

ARTICLE III.

RECENT CRITICAL TREATMENT OF THE PSALTER.

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THE critical attention bestowed upon the Psalter has always been out of proportion to the admiration and reverence with which that book has been regarded. And it is also worthy of remark that, in those countries where, in recent times, its influence upon the hearts of men has been most widely felt, the desire to study its form, character, and history, has been less intense than in lands where its spiritual power has been less generally experienced. Great Britain and America have produced but few expositions of the Psalms marked by independence and critical skill. In this country, while their practical teachings have been unfolded with some degree of success by various expositors, their true exegesis has had but a single worthy representative, the Commentary of Dr. J. A. Alexander.¹ In Great Britain also the Psalter has received much less than its due share of attention in the efforts that have been made to profit by and emulate the achievements of German scholarship.

In the latter country, however, something has been done of late years towards taking away occasion for this reproach. For there the critical study of the Psalms has received a strong impulse from the growing interest felt in the interpretation of the Old Testament generally. J. F. Thrupp² was the first English writer to present at all fully or satisfactorily the results of the investigations of continental critics. Seven years after the publication of his work an anonymous

¹ The Psalms, Translated and Explained by J. A. Alexander. New York, 1850. Few critical commentaries have been so popular as this work. It is largely based upon the Commentary of Hengstenberg, hereafter to be considered, but is much more than a mere compilation or adaptation.

² Introduction to the Psalms. 1860.

treatise appeared,¹ containing a good deal of suggestive matter; but impaired in value by following the arbitrary chronological arrangement of Ewald, hereafter to be noticed. The Commentary of Bishop, then Archdeacon, Wordsworth,² issued in the same year, was a return to the ancient patristic methods of exposition, and gave but small place to the labors of modern commentators. The allegorizing principle of interpretation has no contemporary representative of greater consistency or devotion than Wordsworth. The Commentary of A. R. Fausset, forming part of a well-known exposition of the whole Bible republished in this country, is worthy of mention for its condensed and valuable notes. Attention must be specially called, however, in our survey of the English exposition, to two works,³ which, on account of their representative character, as well as their intrinsic merits, are more worthy of the attention of American Bible-students than any of those just mentioned.

The work of Professor Perowne is the most comprehensive and elaborate Commentary upon the Psalms that has appeared in the English language. In its systematic treatment of the several departments of the exegesis, and in the fulness of its criticisms upon the text, it stands alone among the productions of English interpreters of the Psalter. Its style also is clear and fresh. There is an agreeable freedom from the habit of dogmatic assertion, and the opinions of other critics are fairly and candidly stated. On turning to the more special features of the work, it appears that the one most valuable and characteristic of the author is presented in the analyses and introductions prefixed to the several Psalms, in which he displays fine insight into the feelings and mental posture of the inspired poets, and traces, usually with great beauty and attractiveness, the progress of their thoughts and

¹ The Psalms Chronologically Arranged. By Four Friends. 1867.

² The Holy Bible, with Notes and Introduction. Vol. IV. Part II. Book of Psalms. London, 1867.

³ The Book of Psalms: a New Translation, with Introduction and Notes. By J. J. Stewart Perowne, B.D. (2d ed.). London, 1870. The Psalms: their History, Teachings, and Use. By Wm. Binnie, D.D. London, 1870.

the current of their emotions. In this respect he has achieved in his own country a distinction similar to that which Ewald retains, without a rival, in Germany. He has succeeded not only in penetrating deeply into the general spirit of the poems, but also in discovering the mutual interdependence of their several sections or strophes—a task whose difficulty is in proportion to its importance. In the translation he shows good taste and judgment in being as literal as possible, and in avoiding far-fetched and unnatural renderings. When we come to Professor Perowne's more minute exegesis we find that his exegetical notes have been prepared with scrupulous care, and that the choice he makes between conflicting opinions is usually marked by a due appreciation of their respective merits. Yet we miss the independence¹ and power that characterize his psychological and moral analysis, and receive the impression that he is more at home in the latter region than in the department of philological criticism.

In this connection it may be proper to remark, that an English commentary worthy of being ranked with the great productions of German scholarship and criticism in this department has yet to appear. It may be true that, owing to the influence of traditional interpretation, and of the profound genius and learning and patient investigation that have been

¹ For example, the *dicta* of Hupfeld upon grammatical points are often received with too little caution. A curious instance of the same disposition occurs in the introduction to Psalm cxxxvi. An hypothesis is there cited which had been advanced by Delitzsch in the first edition of his Commentary, that vs. 19–22 originally did not belong to this Psalm, but were introduced from the one preceding, and that there were thus, in the first instance, only twenty-two verses, corresponding to the number of verses in the Hebrew alphabet. Of course this is only a specimen of the fanciful ingenuity which Delitzsch occasionally exercises. The Psalmists had no preference for the number twenty-two in the structure of their poems, except in the case of the Alphabetical Psalms, to which class the one in question does not belong. Delitzsch, in his second edition (1867), withdrew this conjecture; but Mr. Perowne retains and tolerates it in his second edition, published three years after the hypothesis was cancelled. This circumstance, which might seem too unimportant to be noticed, is mentioned chiefly because the proposed transposition would take a liberty with the text which is dangerous in principle, and which the history of that text does not at all justify.

brought to bear upon the study of the Psalter, any commentator of the present time must, if he is to achieve a commanding position, owe his success more to the diligent accumulation and judicious selection of the treasures of other minds than to the collection furnished by his own. Yet there is still a boundless field for the beneficent and happy exercise of a well-disciplined historic imagination, of well-trained linguistic skill, and of an acute and penetrating exegesis, whose clear and profound insight into the depths of sacred thought and feeling shall be guarded by caution and reverence, following spiritual instincts that are finer and truer than mere intellectual judgments.

Dr. Binnie's admirable work is not exegetical in its character; its aim being to discuss, in a popular style, matters introductory to the study of the Psalms. It is divided into three Books: the first treating of the history and poetical structure of the Psalter; the second of its theology; and the third of its use in the church. We agree with the statement of the author, in his preface, that there is room for a work of this kind; and we think that his book just supplies the need. It is true that a large portion of the information he gives may be gathered by a diligent comparison of other works; but in none of them would it be found so clearly and forcibly presented. "Introductions" or "Treatises" appended to commentaries must of necessity be so formal and condensed as to render them unsuited for popular reading. This remark applies with special emphasis to German commentaries. The transparency of Dr. Binnie's style allows a clear light to fall upon everything he holds up to view, and even the most unlearned will follow him with satisfaction and appreciation.

The part of Dr. Binnie's work which is of the greatest value is the Second Book, devoted to the Theology of the Psalms. The importance of this subject cannot be overestimated. It awaits an exhaustive and original treatment, in a work devoted to it exclusively. In the commentaries it has received by far the ablest elucidation from Hengstenberg.

Besides being treated in the other great German commentaries, it has formed the subject of a few separate works, such as that of Professor Kurtz of Dorpat,¹ which relates almost exclusively to the Messianic Psalms; and that of Professor Koenig,² of the Roman Catholic University of Freiburg. The latter work leans chiefly upon Hengstenberg; and while giving much useful information on minor points, seems to be lacking in independent generalization. Dr. Binnie treats upon topics not treated by other writers, as in the section devoted to Social Religion in the Psalms. We give a somewhat lengthy account of this work, because we think it deserves to be known far and wide throughout the church.

It is gratifying to find in Dr. Binnie's book a recognition of the true place of Hengstenberg in the history of the interpretation of the Psalms. His exposition is regarded as "forming an epoch in the reverent and erudite study of the Psalms." In defending the "much decried name of Hengstenberg," we do more than endeavor to uphold a mere personal reputation. Such defence implies an adherence to certain principles of interpretation as applied to the Psalter. The adoption of these principles has not quite as much practical significance for us as for the people of Germany; but their application has resulted indirectly in incalculable good to the world. English students of the Psalms had not been compelled to contend against that rationalizing process, which, it is not too much to say, would strangle the life out of those sacred poems, by eliminating from them the foreshadowed presence of the Messiah. They were, by virtue of this immunity, not brought into such close contact with those vital questions that are involved in the subject of Old Testament Psalmody. Their conceptions of the teachings of the Psalter were, in consequence, unintelligent and vague on many important points. The labors, therefore, of that greatest of exegetical apologists, who opened up the way to the more exact and profound understanding of the reflections of the saints of old which are there embalmed, must be of unspeakable value to all to

¹ Zur Theologie der Psalmen.
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² Theologie der Psalmen.

whom that precious treasure has come. To appreciate at all the present state of the exposition of the Psalms, it will be necessary to indicate the position which this writer occupied, and the nature of his extended influence.

When the Commentary¹ of Hengstenberg appeared, the field was occupied by a class of writers who followed a system of interpretation that refused to see anything in the Psalms but the reflections of gifted spirits, who did not rise at all above the results of their own personal experience, and that of their nation, as gathered from tradition and the national records. It was thus a thing impossible to those critics that the Psalmists could give utterance to truths which could find no realization in their own age. They refused to acknowledge that the feelings and aspirations of the sacred writers were part of a great system of revealed truth, of which one part could be regarded as the complement or the fulfilment of another. Such a system was to them a thing inconceivable. Their theory was, that whenever by grammatical criticism the plain sense of any passage or Psalm was determined, then its allusions must invariably be sought in the relations of the poet to the present and past history of his nation, and that no light could be thrown upon them by disclosures of the future, which must have been to him, as it is to us, undiscovered and unrevealed. This "grammatico-historical" method of interpretation was coupled with a contempt for all traditional opinion and sentiment, especially as bearing upon the authorship of the Psalms, and the periods of their composition. It was applied to the exposition of the Psalter by a series of writers, most of whom were distinguished by their learning and literary taste. Foremost among these stood De Wette,² the most original of all commentators upon the Psalms that had appeared since Calvin, and the first who treated the subject with grammatical strictness and accuracy, in which direction he was impelled by the powerful influence of

¹ *Commentar über die Psalmen*. Berlin, 1842-1847; 2d ed., 1849-1852.

² His Commentary was first published in 1811; a fifth edition in 1856, by Gustav Baur.

Gesenius that was being exerted in every department of Hebrew philology. In his conception of the spirit of Hebrew Psalmody, he was greatly influenced by Herder, who had excited much interest in the study of the Psalms as poetical compositions, by pointing out their manifold literary beauties, and had, at the same time, emphasized their historical significance by dwelling upon the patriotic fervor and devotion that breathes through them. De Wette, accordingly, treated the Psalter as a collection of beautiful and inspiring national poetry. But the people of Israel were to him the Hebrew monarchy, not a theocracy, and the divine government and controlling influence were as much as possible ignored. Hence, while he introduced a new era in the literary and historical, as well as grammatical, criticism of the Psalter, he failed to unfold its full spiritual meaning, and its relations to the rest of revelation. Yet the exegetical accuracy and taste of his Commentary extended and perpetuated a commanding influence far beyond the circle of those who sympathized with its theological spirit.

With regard to the important question of the authorship of the Psalms, the results of De Wette's criticism were entirely negative, as he rejected the received opinions, and substituted none in their place. Hitzig,¹ the next great expositor of this school, tried to show that only fourteen of the Psalms were written by David, and that most of them belonged to the Maccabean period. His exposition is based upon the same historical, anti-dogmatic, system as was that of De Wette, and is marked by equal originality, combined with great critical and exegetical acuteness. He was soon followed by Ewald, whose penetrating and almost intuitive genius is not less conspicuous in his treatment of the Old Testament poets than in the various other subjects to which it has been applied. His Commentary,² with its magnificent general introduction, and its analyses of the several Psalms, which describe so

¹ Die Psalmen übersetzt und ausgelegt, 1835, 1836. New and enlarged edition, 1863-1866.

² Die Dichter des alten Bundes. 1st ed., 1839, 1840; 3d ed., 1866.

discriminatingly, in every case, the conflicts and yearnings of the poet's heart, is marked by the rejection of all higher and true inspiration, as decided as his utter and undisguised contempt for the achievements of all other investigators.

The influence of such weighty critics as these had to be met by a force of learning and science equal to theirs, moved by unshaken faith in the word of God, and ardent love of the truth it reveals. Such force was wielded by Hengstenberg. In two respects must the right interpreter of the Psalter advance upon the rationalists. Still occupying their standpoint, he must seize upon two others; he must not regard the sacred poets simply as the inheritors of grand but vague anticipations of Israel's future greatness, and the rapt seers of coming national glory, which gradually assumed more definite form under the workings of their fervent spirit. He must also interpret the Old Testament songs as expressing a religious life, which did not rest merely upon the promises and threatenings of the law, but had a deeper foundation in the desire for the blessings of pardon and justification, as a preparation in the heart of the true Israel for the advent of a Redeemer. And, further, he must complete his view by endeavoring to determine the true position which the Psalter and its several songs, and even their individual expressions, hold in divine revelation; discerning the continuity of each line of development, and the identity of each central doctrine under its varying exhibitions. It was the merit of Hengstenberg to contribute more largely than any other expositor of this century to such a vindication of the Old Testament and of the Psalms. Umbreit¹ and Stier,² in their treatment of certain Psalms selected for the purpose, had made an attempt, praiseworthy and valuable as far as it went, to promote the same end. But Hengstenberg, peculiarly fitted and prepared for his task by the constitution of his mind and his earlier studies, undertook a more thorough and exhaustive investigation. While subjecting the grammatical forms to a severe

¹ *Christliche Erbauung aus den Psalmen*, 1835.

² *Siebzig ausgewählte Psalmen*, 1834-1836.

scrutiny, and aiming to fix the true historical position of the several Psalms, his Commentary is specially distinguished from all that had preceded it, by the efforts made in it, both by exegetical proof and systematic discussion, to show the presence of the Messianic element in its higher sense; to establish the fact that the religious life under the law, while drawing upon no fresh revelations of divine truth, had yet one side presented to the future redemption, preserving at the same time the Old Testament relations, by showing that the outflow of religious feeling rested upon, and was prompted by, the abiding presence of the law in the heart. In this last subject — the relation of the law to the religious life of the true Israel, as exhibited in the Psalms — his Commentary is altogether unrivalled.

Hupfeld¹ has analyzed the grammatical forms in the Psalms more fully and minutely, and perhaps, on the whole, more successfully, than any other commentator. But the student needs, even with him, to be on his guard in following the discussion of points of verbal criticism, the conclusions he presents often failing to justify the authoritative manner in which they are announced. His conjectural emendations of the text, also, frequently do not even mend the sense. He displays an unworthy and most bitter opposition to Hengstenberg in all departments of investigation, but is especially at variance with the "theological" spirit manifested by the latter. With regard to the Messianic Psalms, he advances beyond the grammatico-historical school already noticed, recognizing, as he does, the organic unity between the various parts of revelation, which is pervaded throughout by the Divine Spirit, who controls history, organizes its elements, and "develops in the New Testament the germs that he concealed in the Old." But this "organic" system of interpretation becomes very limited in its results, for, according to it, the Messianic references are always "general and ideal,"

¹ Die Psalmen, übersetzt und ausgelegt von Dr. Hermann Hupfeld. 1ste Auflage, 1855-1862. 2te Auflage, nach dem Tode des Verfassers herausgegeben von Dr. Eduard Riehm, 1867-1871.

never referring to particular circumstances in the life of Christ, or to special functions of his mediatorial office. Those who have bestowed loving meditation, with profound study, upon Ps. xxii., lxix., or cx, will find very little satisfaction in such a jejune theory as this, which virtually excludes the living and suffering Messiah from the place in the Old Testament dearest to the Christian heart.

The Messianic Psalms have, we think, been best treated by Delitzsch.¹ His classification of them (which is adopted substantially by Dr. Binnie) is exhaustive, and shows a deep insight into the typical and prophetic aspects of the Psalter. In this respect his Commentary may be regarded as an improvement upon that of Hengstenberg. The latter had himself modified, with regard to some of the most important of the Psalms, the views which he had previously maintained in his Christology; but the change was not frequently, as we think, for the better. At all events his two works should always be studied together in the investigation of this most interesting and ever-fruitful subject. With regard to the general features of the Commentary of Professor Delitzsch, we have to speak in terms of enthusiastic praise. As regards its style, it is probably the most readable of all the German expositions. It is marked by great beauty and force of expression; and the critical and exegetical remarks are as condensed and, at the same time, as clear as could be thought possible. The course of thought in each Psalm, is admirably traced through the several strophes and verses, and exhibited with a wonderful degree of penetration into the heart and soul of the poet. His insight into the spiritual meaning of scripture, which is perhaps the highest endowment of his gifted mind, shines conspicuously in his treatment of the Psalter. And a devotional spirit breathing through his Commentary, as it does through that of Hengstenberg, and which has earned for him an unmerited sarcasm from Hupfeld, seems to confer upon it

¹ *Biblischer Commentar über die Psalmen*, 1859, 1860. *Neue Ausarbeitung*, 1867. Prof. Delitzsch had already done good service in the same direction by his *Symbolæ Isagogicæ ad Psalmos illustrandos*, 1846.

many of the advantages of a practical treatise. In his version he attempts to follow closely the rhythm of the original, as he has also done in his Commentary on the Book of Job. In this the plasticity of the German language enables him to succeed better than might be expected; but it is perhaps, on the whole, to be regretted that he has allowed himself to exercise his ingenuity upon this plan, for it is inevitable that the renderings should often lose greatly in force and naturalness and simplicity, under the exigencies of such a peculiar method of translation.

The aim of Dr. Moll,¹ who has prepared for Lange's *Bibelwerk* the most important and valuable of the more recent German expositions, is to represent, comprehensively and concisely, the results of the modern exegesis of the Psalter. Without possessing the grasp of Old Testament principles that characterized Hengstenberg, or the critical acuteness and suggestiveness of Hitzig, or the philological tastes of Hupfeld, or the poetical insight and manifold erudition of Delitzsch, he has yet perhaps the very best qualifications for the task he has undertaken — the execution of a historical and representative commentary, containing results rather than discussions — a book for the Bible-class and the family, as well as a thesaurus for the student. He is extremely cautious, reverent, and judicious; his choice among the various opinions which he holds up to survey in their historic or genetic order being usually almost instinctively safe. But perhaps the most distinctively valuable feature of his exposition is his original and sagacious unfolding of the doctrinal and moral teachings of the Psalter — discerning, as he does, the individuality and true place and value of each Psalm, and thus furnishing various instruction and edification where a superficial interpreter would inevitably indulge in monotonous repetition. In this department he supplies a long and deeply felt want, and merits the thanks of every earnest student of the Psalms. His work has many inter-

¹ *Der Psalter, theologisch-homiletisch bearbeitet, von Dr. Carl Bernhard Moll, 1869, 1871.*

esting points of resemblance to that of Perowne, especially in their exegetical methods and principles and their appreciation of the true course and tendencies of modern exposition. With much that they have in common, there is a striking difference in one respect, in which they may be regarded as mutually supplementary. Mr. Perowne, as we have already remarked, is specially at home in portraying the inward feelings of the sacred poets; while Dr. Moll is equally eminent and successful in unfolding the objective truths of divine revelation which underlie the form and the spirit, the reflections and the emotions, of their productions.

Before closing this hasty and imperfect survey of the attempts which have been made in recent years to bring to light the treasures of this inexhaustible storehouse of truth and consolation, it is surely not out of place to express a regret that so little, comparatively, has been done in this country to further the great enterprise. The force of such a reproach cannot be weakened by urging that the practical teachings of the Psalter have not been neglected, and that this, after all, realizes the purpose for which it was given to mankind. For the practical exposition rests directly upon the critical and exegetical treatment, and is affected by the decline or progress of the latter. It is not to be doubted that many a precious gem of truth lies unperceived and unsuspected very near the surface of the familiar ground over which the faithful student of the Psalms moves so constantly and lovingly. Many a valuable lesson is also to be learned from the attentive consideration of the exact circumstances and mental posture of the Psalmists when their hearts were made to overflow with thanks and praise, or when "rivers of water ran down their eyes"; when transient doubt of God's providential care assailed and bruised their souls, or when a presage of immortal glory thrilled their fainting and failing flesh and heart from the invincible assurance that he was their everlasting Portion and Helper. But it is the province of the critic and the exegete to investigate each word, each phrase, each passage, each Psalm, independently and in their mutual

relations, and in their relations to the rest of God's word. Such study and comparison must always be unfinished, as the depths they would sound and the heights they would scale are infinite. The results which they achieve they hand over to the practical expositor, the preacher, and the great multitude of those to whom the Psalms are a treasure and delight. As a proof of the correctness of the position here assumed, it should be mentioned that Germany is now producing more practical works upon the Psalter—called forth, in large measure, by its scientific and critical treatment—than all other countries combined.

Another result of such study must be regarded whose achievement is an object worthy of untiring pursuit. An enlarged and more profound understanding of the Psalms among our people would certainly be followed by their wider and more frequent use in the service of praise. In this part of our worship they must always hold some place. The Christian heart has found in the Psalter a sanctuary and a resting-place. It would, as moved by the Spirit, employ the words there found to express its sorrows and to sound forth its joys. And, as Dr. Tayler Lewis has said, "there must be something unsound in that religion that would prefer a popular hymn to an ancient Psalm." We believe that the present wide-spread neglect of the Psalter in public and private praise, though in some measure the result of a depraved taste, is also largely due to the want of an intelligent appreciation of these sacred songs as regards the place they hold in revelation, and the conditions under which they were composed, as these are connected with their inner and divine disclosures. Let knowledge of all that relates to the Psalms be widely diffused, and not only will the imagination and reason of growing multitudes be satisfied as they sing the songs of Zion, but their hearts also will be strengthened and cheered.