O Lord, who shall stand ?

Is it wonderful that with so unsparing a conscience the Psalter should have become the confessional of half the world ?

¹ The original rhythm, lines of four accents or stresses each, falls easily into English.

12 THE NATURAL STRENGTH OF THE PSALMS

After these confessions of sin we may take those opposite asseverations of the singer's righteousness and integrity, which it must sometimes puzzle the Christian to find in the same Canon that contains the parable of the Pharisee and the Publican : e.g. Psalm xviii. 20.

The Lord rewards me after my righteousness,
After the cleanness of my hands, He requites me.
For the ways of the Lord I have kept,
And not viciously lapsed from my God.
So have I been perfect before Him
And have kept me from mine iniquity.

On such passages I would remark that they are further proof that the Psalms have not been curbed or stinted in the interest of a system of theology, but have been left free to express all the movers of the spirit of man. The speaker in such Psalms is sometimes the congregation of Israel as a whole, justly sensible that in general they have been faithful to the Law under the tyranny of the heathen ; and sometimes, as in the Book of Job, the individual in revolt against the dogma that his suffering is a proof of guilt. But above all we may again read here the measure of the difference Christ has made by so revealing the infiniteness of the moral ideal and of our responsibilities towards it, that since He came and perfectly kept the Law none of us can say we have even approached its fulfilment.

I have no time to describe the free enjoyment of God's world and of the riches He has stored in it, which some of the Psalms express. The power of the open air and of the skies rests upon them ; and, with their sense of the beauty and awfulness of the universe, renders them healthy examples for our own worship. They breathe a full joy in God's gifts of birds, beasts and fishes, corn, oil and wine ; an exultation in fire and wind, frost and snow ; and even a relish of the more uncouth forms of animal life, e.g. Psalm civ. 26.

Leviathan, whom Thou hast formed to play with him.¹

This fragment may serve to remind us of the liberal use which some Psalmists make of the figures of the popular mythology of their time : to illustrate that fully would require another lecture.

As we should expect from a people of highland warriors, and cragsmen, whose God was their Battle-Lord, we have such wholehearted songs of challenge and of triumph as the following : Psalm xviii. 31-34, 36, 29—

For who besides Yahweh is God,
And who save our God is a Rock ?
The God who girds me with strength
And maketh my way secure,
Who evens my feet to the hinds'
And stands me up on my heights ;
Who traineth my hands to war
Till my arms bend bows of brass.
Thou⁷ broadenest my steps beneath me,
That my ankles do not swerve,
For by Thee do I scatter a troop,
And by my God I leap over a wall.

Or the sheer strength of the antiphon in Psalm xxiv.
7-10—

Lift up, O gates, your heads ;
And be lifted, ye doors everlasting,
That the King of Glory may enter !
Who then is the King of Glory ?
Yahweh the mighty, the hero,
Yahweh the hero of war.
Lift up, O gates, your heads,
And be lifted, ye doors everlasting !
Who then is He, the King of Glory ?
Yahweh of Hosts, He King of Glory.

These then, but imperfectly rendered, are features of the Psalter, some of which may have been taken by the Christian heart for offences or scandals, whereas all are marks of the force and genuineness of the Psalms, of

¹ The most probable rendering : cf. Job xli. 5 and the Babylonian mythology on which that passage is based.

14 THE NATURAL STRENGTH OF THE PSALMS

their honest and natural humanity. Consider the bearing of this upon their religious testimony. Thomas Carlyle used to say of his father that he did not know any man whose "spiritual faculties had such a stamp of natural strength." This is the proof and the charm of the Psalter. As spiritual witnesses the Psalms have "the stamp of natural strength." Genuine in their humanity they cannot fail when they come to us with their messages from God. Honest in their telling of earthly things, they are the more to be trusted when they bring us the heavenly.

For all the drifts and motions which we have been considering, stained as they are by the earthiness of the basin and channels in which they move, are only tides: surges deriving their force and their direction from above. If that derivation be correct, which identifies *El*, the common Semitic name for God, with the preposition meaning *to*, as though God were the Great Towards, the desire and final goal of man's heart: then nowhere does the name receive fuller illustration than in the Psalms of Israel. For the whole secret of their unrest, their passion and their rhythm, is God Himself: the end of their aspirations the satisfaction of their desire, the return and the rest of all their argument. When Balaak brought Balaam to look upon Israel that half-inspired prophet said of the people—

Yahweh their God is with them
And the noise of a King among them.

They had then no human king: they were a crowd of tribes so loosely bound that after a few years they broke apart. But in the confused noise which rose from their camp by the Jordan to his lonely station on the heights of Moab, this discerning Pagan caught the rhythm of a natural life conscious of leadership and musical with memories of deliverance; the heart of a people throbbing towards their God, the murmur of a divine destiny. So are the Psalms

to us who look and listen across them : the *noise of a King* is through them all.

Bless the Lord, O my soul,
And all that is within me, bless His Holy Name.

GEORGE ADAM SMITH.

THE BIBLE.¹

I.

WHY do we read the Bible ? Why do we teach it ? Why do we set it in a place of its own, apart from other books and above them ?

Once the question might have been easily answered. There was a time—it is past now—when men believed in “ verbal inspiration ” ; believed that every verse, every line, every letter of the book was divinely, infallibly, and equally inspired ; believed in an inspired original, an inspired translation, and, I might almost say, an inspired punctuation. That simple and unquestioning faith has not come down to us. Our lot is cast in darker, stormier days ; we cannot break with the present unless we break with ourselves. We cling to a belief in inspiration, but we are often in doubt as to what inspiration means. We are eager to get at the meaning of the Book, but we are perplexed as to the true method of interpretation. That is the experience of men and women inside the churches as well as outside them. It is your experience and mine.

But still we read and revere : why ? Let me try to answer the question, not for theologians, scholars, or philosophers, but for ordinary men and women living under commonplace conditions. I shall assume nothing ; shall start with no theory. I ask what men without bias, with-

¹ An address delivered at Leeds to University students and others on November 5, 1911.