

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Expositor* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expositor-series-1.php

PSALMS OF THE EAST AND WEST.

II.

IN a former paper we dwelt on the Hebrew Psalter, as poetry of nature and reflection, and on the mystic element contained in it. We also compared it with the modern compilation entitled *Psalms of the West*. Here we propose to consider the Psalms in their liturgical, national, and Messianic aspects, as expressing the sentiment of the Jewish Church and nation. This consideration of "Temple psalmody," forming part of the Jewish ritual after the reorganization of the national worship, will again, as in the previous paper, afford ample opportunities for comparing Semitic and Arian, Jewish and Christian, Eastern and Western modes of religious thought expressed in the language of devotion and devout meditation. The Hebrew Psalms are here regarded in the light of historical records, whilst *Psalms of the West* are considered as compositions reflecting the spirit of cultured humanity in a scientific age, cosmopolitan rather than national, as the epitome of devotion for an intellectual *élite* intended, in the words of the author, to voice "the strivings of present humanity." Regarded from this point of view, we may say generally that whilst the Hebrew Psalter has the quality of true poetry, according to Milton, in being "simple, sensuous, and passionate," the tone of the modern book may be said to be rather intellectual, abstruse and supersensuous; that a certain tone of self-assertion characterizes the ancient book, whereas an accentuated tone of self-regard and self-reverence is the characteristic of the modern book; that dependence upon God predominates in the utterances of the former, and self-determination in the latter; that whereas self-absorption in the Hebrew Psalms is apt to approach the egoism of the Pharisee, the habit of self-

introspection peculiar to modern and Western modes of thought reappears in passages here and there in *Psalms of the West*, which have a savour of the egoism of the Stoic. M. Rénan, indeed, may be too severe in dwelling on the Semitic Egoism displayed in the "I" psalms (as Smend calls them), of which there are some eighty in number. For it has to be remembered that it is the intense strenuousness of the race which the individual writer gives here expression to: that good haters in the opinion of Dr. Johnson make good lovers; that this "intensity of subjective effectiveness" or zeal smacking of intolerant impatience comes from the strength of affection for God and country; that when the writers speak here in their own person, they do so in the name of the community; that if our modern writers are less guilty of zeal without knowledge, they are apt also to be too grandly indifferent and frigidly correct. The hot asseveration of one's own innocency with a presumptive accusation of guilt in adversaries is no doubt an unpleasant trait of Jewish self-assertion. It mostly comes, however, from extreme suffering inflicted by the enemy, and the vehemence of language is produced by a sense of impotence in retaliating. "Suffrance has been the badge of all our race," cries Shylock. It does not excuse, though it explains, the severe imprecations in some of the "Persecution Psalms." It is moreover the tribal self which speaks out of the "I" Psalms; and in them we have the heart utterances of the Jewish Church. In some of the "Passion Psalms," or "Persecution Psalms" (e.g. Psalms xxii., cxxx., cxxx.) the sadness of sorrow is less violently expressed, and the cries of distress out of the deep have much sweetness and pathos. They breathe too a humble and resigned hopefulness amid the puzzling perplexities of the personal and national life. But besides this there is in these Hebrew lyrics a light shining out of the darkness, a resolute faith which con-

quers fear and despair, an exhibition of resigned gratitude resting with implicit confidence on God, which we look for in vain in modern poetical effusions of this kind.

Take, in the next place, the Penitential Psalms, notably that most perfect specimen of the kind, Psalm li., "The Crown of the second Davidic collection," which forms, as a Jewish expositor reminds us, the basis of the Kyrie Eleyson and the misereres of the dark ages; or Psalm xxxii., which Luther speaks of as a "Pauline Psalm"; or the opening words of Psalm xxxviii., and compare these with the Penitential Psalms of the Chaldeans, or those contained in the Arian Vedas; or again with *Psalms of the West*, such as, for example, Psalm xviii. of the latter collection, in which we find the following confession of sins addressed to the "Leader through the storm of life":

I am poor and tried with sorrow, deep learned in pain's relentless school;

My days have been ill-spent, though I knew thou wast by me; I have been careless of the allotted time thou hast portioned for me in the world;

. . . Thou hast room in thy holiness for the children of imperfection.

Is it possible to deny that the penitential lyrics of the Hebrews express more fully the true contrition of heart and the genuine yearnings after greater perfection as well as the larger hope of renewed Divine favour than any other collection of the kind, old or new?¹ That in their endeavour to solve the problem of expiating guilt and exorcising the powers of evil, the Jewish hymns before us stand first in the sacred literature of the world will scarcely be denied by those who are in a position to make a critical comparison.

¹ See some quotations from the Vedas in Moriz Carrière's *Anfänge der Cultur und das orientalische Alterthum in Religion, Dichtung, und Kunst*, 1. Band, p. 411 et seq., and others from *The Penitential Psalms of the Chaldeans* in the parchment edition of the Psalms by Prof. Cheyne, p. ix. et ante.

If we pass on from the Prayers, or Tephilloth to the Praises, or Tehillim, which give the Psalms their Hebrew title, as songs of thanksgiving for individual or national mercies and deliverances, we note again in them a peculiar charm in the unrestrained elatedness, the happy contentment, the complete abandon of the soul in giving voice to its exuberant joy. This differs widely from the bombastic grandiloquence in which other Eastern nationalities celebrate their victories—"Non nobis domine" is the ground tone of these Hebrew national hymns. It differs still more from the measured, self-restrained, almost stately reticence in which *Psalms of the West* celebrate the triumphs of science, progress, and modern civilization. Compare with these the Hallelujah Psalms, e.g. Psalm cxlvi. or cxlviii.—"Laudate dominum," "the grandest perhaps of all the Hymns of Praise," and put these side by side of any processional hymns in our modern collections, and it will be noticed that there is something more real and heart-stirring in the reverberating sound of joy and thanksgiving in these Hebrew Psalms, where God is "enthroned in the praises of Israel," than in the more carefully studied, if not artificial, style of Western and modern hymnology.

If we turn to those Psalms of the East and West which are concerned with political and social subjects, to use modern terms, the contrast is still more pronounced. In those Psalms where we have plaintive dirges bemoaning national reverses (see Psalms xxviii., xxxi., xxxv., xli., and notably lxxx.), as in the kindred group of Psalms, the Pharisaical war songs of which Psalm xvii. is a type, we have the battle cries of zealous fighters for God, zealous of the national religion, pronouncing severe strictures on those compatriots who in their worldly wisdom and proclivities make dangerous compromises, bringing the Jewish faith into jeopardy. In these Psalms we note the antagonism

between the more devout and the more secular sections of the Jewish community, as for example in Psalm lxxviii., "Let God arise," etc. The "Royal Psalms," which treat of "the things concerning the King, such as Psalm xxi., which commences "The King shall rejoice," and which in his parchment edition Professor Cheyne invites us to compare with a similar Assyrian prayer for the king; Psalm lxi., which contains a prayer for the long life of the king, or Psalm ci., which presents us with a picture of an ideal head of a theocratic kingdom, a *Regentenspiegel*, as Duhm, following Bickell, calls it, and in which he sees an allusion to a high priest, invested with royal dignity; and, if we may add Psalm cx. 1-4, where he conjectures that Simon the Asmonaeon is alluded to because it is an acrostic bearing his name, all these are references to the national history, obscure no doubt, and difficult to fix with anything like certainty, but at the same time exhibiting the special traits of national character at a given epoch of their history, and, therefore, of the greatest value from an ethnological point of view.

We have not here, indeed, the productions of Hebrew poets-laureate, or specimens of court poetry like those of the Persian poets written in honour of their monarchs, or of western minstrels of a later date celebrating the deeds of royal heroes, still less "party pamphlets," as some hold, naming Psalm cx., as a typical instance. We have rather here the effusions of lyrical poets sensitive to all national impulses and carried away in the full tide of national enthusiasm, expressing the hopes and fears of their countrymen. And what is most remarkable is the fact pointed out and enlarged upon by Professor Grau in his monograph on *Semiten und Indogermanen in ihrer Beziehung zu Religion und Wissenschaft*, that some of the finest psalms owe their origin to national reverses, whereas the occasional pieces in *Psalms of the West*, which deal with national subjects

are inspired by national successes and imperialistic expansion. The Hebrew psalms seem in this way to anticipate the great principle enounced later by Him whom the Roman Governor called the King of the Jews: "My kingdom is not of this world." The genius of the nation was not to build up empires; man is not, as with the Greek philosopher and the tutor of Alexander, a "political animal"; in the Jewish mind he is the image of God, a member of a Theocracy—that great future world-empire—whose builder and maker is God. On the other hand the future of society attracts the author of *Psalms of the West*. Here we have a devout hope expressed that love and wisdom may go forth to "transform social iniquity into a law of human lovingkindness," that "the deep distress of a multitude shall not endure in an age of pity." Social problems give rise to corresponding thoughts and the pious hope of social improvement, "that the people may comprehend the power of wisdom, that skill and temperance may uplift them; stern industry and self-conquest shall make them a nation of victors." These are accompanied by aspirations natural enough in an age of science and industrial as well as mental activity. Here the "Gospel of work" is preached in season and out of season, as when the Western Psalmist exclaims:

"Labour shall be our supplication, knowledge our form of worship, a true heart our thanksgiving, led by the spirit of eternal life.

"Then shall all men understand their work; there shall be no more doubt in such a faith; for it shineth in the circumference of everlasting law."

In all this there is much that would puzzle the mind of the Hebrew Psalmists, whose social environment suggests aims of a totally different character. In them we have rather the intensity of national feeling, the fervid sentiment of "faithful Israel," occupied with the communal sufferings and sorrows of the people of God. In this sense

the 137th Psalm, commencing "By the waters of Babylon," has been called a "dramatic idyl," composed by a temple singer sympathetically identifying himself with his exiled countrymen, as per contra Psalms xlvi. and xlviii. have been mentioned as written during the ferment produced by the overthrow of the Persian Empire by Alexander.

There are, again, some Psalms more in the nature of "spiritual songs" where we note the educative influence of national misfortunes in cultivating "inwardness," e.g. in Psalm cii., which contains the prayer of "the afflicted" pouring out his complaint before God, but speaking for the whole people with them experiencing the chastening effects of adversity.

As popular national lyrics the psalms have their limitations, their horizon is the narrow boundary which separates them from the great world beyond. Thus in the "Psalms of Ascent," or Pilgrimage Psalms (Psalms cxx.-cxxxiv.) in use for those going up to Jerusalem, we have something of this national particularism. But, as we have already pointed out previously, what we lose in width of view we gain in intensity of enthusiasm. In the most touching manner they express the communings of the soul with God. In others, which from the occurrence in them of the name of Joseph are called Joseph Psalms (lxxvii., lxxviii., lxxix., lxxx., lxxxii.), we have a "fine monument of Pan-Israelitish sentiment . . . preoccupied with the thought that Judah alone cannot represent all Israel."

In the "Guest Psalms" (xv., xxiv. 1-6, xxvii. 1-6, xxiii., xxxix.) the security of Jehovah's guests under His own roof, i.e. within the temple precincts, is celebrated. In xxxix., the writer declares himself to be a stranger and sojourner, given up to silent grief with a burning volcano within ready to burst out, but repressed by a better hope of ultimate deliverance.

In all these congregational hymns we have the expression

of the collective consciousness of the Church, of national Jewish sentiment, addressed to the tutelary Deity, patriotic songs rarely taking a "wider sweep," and falling far short of the Cosmopolitan outlook that we are accustomed to find in modern and Western compositions of a kindred character. Yet, though far from cosmopolitan, some of these Psalms are thoroughly human, when, in the words of Wellhausen, "the specific Israelitish way of looking at things is lost in the universal," as in the 90th Psalm, which for this reason has been called the funeral hymn of the world. For in its truthful portraiture of the frailty and transitoriness of human life it appeals to the spirit of man everywhere and in all ages.

If anywhere the cosmopolitan temper of mind is present to any extent, it is so in the Messianic Psalms, and on them we will dwell for a moment before we conclude. The Psalter has been called the "Messianic book of the Old Testament," and Psalm lxxxvii. "the great lyric of universalism." In it Jerusalem figures as the "spiritual metropolis" of an ideally catholic Church of the future, whilst in the 2nd Psalm the Messiah speaks of Himself as "the incarnation of Israel's universal rule." The mission of Israel is that of a Messianic people, as such destined to proclaim the one true God among the nations, whilst in the "Royal Psalms" the coming universal reign of righteousness is celebrated as the golden age of Messiah (see Psalms xcii., xcv.); "the righteous shall flourish" under His rule in the great restoration period to which these Psalms point. Thus it appears that the Eastern Utopia is a theocratic commonwealth and the converted Gentiles are incorporated with it. The God of Israel will be exalted over all the inhabited globe, *and the whole earth* filled with His glory (see close of Psalm lxxii.). As Professor M. Carrière shows, to Israel, in whom he says Semitism has reached its highest point spiritually and historically, the

task is reserved of promulgating the idea of God as the supreme Ruler of the universe and its Divine lawgiver. This is the part assigned to Israel in the promotion of early culture. In *Psalms of the West* we have "the soft breath of hope" in the final triumph of human civilization, when lawlessness shall cease and every man shall become a law unto himself, when selfish strife shall cease and "the order of the Eternal" shall reign over all. Here "the purpose of infinity" shall be finally attained, when out of the chaos of conflicting faiths "the world-cathedral shall arise from the bounty of all seas and lands"; the music of its service shall be "the unity of love in sacrifice." In another place the Western Psalmist sees a nation arise where "the Captains of Industry" are of "noble skill in all manner of work, and of high thought for the good of brethren under every star," in which "factions and parties were turned into one cause, the transformation of evil to good, the first duty of every man, the great reform, the regeneration of himself," and as a result of this the final consummation.

"The people of the world beheld the universe and there were no strangers in all the heavens."

If then we have in the Psalms the devout musings and noble anticipations of pious Israelites, if the Psalter is in fact a monument of the best religious ideas of the Jewish Church, and if, moreover, in *Psalms of the West* we have an adequate statement of the hopes and beliefs of modern thinkers, we may, after the foregoing survey of their respective views, ask—

Firstly, which of the two most fitly expresses national aspirations? *secondly*, which is best adapted to inspire universal philanthropy? *thirdly*, which of them presents us with the most captivating picture of the Church and Society of the future?

1. As to the first, there are few compositions more profoundly expressive of national sorrow or joy than the

Psalms, or of the spirit of hope under dire calamities which have befallen the nation. Take, e.g., Psalms lviii. and lix. ! The former has been called the most melancholy of all the Psalms, and the superscription which Baethgen puts over it is "the prayer of despondency" ; whilst the next Psalm, although likewise a cry of distress, has, as the same writer shows, for its central idea the great Messianic hope of national deliverance. So, too, the Accession Psalms, as in Psalms xcvi. and c., with which the series concludes, celebrate in stirring strains contemporary national triumphs, or anticipations of future national expansion. The expression of national feeling here is not excelled by any productions in Eastern or Western poetry dealing with the same subjects.

2. In the next place comes the question whether the Psalms adequately enforce, as undoubtedly *Psalms of the West* do, the spirit of universal philanthropy. Is it true that Semitism is so narrow in its egotism as to be incapable of feeling for other nations, or entertaining the idea of a universal brotherhood, which we are told is the product of the Arian mind exclusively ? In answer to this it cannot be denied that "Jewish Catholicity" is to some extent limited ; still there are passages here and there in the Psalms, e.g. in Psalm lxxxvii. already referred to, and of which Mr. Montefiore, in his Bible for Home Reading, says that it prefigures "the highest hopes of an enlightened Judaism to-day," which open a wider vista, and in which the world is invited to join the praises of God : "Let the people praise thee, O Lord ; let *all* the people praise thee !"

But it is in their appeal to the universal heart that these Hebrew lyrics prove their true catholicity, since from the commencement of the Christian era they have served for giving expression to the devout sentiments of the whole Christian world. They have furnished the ground tone to

Latin psalmody in its aspiring fervour and mystical ardour. One of the celebrated women of the Renaissance, Louise de Savoy, on rising in the morning read a psalm "pour embaumer la journée"; the 32nd Psalm was a favourite of St. Augustine and Diane de Poitiers, as the 6th was of Catherine de Medici; the 68th Psalm became a Huguenot battle song and it was chanted by Savonarola and his brother Dominicans on their way to the grand piazza at Florence for the fiery trial that awaited him there. C. Wesley's last hymn was inspired by Psalm lxxiii, and Alexander von Humboldt loved the 104th Psalm as a hymn of Nature. Mrs. Symonds, the wife of J. A. Symonds, tells her husband that the Psalms came into her head all through a long day in the Alps, and M. Rénan himself makes the confession that in the hours of doubt "I recite the Psalms." Here, indeed, we have a *consensus mundi*. The Psalms of the East are chanted in that very "cathedral of souls" imagined by the Western Psalmist. In his cathedral there are other chants indeed besides "Peace and wisdom began to descend upon mankind as they built their Church of humanity, the stones of which were the hearts of saints." It is a fine vision of the future, though somewhat vague in outline, grand in its placid calm, noble in aspect, a cathedral in marble, but untouched by the warm sun of fervid feeling, and in which the subdued murmur of many voices is not heard above a whisper; the chill of doubt is felt within its walls—a faithful transcript indeed of modern Western thought, uninspired by the glow of religious enthusiasm, expressing the lisped possibilities of meditative surmise, but unable to utter the rich tones of a lively faith, of sanguine hope, and all-absorbing love.

3. In the last place, which of the two, Psalms of the East or of the West, contain the more perfect Utopia? The assumed absence of epic poetry in Hebrew literature is sometimes referred to as indicating the inferiority of the Semitic

as contrasted with the Arian mind, with its *Thatendurst* commemorating the great deeds of the past. But a compensation has been discovered in the fact that whereas the Indogermanic mind traces its history backwards to the golden age in the past, the Semitic mind stretches forward into the future. Without staying to examine the accuracy of this difference, which is open to criticism both ways, we may point to the Psalms as presenting us with a picture of a social edifice erected on a sacred foundation with a superstructure reared upon it under the superintendence of the Divine Architect of the universe which leaves little to be desired. As the product of the national mind of a simple people whose social and political philosophy was of a somewhat crude nature it compares favourably with the much more ambitious attempts of social architecture in more recent times. Nay, in our latter-day Utopias we may trace that tendency of the Hebrew mind to evolve social ideals to which must be ascribed the fact that most of the intellectual leaders and prominent representatives of modern socialism are Jews either by birth or extraction.

True, for a stately view of organized law, of civic freedom, toleration, and noble bearing under social pressure, or bold attempts to grapple with social problems, we turn to *Psalms of the West* informed by sociological science, promising "a far off, a brighter abode for man," when "the command of the future is quietness and order" and "the law of humanity will accord with the wisdom of love." All this, as the ultimate result of social evolution and the slow advance of social science. But the social ideal, as the offspring of the modern mind, grand as it is, suggests at the same time an all but insurmountable difficulty in the way of its final realization, namely, the selfishness and infirmity which ever frustrates the working out of his destiny of average man.

In the Hebrew Utopia God is the great Master Builder. The predominating idea here is the final establishment of the reign of righteousness on earth by His power. It brings before our minds the vision of the kingdom of God which thence entered into the mind of the Christian world and has served ever since in modelling and modifying the social ideas of modern civilization. It is in the Psalms, these "lofty hymns divine," that we have the earliest indication of that universal empire of which the Jewish Church and nation were to form the nucleus and which since has been further developed into an all-comprehensive idea of a universal society founded on Christianity as a world religion.

If the Psalms, as Hengstenberg says finely, serve as a book of devotion to freshen up the image of God in an unbelieving age, they will also, in an age of agnostic doubt and pessimistic apprehension, help to cheer up men in their efforts of social amelioration, they will serve as an inspiring influence much needed in our modern social aims by inculcating obedience to the Divine laws of justice and mercy. Containing, as they do, the consolations of Divine philosophy, they will brace up the hearts and minds of those who, disappointed by results, or wearied by vague and vain attempts to solve social problems, would otherwise succumb. In this way they are still capable of lifting up the soul depressed by failure in schemes for social improvement and of giving full expression to the elatedness of spirit which accompanies every successful attempt to ease human suffering or to alleviate human sorrow. For this and similar reasons applying to the whole aspect of man's life, individually and collectively, the Psalter still holds its place as the *facile princeps* among its ancient and modern competitors as the Enchiridion of saints.

M. KAUFMANN.