

THE PSALM OF HABAKKUK.

THE following Note is an attempt to carry one step further the admirable paper published by Mr H. St J. Thackeray in the *Journal of Theological Studies* for Jan. 1911 (*J. T. S.* xii 191-213). Mr Thackeray started from the Jewish lectionary practice of reading the Psalm of Habakkuk during the Feast of Weeks, i. e. Pentecost, and he proceeded to shew that the obscure and untranslatable words of Hab. iii 9^b are very probably catchwords indicating the passages of the Pentateuch in connexion with which the Psalm, or part of it, was to be recited. I propose to consider more closely a question which Mr Thackeray only touched upon on p. 211, the question of the authenticity and original meaning of the whole Psalm.

The 'authenticity' of the Psalm of Habakkuk naturally means nothing more than the question whether the third chapter of the Book of Habakkuk is by the same author as the first two chapters. We know nothing about Habakkuk, except what we can get from the book, for the Habakkuk 'capable de tout', whom we meet with in Bel and the Dragon, may be left out of serious consideration.

I.

What is the date of the Book of Habakkuk? What is its general message? The usual answer is that it comes from the period of the Exile. The just man is told to wait in faithful endurance, till at last (but not just yet) due vengeance falls on the Chaldeans, 'that bitter and hasty nation' (i 6). From the mention of the Chaldeans it is assumed that the prophecy falls in the time when the Chaldeans had dominion over the Jews.

Another view has, however, been taken, which English readers may find most conveniently set forth in Budde's article 'HABAKKUK' in *Encyclopaedia Biblica* cols. 1921-1928. It is pointed out that there is no word of 'exile' or 'restoration' in the prophecy; it is Jahwe Himself who is raising up the Chaldeans to be an instrument of vengeance, and it is not said that they have laid Zion waste—or, indeed, that Zion is lying waste at all. For these reasons it is contended that the enemy of chapter ii, upon whom destruction is coming, is not Babylon but Nineveh, and that the true date is a few years previous to the destruction of Nineveh in 608-606 B. C. The revolt of the Babylonians under Nabopolassar had been the turning-point in the decline of the Assyrian

Empire, and though in the end Nineveh was actually captured by Medes, the Chaldean rebellion had greatly contributed to the final catastrophe. No doubt Hab. i and ii are written in a somewhat obscure style, with few definite allusions involving names and places from which certain historical conclusions inevitably follow, but though certainty cannot be obtained it may be said that the earlier date is at least as probable as the later one. This means dating the Book of Habakkuk in the decade from 620-610.

2.

What is the meaning of the Psalm of Habakkuk? What is the point of the whole composition? I find in commentaries a great deal of admiration expressed for its poetry and grandeur, but the general conclusion appears to be that, as it stands, the poem has suffered some damage, and so it no longer means anything at all as a whole. In this connexion Budde's remarks are very instructive (*Ency. Bibl.* 1927). He says:—

'it is to Wellhausen that we owe the complete elucidation of this obscure composition (*Kl. Proph.* 166, 170 f). As he well remarks: "It is the community that is the speaker, . . . it prays, Renew Thy work in the midst of the years. The long-since founded theocracy has fallen into ruin, and a new foundation is desired . . ." In the description of the theophany . . . the colours are derived exclusively from the deliverance from Egypt, as can be seen with sufficient clearness from *vv.* 3, 7, 8 ff. With this description of the deliverance wrought for the fathers that of the new deliverance now prayed for and expected becomes for the poet so blended that he seems to behold the approach of the other. Wellhausen leaves open the possibility that this may not always have been the case, and that the proper close of the poem has been lost, since *vv.* 17-19 cannot be the genuine one.'

Yet Prof. Budde is not quite certain, after all, that *vv.* 17-19 are not genuine. 'Verse 17', he says, 'which certainly seems strange, may give some fresh touches to the picture of the fate of the hostile people; but *vv.* 18 f present not only a very appropriate contrast to this, but also a thoroughly typical psalm-epilogue.' Let us see what this epilogue really is, which Wellhausen says cannot be genuine and the most characteristic part of which Budde acknowledges to be strange. It runs thus:—

- 17 For though the fig-tree should not blossom,
Neither fruit be in the vines,
The labour of the olive have failed,
And the fields have yielded no meat,
The flock have been cut off from the fold,
And there be no herd in the stalls:

- 18 Yet I will rejoice in Jahwe,
I will joy in the God of my salvation.
19 Jahwe, Adonai, is my strength, &c.

Certainly, verse 17 is unusual. It comes in very oddly, and if it is to have a meaning in the context it must be something quite special and definite.

I venture to suggest that if we strip off all the poetical imagery from the verses I have quoted, we may fairly say that the meaning is 'However bad the year may be, we will hold our Harvest Festival all the same!' I do not say this is doing justice to the poetry, but I think it expresses the thought.

With regard to the rest of the Psalm, no doubt Wellhausen is right in saying that 'the colours are derived exclusively from the deliverance from Egypt'. Verse 2 is the essence of the whole, and here we have a paraphrase of the meaning ready to hand in the familiar versicle 'O God, we have heard with our ears, and our fathers have declared unto us, the noble works that Thou didst in their days, and in the old time before them'. And, further, the particular work of old time appears to be connected with the battle of Rephidim and the defeat of the Amalekites, who are (I suppose) referred to in verse 7.¹ It was these references to the events between the Passage of the Red Sea and the giving of the Law at Sinai that made the Psalm appropriate for recitation at Pentecost, which the Jews regarded as the time of year when the Law was given, as Mr Thackeray has been telling us.

3.

Very little is known about the celebration of Pentecost in pre-exilic times. It is, of course, the season of corn-harvest in Palestine. There are features about it that are ancient and others that are secondary. In Lev. xxiii it is only a one-day feast and in Ezekiel's revised Kalendar it is altogether passed over. Yet it was no novelty, as the Day of Atonement seems to have been, for even in the old codes of Exodus xxxiv and Exodus xxiii it is a feast of obligation. We do not know how old the theory was that connected it with the giving of the Law: this connexion is commonly said to be based on the chronology of Exod. xix 1, a passage from the Priestly Code. It is quite conceivable that the connexion is the other way round, and that the view that Pentecost commemorated the Law (or rather the Covenant between Jahwe and Israel, as emphasized in Deut. v 2 f) is the reason for the artificial dating by months, found in Exodus xix. In any case one element of

¹ For the equation of Midian and Amalek, see Judges vi 3, &c., and Nöldeke's article MIDIAN in *Ency. Bibl.*

the Deuteronomic legislation was to enforce the theory that the religion of Israel was no nature-worship like that of the peoples round about, but a special cult designed to remind the Chosen People of the special relation in which they stand to their Covenant God and of the great deliverance which He wrought for them in the past.

To come back now to the question of date, we have seen that a most probable date for the Prophecy of Habakkuk is the decade 620-610 B.C. What was going on at that time in Judah? Politically it was a quiet period, but ecclesiastically it was a time of revolution, for at the beginning of it falls the 18th year of King Josiah, when the High Places of Judah were destroyed and the Law of the One Sanctuary at Jerusalem was put in force, so that a Passover was kept unto the LORD their God, 'as it is written in the book of the Covenant' (2 Kings xxiii 21). If this was the time of Habakkuk, was it not with new feelings, with eyes turned back to the days of old and to the law of Moses, that he and his contemporaries kept together at Jerusalem the immemorial agricultural Feasts?

I cannot but think that this date, the date of the reforms of Josiah, gives a meaning and unity to the Psalm of Habakkuk, and further that it is the only thing that does give real unity to it. Let us substitute for the actual words the paraphrase of the two parts given above:—

'O God, we have heard with our ears, and our fathers have declared unto us, the noble works that Thou didst in their days, and in the old time before them: however bad the year may be, we will hold our Harvest Festival all the same.'

These two sentiments are connected together by a real link if the Harvest Festival to be celebrated is being now for the first time connected in thought with the noble works which God did in the old time for His chosen people.

In other words Habakkuk iii is not only an appropriate lesson for Pentecost; in my opinion it is, when considered as a whole, *too* appropriate not to have been originally composed for the occasion, and no epoch in Jewish history is so appropriate for its composition as the one which is from other considerations its probable date, viz. soon after the reforms of Josiah.

4.

I should like to guard myself here against two possible misunderstandings. I have not assumed that the Book of the Law found in Josiah's time was the Book of Deuteronomy. Professor Kennett, as readers of this JOURNAL know, has made it probable that Deuteronomy as a literary work is later than Jeremiah. The basis of the reform under Josiah was rather the earlier Book of the Covenant (2 Kings

xxiii 21), supplemented by the 'Deuteronomic' principle, so acceptable to King and Priests at Jerusalem, that the Temple on Mount Moriah is the only legitimate place of worship. But in any case the regulation of public worship by the Book of the Covenant in itself connects the Feasts with Sinai and the first meeting between Jahwe and His people rather than with the time of year when the corn is ripe, as had immemorially been the case.

Further, the later Jewish theory represents rather a different *nuance* from what is suggested by the words of Habakkuk's Psalm, and even (if Mr Thackeray be right) the earliest system of commemoration. The chronology of Exod. xix 1 and the Jewish traditions dependent on it make the event commemorated at Pentecost the giving of the Law. The Psalm itself and the reading of Genesis xii, on the other hand, lay stress on the earlier, more 'prophetic', idea of the Covenant between God and Israel. It is not so much the documentary result of the meeting between God and Israel that is emphasized as the meeting itself. 'Blessed be the LORD God of Israel; for He hath redeemed and visited His people'—that is the idea which the Psalm of Habakkuk wishes to connect with Pentecost.

If the Psalm of Habakkuk really be a Hymn written for Pentecost in the first years of its reformed celebration, a Hymn so appropriate and so popular that it has practically never passed out of Jewish liturgical use on that Festival, may we not consider the question of the authorship of the Book of Habakkuk from a new point of view? Is it not likely that the first two chapters owe their inclusion in the Canon to the fact that they are by the author of the Pentecostal Psalm?

I began by leaving out the Habakkuk who figures in the Greek tale of Bel and the Dragon. No doubt the story is pure invention, without any basis at all in fact. But it is just worth notice that even in that tale Habakkuk is connected with the harvest, for he is represented as bringing food to the reapers.

F. C. BURKITT.