THE VINDICTIVE PSALMS.

THE difficulties which beset the vindictive or imprecatory Psalms have arisen from the erroneous views of Inspiration which held sway for so many centuries, and which even to-day have not wholly disappeared. The mechanical theory of Inspiration was thought to be the true one by Romanist and Protestant alike. The writer was the conduit, through which the stream of inspiration passed; the prophet was the mouth-piece, by which the Holy Ghost gave utterance. This mechanical theory of inspiration was displaced by the dynamical, as it was called. But the dynamical theory did not correct in any great degree the erroneous views of Inspiration to which men still clung. If every letter and every word was not actually suggested; if the prophet was considered to speak in his own language, and according to his own character; if the imagination and idiosyncracy of the writer was allowed to have its play; still thought and fancy and diction and character and imagination were so overruled that every utterance of Scripture remained the distinct utterance of the Holy Ghost, free from all error of fact and sentiment. The nature of the writing went for nothing; the time of the utterance was not to be considered; the circumstances under which the words were spoken did not qualify the message. Although the Book of Job was a sustained argument between the Patriarch and his three friends, in which his friends were shewn to be in error, men did not hesitate to quote the words of Eliphaz and his companions as true statements of moral truth, and cited them without a suspicion of misgiving for the purpose of proving points of doctrine. The same weight attached to the speech of untaught and barbarous judges in Israel's dark ages as to the words of Christ Himself; a song of triumph over fallen enemies was Holy Scripture, and, therefore, of the same value as the Epistle to the Ephesians.

Such views of Scripture are even now being only slowly discarded; men are only beginning to understand, that, as the training of the Jewish nation was slow and progressive, so in Holy Scripture itself there must be evidence of the same slow progress, the words of Holy Scripture being ethically and morally more true, and approaching more nearly to a perfect standard, as deeper knowledge and greater light were given.

The key, then, to the solution of the difficulty of the vindictive Psalms lies in this ill-remembered fact: that the Psalmist—whether a hero of the Judges' time, or King David's royal self, or some prophet of the Captivity—could not transport himself out of his own time, or rise to any great extent beyond his own surrounding circumstances; and further, that, under ordinary conditions, no miracle of inspiration was performed, by which the Holy Ghost gave the seer light and knowledge beyond the experience of his own age or the ideas of his own contemporaries. Of course, since all things are possible with God, He could have illuminated the prophet's mind with light equal to that which shone upon the world when the Eternal Son Himself caused the full blaze of his own perfect morality to be manifested to his astonished hearers. There are, in fact, many instances of inspiration, when the seer was transported altogether beyond himself, and gave utterance to sentiments which were outside the scope of his own conscious experience, and to ideas which his own mind could never have engendered. Some of the Messianic prophecies are instances of such exalted inspiration. But this divine rapture was rare. The evidence of the writings shews clearly that men did indeed truly speak and write as they were moved by the Holy Ghost; but, as in the case of St. Luke, they had to make use of their own faculties, and wrote and spake in accordance, personally, with their own ideas, and, nationally, with the ideas of

their race. The words of the Psalms are true, *i.e.* they truly represent the thought of the Psalmist; but they are not, in all cases, true ethically, *i.e.* they do not present to us moral truth in the same way, or according to the same high standard, as we find it, for example, in the Sermon on the Mount.

I purpose to apply these principles of interpretation to three Psalms, chosen from three different epochs in the national history: one written in the time of the Judges; one taken from the Psalms of David; one selected from the group to which the troubles of the Captivity gave birth. They are the Song or Psalm of Deborah, Psalm cix. and Psalm cxxxvii. If they remove the difficulty from these three Psalms, it is evident, that the same principles, applied to other Psalms of the same character, will be equally efficacious in disposing of the difficulties which beset them.

1. THE PSALM OF DEBORAH. The difficulty here is this: Deborah, being a prophetess, that is a woman under the inspiration of the Holy Ghost, declares, in a spirit of triumphant vindictiveness, that Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite, was blessed above women; Jael having just committed a treacherous murder under circumstances from which no revolting or atrocious element was lacking.

Let us enquire what the religious training of Deborah had been. She was more or less acquainted with the Mosaic law, and had certainly been brought up and educated under its influence. The law of Moses was the law of God. If any prophet spoke authoritatively, as the inspired messenger of God, that prophet was Moses. But was the law of Moses perfect in an ethical sense? Did it teach that morality in which Christians are trained? Did it correspond with the far-reaching morality which Christ taught? Let our Lord Himself give the answer: "Ye have heard that it hath been said"—that is in the law given by Moses—"Thou shalt love thy neighbour and hate thine

enemy; but I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you." While Christ taught love and forbearance to all, the Jewish code taught men to love their friends, but to hate their enemies. There is no such actual precept in the Book of Deuteronomy; but, as the words are the words of Christ, no one will care to dispute that they accurately represent the spirit of the law of Moses. The law was God's law; it was not a perfect law; but it was the best possible law under the circumstances. It was not perfect absolutely; but it was perfectly adapted to the people to whom it was given. A Jew of those days—savage, barbarous, uncultivated—could not have received the perfect law of Christ. "Because of the hardness of" their "hearts, Moses gave" them such "precepts" as were suited to their condition. Before he could receive the perfect law of Christ, the Jew needed to be trained up to it by the long teaching of centuries. It was in the Mosaic law, ethically imperfect, that Deborah had been trained. When she spoke, she spoke according to the light she had received; according to the light that God Himself had given her. The fact that she was a prophetess did not place her on a higher pedestal than the great Lawgiver of her people. Her words breathed his spirit, with something of natural savagery added thereto. Her thoughts were in accordance with her law—God's law. She hated her enemies; she gloried in their discomfiture; she triumphed in their death. Treachery in her eyes, and, let me add, in the eyes of all her nation at the time, went for nothing. It was but a stratagem of war; it was but taking advantage of a lucky chance that offered itself. Among the Jews, as among every savage tribe of which we know anything, enemies were considered outside the pale of humanity. All was right and just and fair as far as enemies were concerned; and no words of praise could be exaggerated which glorified the agent by whom the ven-

geance was accomplished. In spite of Christian teaching, in spite of Christian training for some two thousand years, something of this unholy savagery clings to ourselves. We need not go far for an example. The famous telegram of the Emperor William after Sedan is a case in point; nay the very "Te Deum," by which we praise the "God of battles" for giving us victory and triumph over our foes, is but a remnant of the same spirit. Who could, in the eyes of Israel, be more blessed than the woman by whom God had given deliverance? The words are revolting to us who have been taught by Christ; they would not have been revolting, but the reverse, had we been Jews suffering under the cruel oppression of Sisera. The words of Deborah were true and proper from her point of view, although they are untrue, and improper in the highest degree, to us. And, be it remembered, they were not only true and proper to Deborah; they were true and proper in the light of that partial law under which God was training the Israelites for better things. To the man, whose *duty* it was to hate the enemy with whom no terms were to be kept, the words of blessing presented nothing incongruous. The words were inspired; but it was not within the purpose of God that the inspiration should overrun the current ideas of the day, any more than He willed that the inspiration of the Law of Moses should cause the precepts he gave to be ethically perfect.

2. PSALM cix. I have not thought it necessary to allude to the various interpretations and explanations to which recourse has been had in the case of the Psalm of Deborah. One familiar use of the Song will suffice. It was at one time a favourite argument with some Protestants, that not much importance was to be attached to the promised blessedness of the Virgin Mary, because, at best, it was an exaltation which she shared with the murderess of Sisera. And it never entered the minds of these controversialists,

that there could be a difference in the utterance of the savage judge living in a dark age, and that of the pure maiden of Nazareth. But it may be well to revert for a moment to the explanations which have been offered of the Psalm now before us.

It has been suggested that the words of imprecation are not those of David—the inspired prophet—but they are a quotation; that, in fact, they are the words of the curse with which Shimei cursed David at Bahurim. That were, indeed, a solution of the difficulty. But the suggestion is so evidently born of the difficulty that it scarcely needs refutation. Shimei is supposed to commence speaking at Verse 6; but there is no trace of any change of person. The words of the curse apply to a private individual, or to a person holding subordinate office; they are not words which an oppressed or injured subject would have applied to a king. The actual curse of Shimei, as given in the Book of Samuel, is altogether different. And the twentieth verse of the Psalm is conclusive. "Let this"—the preceding curse—"be the reward of mine adversaries from the Lord," are the words of David. It is altogether too far-fetched to insert some unspoken thought such as "This is the curse wherewith they have cursed me, oh Lord, but let this curse, instead of falling upon me, be the reward of mine adversaries." It is lost time to waste words over such a theory; and the more because, even were the impossible supposition conceded, that this curse was the curse of Shimei, the difficulty is removed only from this Psalm to meet us again in other Psalms of the same vindictive character.

Another solution of the difficulty has been attempted. We are told that David, in cursing his enemy, does not refer to his own personal foe, but generally to the wicked, who are the enemies of God; and we are assured, despite any apparent seeming to the contrary, that he had not in his mind any individual hatred, any personal vindictiveness,

any special or peculiar animosity. The man, to whom none is to extend mercy, is not an individual, but a type of those whose very memory is to be cut off, because they are wicked and deceitful. He is not a person, but a class; and David, in uttering his curses, is but denouncing the just judgment of God against all those who offend against his laws. But the most cursory reading of the Psalm disproves such an unfounded and unsupported assertion as this. The theory would never have been dreamed of but as a happy escape from a difficulty which, on the older theory of inspiration, was felt to be insuperable. The personal and individual element is to be traced in every verse. The man, in his own proper and most distinct personality, stands before us; and, as if to give intensity to this personality, the wife and the children are introduced, There is no trace of a lay figure standing as the representative of a class; but there is a living man before us—a husband, and a father. The very inventors of the theory feel the ground giving beneath their feet; and so a new theory is started. The Psalm is a prophecy of Judas. Now there can be no question that the Psalm is applicable to Judas. It is quoted in this connection by the Apostle. I understand it as quoted *accommodative*. St. Matthew, as we know, was constantly in the habit of quoting the Old Testament in this manner. If anybody desire to take it in this sense, the Psalm may be taken as a direct prophecy of the traitor who betrayed Christ. But this will not prevent it from having a present and personal meaning to David. It was not spoken by David as a *conscious* prophecy of the traitor who was to betray David's Son and Lord a thousand years hence, even though this reference may have been in the mind of the Holy Ghost through whose inspiration he spake. It arose out of his own condition, and was suggested by the circumstances in which he found himself. The Psalm may have had reference to Doeg the Edomite,

or, like Psalm lv., it may have had for its primary meaning a reference to the revolt of Absalom; and the wicked man alluded to—as in Psalm lv.—may be the king's old councillor Ahithophel. How keenly David felt his defection may seen by the prayer that his counsel might be turned into foolishness, and by his sending Hushai to circumvent him. It is, however, of small importance what the historical reference is, if the Psalm have any primary reference. It matters not whether Doeg or Ahithophel is cursed, if the words of imprecation apply to any person whatever.

Because it was felt that none of these interpretations really met the difficulty, another theory was started; a theory the better worth considering as it has found large favour and acceptance in the present day.

David, it is alleged, hated and cursed his enemies—his own personal enemies; but he hated them because, being evil, they were the enemies of good. The Jew, we are reminded, was brought up in a hard and pitiless school. He was not trained in a manner which gave much play to the kinder feelings of humanity, or fostered the softer emotions of his nature. A burning zeal for God's honour was the ruling principle of the man who claimed to be religious. On account of God's honour the denunciatory word was never far from his lips; for the sake of the glory of Jehovah the murderous stone was ever ready to his hand. And, besides, as a future state of retribution was unknown, so it is said,[1] men looked to see God's justice vindicated by the swift vengeance which, in this present life, should overtake and overwhelm the evil. This differs from the former theory that the Psalmist cursed the wicked as a class hateful to God, because it admits the personal

[1] This is true generally. Cf. for instance, Hezekiah's Psalm, Isa. xxxvii. especially vv. 11, 18, 19; but it is not universally true. In some instances, and certainly in the case of David, the Old Testament inspiration did embrace a future life. Cf. 2 Sam. xii. 23 and Ps. xvii. 15.

element—which it was felt could not be excluded—and yet saves the author of the Psalm from the charge of personal vindictiveness. He hated his enemies; but he hated them because they were the enemies of God. "Do not I hate them, oh God, that hate thee, and am not I grieved with them that rise up against thee? yea, I hate them right sore as though they were mine enemies." The theory is so far good as, if true, it is to some extent a vindication of David. He hated his enemies because they were God's enemies. To the apologist for David such a plea is, perhaps, worth putting upon the record. A similar plea is not unknown in Christian times. It was the excuse urged on behalf of the Roman inquisitors; it was the defence for the Spanish Philip, and for the English Mary; it was urged for Calvin burning Servetus; it had its echo among the hills of the Scottish Covenanters. But we are not (at present) concerned with the personal character of David, but with the ethical morality of the Psalms. And, from this point of view, the theory helps us not at all. All are now agreed that such a spirit—whether it meets us in the Old Testament or in the annals of the Christian Church—is not the spirit of Christ. And thus, even if the theory be a true one, which we are unwilling to admit, we are driven back upon the old difficulty, that the vindictive Psalms are not in accordance with the teaching of the Sermon on the Mount.

Is it not better to face the difficulty honestly? To admit, what every unsophisticated reader of this Psalm must gather from its contents, that David was animated by a spirit of personal hatred, and cursed his personal enemies? Let us remember that in doing so no Jew could conceive he was acting wrongly. He was acting in the spirit of the law he had been trained to reverence as supreme, and which taught him in no indistinct or uncertain language that it was his duty to hate his enemy.

Psalm cix. grates against our feelings more, perhaps,

than any other, because of the contrast offered in the twenty-first verse. The whole vocabulary of cursing and imprecation had been exhausted. Not content with invoking vengeance against the man himself,—the guileless wife and the innocent children are involved in the bitter hatred. Even after the husband and the father had paid the forfeit of his treachery, no thought of mercy intervenes for those whom he had left bereaved and desolate. Like the Ammonite or the Moabite, he was to be cursed for all generations. And then—while the echo of the frightful curse was still resounding on the air—the inspired Psalmist does not fear to turn to God with the prayer that the mercy he had so ruthlessly denied to others might be given to himself: "But deal thou with *me*, oh God, according to thy lovingkindness, for sweet is thy mercy."

Yet notice: notwithstanding the bitter imprecations it contained; notwithstanding the words of cursing, which, according to all Christian ideas, defiled its page; notwithstanding the virulent hatred and utter want of charity which it displayed, editor after editor of the Holy Scriptures—themselves inspired men—did not hesitate to receive this Psalm as an inspired writing, and to place it among the Hagiographa.

Can the apparent anomaly be explained?

Undoubtedly. "It was said to them of old time, Thou shalt love thy neighbour and hate thine enemy." Who was a greater enemy to David than the treacherous counsellor, who had once been his friend? and who, because he had been his friend, because—to quote from another vindictive Psalm—they had taken sweet counsel together and had walked in the house of God as friends, could stab with the greater certainty of inflicting a deadly wound. Nor need we wonder that wife and children, to the latest posterity, were involved in the curse. The law of Moses sanctioned this bitterness of spirit. "An Ammonite, or

Moabite, shall not enter into the congregation of the Lord, even to the tenth generation," *i.e.* for ever. And the hatred was not to be passive, or negative; but distinctly active. They were to do them all the harm they could. "Thou shalt not seek their peace, nor their prosperity, all thy days for ever." No curse nor malediction could go beyond such a precept as this; and this we must remember was the actual command of God Himself. And what is the reason assigned? It was not because these Ammonites and Moabites were wicked and transgressors beyond all other races; or because, as in the case of the Canaanites, they might seduce the Israelites to evil, that they were to be held accursed and hated; the eternal hatred is based on a single act of hostility. The Jew was to hate the Ammonite and the Moabite, and was to refrain from seeking their good for ever, because "they met them not with bread and water in the way when they came out of Egypt." Had David used language other than he did, he would have been a Christian, not a Jew. He would have forestalled by centuries that word which Christ was the first to reveal: "Love your enemies; bless them that curse you; do good to them that hate you; pray for them that despitefully use you and persecute you."

Under the influence of the Holy Spirit's inspiration David might have done all this. He might have forestalled the sentiments and the very words of Christ. The Holy Ghost is tied to no time, and is dependent upon no circumstances. But, if we turn to the Sermon on the Mount, it is clearly revealed to us by Christ that such was not the method that it pleased God to adopt. In giving to his prophets the aid of his Holy Spirit, God did not give them, necessarily, such a revelation as should open to their minds the morality, which, only in after ages, Christianity was to introduce. It was his purpose and design that there should be a slow progressive development by which the

human mind was to be trained for the more perfect revelation of the future.

3. PSALM cxxxvii. To this Psalm we need refer but briefly. Like most of the Songs of the Captivity, it unites in itself two contradictory elements. There is the pathos of the Exiles' lament: "By the waters of Babylon we sat down and wept, when we remembered thee, O Sion; as for our harps, we hanged them up upon the trees that are therein." But, suddenly and abruptly, the strain of pathos breaks into a stern and bitter cry for vengeance: "Remember the children of Edom, O Lord, in the day of Jerusalem; how they said, Down with it, down with it, even to the ground." And from the accomplice the Psalmist turns to the principal: "O daughter of Babylon, wasted with misery (who shall be wasted with misery), yea, happy shall he be that rewardeth thee as thou hast served us; yea, blessed shall he be that taketh thy children and throweth them against the stones." The words read like an echo of the savage song in which Deborah invoked a blessing on Sisera's murderess. And they are noteworthy as shewing that much the same spirit as animated Deborah was still existent among the Israelites. "Thou shalt hate thine enemy." They had not forgotten the precept which was so thoroughly in accord with human nature. The old spirit of hate survived. It survived; but a better spirit was at work, silently making its way into the hearts of those who should receive it. Already, in the earlier chapters of Isaiah, the note of peace and amity had been sounded: "In that day shall Israel be the third with Egypt and with Assyria, even a blessing in the midst of the land: whom the Lord of hosts shall bless, saying, Blessed be Egypt my people, and Assyria the work of my hands, and Israel mine inheritance" (Isa. xix. 24, 25). The writer of the second part of Isaiah was contemporaneous with the author of Psalm cxxxvii., and in his pages we find hardly a note of hate or vengeance.

In this respect, as in so many others, the evangelical prophet has caught the spirit of the Saviour who was to be revealed, and, in the contemplation of the calm and serene glories of the future, he loses that bitter spirit, which still was to remain for long years and centuries the unhappy heritage of his people. Nor is this better spirit confined to him. It breathes in many of the teachers of Israel in the years of the Exile and in the centuries which succeeded it; notably in the sage who made one of the latest contributions to the national collection of Proverbs, and forbids retaliation in the striking apothegm (Prov. xxiv. 29): "Say *not*, as he hath done to me, so do I to him; I render unto the man according to his work."[1]

One might almost imagine that the principle laid down, and which has been applied to these three Psalms, must be clear and self-evident; yet it is simply because they have failed to comprehend or feared to apply it that many of the faithful have been troubled with apprehensions and misgivings which have made it doubly hard for them to meet the sneers of those who hate and despise religion. The Sermon on the Mount is sufficient evidence that the morality of the Law was imperfect; and therefore proves that the inspiration vouchsafed to the prophets was imperfect. No one will venture to claim a higher degree of inspiration for any Old Testament prophet than that vouchsafed to Moses. If Moses, giving a law to an untrained and ignorant people, commanded as a precept, that they should hate their enemies, there can be no surprise that similar sentiments should be found in the Singers and Psalmists of Israel. Somehow or other, while nearly all men have recognized that in the Psalter there are poems, some of which breathe a vindictive spirit altogether out of harmony with the teaching of Christ, it has not been recognized, to anything like the same extent, that a similar vindictive spirit is to be traced in the Book of Deuteronomy, and in the

[1] See THE EXPOSITOR (*New Series*) Vol. vi. pp. 403–4.

ordinances of Moses. And so, while the difficulty in the Psalms was patent to all—explained on baseless hypotheses by the friends of Christianity, and turned into equally baseless allegations by its enemies—the key, which would have solved the difficulty, was lost to sight, and lost very mainly because men were blinded by a false idea of inspiration. Inspiration did not interfere with the natural play of man's normal feelings; and, quite apart from any spirit of vindictiveness traceable in Holy Scripture, a yielding to the passing emotion of the moment, somewhat similar in its character, may be found here and there in most of the sacred books. Job, in his anguish, curses the day on which he saw the light; and the parallel passage in Jeremiah is familiar to all. Something of the same kind may be traced in the writings of the New Testament, as it is to be perceived in the actions and sayings of the Apostles. All will call to mind the impetuous passage in the Epistle to the Romans where St. Paul says, that he could wish himself accursed from Christ for the sake of his fellow-countrymen, the Jews; and that other one, in which he declares himself to be the chief of sinners;—neither absolutely true, but the thought of the one momentarily possible in a man of St. Paul's vehement and passionate nature, and the other too closely allied to all Christian experience to occasion much wonder or surprise.

Nor must it be supposed for a moment, that the principle which has been enunciated detracts from Inspiration; although it may run counter to the received idea of it. Men truly spoke as they were moved by the Holy Ghost; but in what the inspiration consisted, or what it effected, is nowhere laid down in Holy Scripture, nor is it defined in the Articles of the English Church. It may be that the old-fashioned idea of Inspiration—like so many old-fashioned ideas—needs to be re-examined in order to be placed on a truer and sounder basis.

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