

An Abyssinian Christian Free-thinker.

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IN volume xv. of THE EXPOSITORY TIMES, p. 63, I drew attention to a new and important work, the 'Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium,' and offered some extended remarks on the first book of the series. Since then other parts of the work have followed with very commendable promptitude: of the Syriac series two, *Dionysius Bar Salibi expositio liturgie*, and *Chronica Minora, pars secunda*; of the Arabic series one, *Petrus Ibn Rahib, chronicon orientale*; and of the Ethiopic series three, *Annales Iohannis I, Acta S. Mercurii*, and *Philosophi Abessini*. This last, edited by Dr. Littmann, contains the 'philosophy' of Za'ra-Ya'qob, and that of his disciple Walda-Heywat, in two parts. The first is particularly interesting; in it we have a brief autobiography of Za'ra-Ya'qob, containing many picturesque details, together with a fairly ample account by himself of his religious views. His words depict him as a Christian free-thinker, a type not uncommon to-day; and it may be interesting to readers of THE EXPOSITORY TIMES if I give a brief sketch of the contents of his little book.

Za'ra-Ya'qob tells us that he was of priestly origin, although his father was a poor farmer only. He was born in the district of Axum, in the third year of king Ya'qob, 1599 A.D. (1592 Abyssinian reckoning). Put to school by his father, he learnt to read the Psalms, and it was further intended that he should go on to learn sacred singing, but the roughness of his voice was a hindrance, and caused also the derision of his companions. He then, under another master, studied with success for four years what was practically a kind of *litterae humaniores*, afterwards giving himself to the study of the interpretation of Holy Scripture. It was then apparently that his first doubts and difficulties arose. He says, 'the interpretation of those men' (i.e. the Franks or Latin Christians, and the men of his own land) 'did not always agree with my reason'; but he held his peace, and hid his thoughts in his heart. When about twenty-nine years of age he began to suffer from the uncharitableness of his countrymen, because he taught the cultivation of peace and love even between those of differing beliefs: 'And teaching and interpret-

ing the books I used to say, Thus and thus said the Franks, or thus and thus said the Copts; nor did I say, This is good, that is bad; but I used to say, All things are good if we ourselves are good: and therefore they all hated me.' At last, accused before the king by a priest of Axum, he was compelled to flee for his life, and taking with him three ounces of gold of his possession and the Psalms of David, he found, after many wanderings, a cave under a lofty cliff, and there he dwelt a long time in peace: 'and I used to pray with my whole heart from the Psalms of David, and I hoped in God that He would hear me.'

It was while he dwelt in his cave that, having no labour to attend to, he began to work out for himself his philosophy of life and faith. His first trouble was the fact that Franks and Copts persecuted one another, both declaring that the true faith was theirs. This sad hostility led him to question the goodness and almost the existence of God who permitted these things, but at last he arrived at the firm conclusion—the corner-stone of his philosophy of religion—that there is a Creator. He was then confronted with the question whether all the things written in the Scriptures—his own special line of study—were true. Men, he felt, could not give him any reliable answer here, for each interpreted according to his own particular belief, 'and where shall I find one who judges truly? For as my faith seems to me to be true, so the faith of another seems to him to be true: yet truth is one.' From all this he concludes that men go astray and differ as to truth because they accept without inquiry what is transmitted to them on the authority and *ipse dixit* of those who preceded them, and because they do not use their own reason which God has given them. He accordingly rejects written, or uttered authority which asserts what is against his reason. He finds many things in the Pentateuch, in the law of Christians, and in the law of Islam—for he is a very impartial inquirer—which do not agree with the truth and justice of the Creator which our reason opens out to us. Of the Pentateuch, for instance, he

says, 'Moses said, I am sent by God to announce to you His will and His law'; and then he adds in the spirit of the most modern of critics, 'and those who came after him added stories of portents which they said were done in Egypt and on Mount Sinai.' He speaks further of certain laws of uncleanness in the Pentateuch, of ideas about marriage and celibacy among Christians, of laws about fasting and about slavery among Christians and Mohammedans, and points out that they cannot be in accord with the truth, nor are they of God. But there is besides, he says, another important question. All men are equal before God, and are all of His creation, and He has not created one people for life and another for death. Our reason teaches that God, who is just in all His works, cannot have done this. Yet the Jews thought that they were the only people taught of God; 'and in these days Christians say, The doctrine of God is only found among us; and the same say Jews and Mohammedans and Indians and others. Moreover, Christians do not agree among themselves . . . and if we are to hear men, the doctrine of God has come to but a very few!' His conclusion is that only certain truth is to be found in that in which all men agree, as, for instance, in the conviction that there is a Creator; but where men do not agree, there the false is mingled with the true; 'and men quarrel among themselves, for one says, Thus and thus is the truth; another says, Not so, but it is false. For all lie if they make the voice of men the voice of God.' However, he praises the Christian faith 'as it was established in the time of the Gospel,' for it taught men to love each other and to exercise compassion. Our nature, he declares, reveals to us an eternal life, and he holds that God permits the evils which exist in the world and amongst men in order to prove men, who shall after death receive according to their works. 'Now the will of the Creator,' he says,—and this would seem to be the summary of his philosophy of faith and practice,—'is known in this brief word of our reason which says, Adore God thy Creator, and love all men as thyself; and also in the word of our reason, Do not to men what you do not wish them to do to you, and do to them what you wish them to do to you. . . . Furthermore the Ten Words of the Law are the will of the Creator, if you omit that about honouring the Sabbath, for about

honouring the Sabbath our reason is silent. But that we should not kill, or steal, or lie, or go to another man's wife, these and similar things our reason teaches us it is not fit that we should do.' Further, he says that we ought to labour and to pray, and he mentions an incident in his life when he was delivered from peril through prayer; yet when the same peril threatened him on another occasion he escaped, 'but I did not as before pray to God that He would deliver me from danger, since I was able to escape, for it behoves a man to do as much as he can himself, and not to tempt God vainly.'

After the death of Susneos the king, Zar'a-Ya'qob left his cave to live again among men, and at last settled down with a certain rich man named Habtu, who became his patron. For him he wrote out the Psalms in a beautiful hand which all admired, taught his sons, and married a maid-servant of his family. The brief account which he gives of his harmonious and happy family life, of his prosperity, and of the birth of his children is very striking in its patriarchal simplicity. When he was about forty-four years of age his patron died. 'He called us,' says Zar'a-Ya'qob, 'and said to us, Behold I am about to die: God protect and bless you; and be thou a father to my children. And he gave me two oxen and a mule, and to my wife two cows with their calves, and he said to us, Pray ye for my soul. And he died in the peace of God.' After this Zar'a-Ya'qob lived in peace and prosperity, praising God who had satisfied him with all good things, and died at length in the ninety-third year of his age.

Towards the end of his life Zar'a-Ya'qob was troubled with the question as to what ought to be his attitude towards those among whom he lived. 'I was,' he says, 'living among men and seeming to be a Christian, but in my heart I did not believe save in God the Creator of all things and the Preserver of all things, even as He taught me. And I meditated and I said, Will it be reckoned sin in me before God because I seem to be what I am not and thus deceive men? But I said, Men wish to be deceived, and if I reveal to them the truth they will not hear me, but will curse me and persecute me, nor will there be any advantage in making known my thoughts, but it will do much harm.' But while he resolved not to reveal to men his convictions about life and faith, he wrote them

secretly in a book, hiding it away till his death, that men who came after him might know what manner of man he was. 'And if after my death, a wise and inquiring man be found, I beg him to add his thoughts to my thoughts . . . and if there be found an intelligent man who understands these things, and things more excellent than these, and who teaches and writes them, may God . . . satisfy him with His good things which are without measure, even as He has satisfied me; and render him joyful and blessed on the earth, even as He has rendered me happy and blessed until now.'

The impression left on the mind by the perusal of Zar'a-Ya'qob's book is delightful, even though one may not agree with all his views; not only was he a good man, but he was—although his contemporaries would have denied it—undoubtedly a Christian, a Christian freethinker if we will, and a Christian in advance of his age. He refused to accept many things taught in the name of religion, and rejected not a few current interpretations of the Scriptures, and even boldly denied the veracity of some things written therein. But this is the attitude of many thinking Christians to-day, who hold that all religions, not exclud-

ing Christianity, have become encumbered by doctrines, beliefs, and practices which did not originally belong to them, and which are not of their essence. Yet these men are in heart and life religious, and are good Christians in the best sense of the word; and such will be interested to find that they had a fellow-thinker in this far away Abyssinian three hundred years ago. Had he lived in our days he would very probably have ranged himself with those who are not afraid to make known their religious standpoint even at the risk of being called unorthodox; but living when he did, who will blame him for not revealing his inmost conclusions and convictions?—doubtless he was right in judging that to do so would 'do much harm.'

I do not propose to notice the second part of *Philosophi Abessini*. It contains the 'philosophy' of Walda-Heywat, the disciple of Zar'a-Ya'qob; he practically echoes his master's opinions, but he is less original and more diffuse, nor does he tell us anything about his life.

It only remains to add that the printing of the book, like that of the others of the series, is excellent, and that Dr. Littmann's Latin translation of the Ethiopic is a model of clearness.

The Great Text Commentary.

THE GREAT TEXTS OF JEREMIAH.

JEREMIAH VI. 16.

'Thus saith the Lord, Stand ye in the ways and see, and ask for the old paths, where is the good way, and walk therein, and ye shall find rest for your souls: but they said, We will not walk therein.'—R. V.

EXPOSITION.

'Thus saith the Lord, Stand ye in the ways.'—Literally, *station yourselves on* (or, *by*) *roads*, i.e. at the meeting point of different roads. There, as the following words state, the Jews are to make inquiry as to the old paths. Antiquity gives a presumption of rightness; the ancients were nearer to the days when God spoke with man; they had the guidance of God's two mighty 'shepherds' (Is 63¹¹); they knew, far better than we, who 'are but of yesterday, and know nothing' (Job 8⁹), the way of happiness. For though there are many pretended 'ways,' there is but 'one way' (Jer 32²⁹) which has Jehovah's blessing (Ps 25^{8, 9}).—T. K. CHEYNE.

'The good way.'—Literally, *the way of the good*. Good is in the Hebrew a substantive. The sense is not that there are many old ways, amongst which, by inquiry, ye may find the best; but that the search for old paths will ensure their finding that one path which God approves.—STREANE.

'Walk therein, and ye shall find rest for your souls.'—The Fathers often use this verse in a secondary application, contrasting with the *old tracks*, many in number and narrow to walk in, which are the Law and the Prophets, Christ the one *good way*.—PAYNE SMITH.

In the prophet's mind the people were as a traveller who has taken a self-chosen path, and finds that it leads him to a place of peril. Is it not well that they should stop and ask where the old paths (literally, *the eternal paths*; the words going, as in chap. 18¹⁶, beyond the mere antiquity of the nation's life) were, on which their fathers had travelled safely? Of these old paths they were to choose that which was most distinctly 'the good way,' the way of righteousness, and therefore of peace and health also. The call, however, was in vain. The people chose