

*THE VINDICTIVE PSALMS VINDICATED.*

PART V.

IN an earlier paper <sup>1</sup> upon this subject we saw that, in order to vindicate thoroughly the so-called Vindictive Psalms, the following positions must be firmly established : (1) That it was lawful and proper for the writers of these Psalms to desire and pray for the temporal punishment of the wicked. (2) That the writers of these Psalms only predict and pray for the punishment of the *wicked*, not that of merely private enemies. (3) That they only predict and pray for the *just* and *proportionate* punishment of the wicked. And (4) that they pray for such punishments, not, so far as we can judge, in a spirit of malevolence or revenge, but rather in a spirit of zeal for the glory of God, desire for the vindication of right, and regard for the peace and purity of society.

And towards the proof of these propositions the following progress has been made : We have seen (1) that the Psalmists were abundantly justified in seeking, and making supplication for, the punishment of the wicked. They were justified by the principles of the Dispensation under which they lived, which was a temporal law with temporal sanctions ; justified by the provision God had made for exacting such punishments ; justified by the precedents which the history of their own race afforded them ; and, above all, justified by the ratification and approval vouchsafed to such prayers elsewhere in Holy Scripture. (2) That, in considering whether the Psalmists only pray for the *just* and *proportionate* punish-

<sup>1</sup> THE EXPOSITOR, vol. iii. pp. 103-105.

ment of the wicked, it is to be borne in mind that the punishments denounced by the Mosaic law, as well as those dealt out on special occasions by God Himself, were sometimes proportioned, not to the precise amount of moral guilt incurred, but (like some of the penalties of our own law) to the exigencies of the time and the peculiar circumstances of the case ; that is to say, they were sometimes exceptionally severe, not because the sin itself merited (as we should say) any such severity, but that they might be *exemplary*—might serve as a conspicuous warning to the nation and to the world. It will not occasion us any surprise, therefore, should we find that the Psalmists sometimes pray for such punishments as these ; punishments, that is to say, which, relatively to the offence committed, were excessive, but which were not excessive relatively to the object aimed at.

It only remains for us therefore, in order to complete our line of proof, to shew that both the Imprecations and Comminations of the Psalter satisfy the conditions just laid down. We have to prove, that is to say, by actual examination (1) that the denunciations of the Psalmists are in every case directed against the wicked ; (2) that the punishments denounced, all things considered, are not disproportionate ; and (3) that the spirit of the writers, so far as we can discover it, is not one of malevolence, but of charity, and piety, and disinterestedness.

Now, to establish these three positions thoroughly, it would be necessary, strictly speaking, to consider every single passage accused, or savouring, of vindictiveness. But it is obvious that any such

exhaustive and detailed examination would soon become formal, mechanical, and wearisome; and it will be sufficient, for all practical purposes, if we confine our inquiry to a few crucial instances:—to the Psalms popularly known as Vindictive; that is to say, to Psalms vii. xxxv. lv. lviii. lix. lxix. and cxxxvii. Psalm cix.—*the* Imprecatory Psalm—appears to be *suu generis*, and has been considered already.<sup>1</sup>

But, before we embark on this inquiry, it may be opportune to remark that if we did find in these or any Psalms traces of malice and vindictiveness, such traces would be in distinct contravention of the teachings of the Mosaic law; they would be in absolute antagonism to the precepts of the very Revelation of which they form a part. For that same law, which, as we have seen, required the pious Jew, as a part of his duty, to pray for the temporal punishment of the wicked, also forbade him, with equal clearness, to cherish a revengeful spirit. It cannot be too thoroughly understood that vindictiveness of every kind is as alien to the spirit of the First Dispensation as to that of the Second. In proof of which it will be sufficient simply to recite the following provisions: “Thou shalt not avenge nor bear any grudge against the children of thy people, but thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself” (Levit. xix. 18); “If thou meet thine enemy’s ox or his ass going astray, thou shalt surely bring it back to him again. If thou see the ass of him that hateth thee lying under his burden, and wouldst forbear to help him, thou shalt surely help with him” (Exod. xxiii.

<sup>1</sup> THE EXPOSITOR, vol. ii. pp. 325-360.

4, 5); and, lastly, "Rejoice not when thine enemy falleth, and let not thine heart be glad when he stumbleth, lest the Lord see it, and it displease him" (Prov. xxiv. 17, 18).<sup>1</sup> So clear indeed is the earlier revelation on this point, that St. Paul, when proclaiming the duties of charity and forgiveness, could find no better words to serve his purpose than that Old Testament precept, "If thine enemy be hungry, give him bread to eat, and if he be thirsty, give him water to drink," &c. (Prov. xxv. 21, quoted in Romans xii. 20). It is manifest, therefore, that if the Psalmists were vindictive, they were so in opposition to the religion which they professed, and in the teeth of its express commandments (with which they must have been acquainted) to the contrary: the obvious conclusion from which is, that nothing but the most convincing proofs will justify us in putting a vindictive construction on their words. Let us now see whether such proofs are forthcoming.

#### PSALM VII.

Is usually accounted the first of the Imprecatory Psalms, though its tone is rather comminatory than imprecatory. Indeed, it contains but one imprecation, that of the sixth verse, "Arise, O Lord, in thine anger: lift up thyself because of the rage of mine enemies." Comminations are found in verses 11-17, and imprecations upon the writer himself (under certain contingencies) in verse 5. It will need but a brief notice.

Let us begin by remarking that the Psalm is

<sup>1</sup> See also Job xxx. 29, 30, where malevolence is clearly recognized as a sin.

universally allowed to be Davidic, even by Ewald, who sees in the inscription "an old and safe tradition." Nor is its authorship (as might at first sight appear to be the case) a question of no importance, inasmuch as if it be indisputably "a psalm of David," then we have in this fact—until it shall be rebutted by direct testimony—a strong presumption that it is not vindictive; for we have every evidence, and it is allowed on all hands, that "David in his personal transactions was singularly free from vindictiveness."<sup>1</sup> In "Cush the Benjamite" some writers have seen an enigmatical name for Saul (because of the blackness of his heart), others (*e.g.* Luther, Kay) a nickname for Shimei, who is spoken of as "the Benjamite" in 2 Sam. xvi. 11. Probably all that can be positively affirmed respecting the title is that it points to some adherent of Saul (the Benjamite king), who had maligned and plotted against David. I cannot help thinking, however, that we may safely connect the composition of this Psalm with the circumstances narrated in 1 Sam. xxiv. (or possibly 1 Sam. xxvi.), as the points of contact between the Poem and the History—some of which I have indicated at the foot of the next page<sup>¶</sup>—are, as it appears to me, too numerous to be the result of accident. And if so, we see more clearly what was the provocation which the Psalmist had received and how utterly nefarious were the plots of which he here complains. But whatever were the precise circumstances which called forth this Psalm, and whoever this Cush may have been, he was certainly an enemy of right, a violator of the eternal laws of God, as well as an

<sup>1</sup> Kay, Appendix on the Imprecatory Psalms.

enemy of David. For, in the first place, he had sought David's life<sup>1</sup> (verse 2), the life of an innocent man (verse 3), who had himself spared the life of his bitterest enemy (verse 4). More than this, he was a man who "travailed with iniquity, conceived mischief, gave birth to falsehood" (verse 14), and a man who digged pits for the innocent (verse 15).

<sup>1</sup> The designs of David's enemies upon his *life* are in some cases missed by the casual reader, owing to the fact that the Authorized Version generally translates שׁוּׁלָא, as in Psa. vii. 2, by "soul," whereas "life" would in this and many passages more accurately represent the idea of the Original. (See Gesenius, "Thesaurus," *sub. voc.*)

¶ For points of contact between the Poem and the History, referred to on page preceding, compare,—

PSALM.	HISTORY.
"Shiggaion" * (title) with	"I have <i>erred</i> " (same root as Shiggaion, and an uncommon word). 1 Sam. xxvi. 21.
"Concerning the <i>words</i> of Cush" ( <i>ib.</i> ), with	"Wherefore hearest thou men's <i>words</i> , saying, David seeketh thy hurt." (1 Sam. xxiv. 9.)
"Lest he tear my soul" (verse 2).	"Thou huntest my soul to take it" ( <i>ib.</i> verse 11).
"If there be iniquity in my hands" (verse 3).	"There is neither evil nor transgression in mine hand" ( <i>ib.</i> ).
"I have delivered . . . mine enemy" (verse 4).	1 Sam. xxiv. 18, and xxvi. 9.
"Let the wickedness of the wicked," &c. (verse 9).	"Wickedness proceedeth from the wicked" ( <i>ib.</i> xxiv. 13).
"Judge me, O Lord" (verse 8).	"The Lord therefore be judge, and judge between me and thee" (verse 15).
"If I have rewarded evil," &c. (verse 4).	"I have rewarded [same word] thee evil" (verse 17).

\* This term is generally understood to indicate a peculiarity either of construction (disregard of metre or dithyrambic) or of sentiment (passionate or elegiac). But may not the word, like Al-taschith (Pss. lvii.-lix. &c. ; cf. 1. Sam. xxvi. 9.), be a reminiscence of some incident in David's life?

The denunciations, then, whatever they may be, are directed, in this case at least, against a flagrant evildoer, against an enemy of God, and thus the first condition is found to be satisfied.

But what is it, let us now ask, that David prays for? What does he desire for the man who was deliberately and treacherously plotting against his life? He simply prays God to "arise,"<sup>1</sup> to "awake" (verse 6), to manifest Himself as a righteous judge, to display the anger which He cherishes against the wicked (verse 11).<sup>2</sup> And what does he predict? He predicts that the just Judge will sharpen his sword,<sup>3</sup> and prepare the weapons of death; nay, he is persuaded that this iniquity will effect its own punishment. By a righteous retribution, by a strict *re-taliation*, the persecutor shall fall into his own pit, and "his violent dealing shall come down upon his own pate" (verse 16). Neither in prayer nor in prediction, therefore, is there any disproportion observable between the crime and the punishment. The Psalmist does but echo comminations which the mouth of the Lord had spoken. He has an abundant warrant for his words in the threatenings

<sup>1</sup> Commentators are agreed in seeing in these words, which also occur in Pss. iii. 7; ix. 19; x. 12, &c., a reference to the formula of Numb. x. 35, "Rise up, Lord, and let thine enemies be scattered," &c. In any case, it is noteworthy that the daily orison of the Pilgrim Fathers of Israel afforded a precedent to after ages for praying for the dispersion and confusion of the wicked.

<sup>2</sup> Verse 11 should be rendered, "God is a righteous judge, and a God who is furious [*vehementer iratus est.*—Gesenius, *in loc.*] every day." מַעַיִם strictly signifies to "foam with rage," and is related, etymologically, to the English words "scum" and "foam."

<sup>3</sup> Ewald understands verses 12, 13, of Cush: "Der Feind werde seine Treulosigkeit erneuen." If this interpretation is correct, there are no comminations in the Psalm.

pronounced by God Himself ("I will spend mine arrows upon them;" "I will make mine arrows drunk with blood, and my sword shall devour flesh," Deut. xxxii. 23, 42, &c.), and in the fundamental axiom of the Jewish law, "Life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth." For such a miscreant as this black-hearted Benjamite had shewn himself to be, the punishment here foretold is but the "just recompense of reward."

But it still remains for us to ask, What was the source and spring of these denunciations? Was it vindictiveness, or was it righteous zeal? Does the man who here testifies that he has "delivered him that without cause was his enemy," nevertheless nurse all the while the malevolent desire for that (or another) enemy's death? Is it the yearning for revenge which inspires his prayer? Not so. It is, first of all, the instinct of self-preservation. His own safety demands the interference of God (verse 2). It is also a desire for justice. God has "commanded judgment" (verse 6, true rendering); then let Him "judge the people," yes, and judge *him* according to his deserts (verse 8), and his cruel persecutor (verse 11; cf. 1 Sam. xxiv. 15). It is, furthermore, a desire for the repression of crime and the encouragement of right. He would have "the wickedness of the wicked" checked and brought to an end (verse 9). And, finally, it is a desire for the glory of God. The righteous judgments of God, displayed upon his enemies, will constitute a fresh ground for thankfulness and praise (verse 17).

Is it possible, in the face of these testimonies, to charge this Psalm with vindictiveness? Or, rather, could its vindication be more complete?



## PSALM XXXV.

The imprecations of this Psalm are found in verses 4-8, and in verse 26. The writer (who cannot be identified positively) prays that his persecutors may be checked and confounded (verse 4), scattered (verse 5); may in their turn be pursued (verse 6), ensnared (verse 8), and suddenly destroyed (*ibid.*). Is there malice or vindictiveness here? Or are our three conditions satisfied?

1. That these persecutors are evildoers is evident. They "seek his life" (verse 4),<sup>1</sup> devise his hurt (*ibid.*), lay snares for him (verse 7), and that without cause (verses 7, 19). They are spoilers (verse 10), wrongful witnesses (*μάρτυρες ἄδικοι*, LXX., verse 11), men who reward evil for good (verse 12), ingrates (verse 14), parasites (verse 16; literally, "profane jesters<sup>2</sup> over cakes"), plotters against the peace of society (verse 20); and, finally, they are men made confident by the silence of God (verse 22) of accomplishing their murderous designs (verse 25).

It is clear, therefore, that the enemies contemplated in this Psalm were thoroughly corrupt and wicked, and that it was neither for the good of society nor the glory of God that they should go unpunished. Let us now consider what punishments the Psalmist denounces against them.

Having represented them as "fighting" against him, he prays that they may be defeated in battle,

<sup>1</sup> The very words used of Saul by David, 1 Sam. xx. 1.—Kay.

<sup>2</sup> "Currying favour by profane or licentious jests, and rewarded by a share of their patrons' dainties."—Canon Cook. Perowne aptly cites the words *ψωμοκόλακες* and *buccellarii*. I venture to suggest "sycophants"—literally "fig-informers" (*σῦκον-φαίνω*)—as being the nearest English equivalent.

may be dispersed by the power of God (verses 5, 6), may be put to flight and stumble as they flee (ibid.). The writer pictures to himself the God of battles as interfering on his behalf. He would fain see his foes "scattered in a confused rout, utterly unresisting, like the light chaff in the windy winnowing field," while "the Angel of the Lord, the defender of the pious, strikes each in his turn with his strong arm and throws him down."<sup>1</sup> Now in all this we have simply a prayer for the discomfiture of wicked and malignant enemies, a prayer strictly parallel, for example, with some of the aspirations which we think it no sin to utter in our National Anthem. Nor can we chide the Psalmist for praying that those who were confederate against him might be scattered like chaff, when we remember how the piety of our forefathers, after a great deliverance, found expression in the words, "*Afflavit Deus et dissipantur.*" And in the words which follow in verse 8—where a different idea is introduced—we have a prayer for strict "*retaliation,*" and no more. They had spread, or some one of them had, a net for the Psalmist: it would be a just and appropriate punishment did that net "catch himself." They had plotted an unforeseen destruction, a destruction "which he knew not of" (as in the margin), against an innocent man, for, as we find from verse 7, "without cause they had hid for him a net, without cause they had digged a pit for his soul."<sup>2</sup> Justice required that destruction which they knew not of, whether by net or pit, should come upon them. But if, in addition

<sup>1</sup> Canon Cook, *in loc.*

<sup>2</sup> This rearrangement of the verse is generally accepted by critics.

to this, they fell into "that very destruction" which they had planned for another; if they were "hoist by their own petard," or, like Haman, in after ages, were hanged on their own gallows, then would the connection between the crime and the punishment be still more conspicuous and the righteousness of God be yet more completely vindicated. It is for this reason that the Psalmist prays as in verse 8. The imprecations he utters are grounded upon, and are in strict accordance with, that *lex talionis*<sup>1</sup> which was such a fundamental article of the Jewish Code.<sup>2</sup> Their burden is—snare for snare, pit for pit, sudden destruction for sudden destruction.

A few words must be added as to the third condition—the *animus* of the writer. What was it prompted these imprecations? It was, first, the instinct of self-preservation, the desire to live (verses 3, 9, 17). If he is not to fall a victim to the craft and assaults of wicked men, then God must awake and deliver him by casting them down and destroying them. It was also the yearning for right, for justice; the longing that malice and wickedness might not triumph, and the conviction that they would triumph unless God arose to judgment (verses 10, 19, 24-26). It was, lastly, zeal for the glory of God; the desire that God should be magnified by the confusion of his enemies and the prosperity of his servants (verses 9, 10, 18, 27, 28). We see these motives conspicuous on the face of the Psalm, and we find not a word to indicate

<sup>1</sup> I find the *lex talionis* recognized in some ten or eleven Psalms, e.g. vii. 15; ix. 15, 16; xxxvii. 15; lvii. 6; xciv. 23; cxli. 10.

<sup>2</sup> See THE EXPOSITOR, vol. iii. pp. 115, 116.

vindictiveness, to shew that the writer desired the punishment of his enemies, in order to gloat over their pain. And, these things being so, we affirm that this Psalm, like the seventh, stands acquitted of the charge of malevolence.

PSALM LV.

The imprecations of this Psalm, or those at least which are found in verse 15, "Let death surprise them, let them go down alive into Sheol," go beyond anything which has so far come before us. It is very necessary to ask, Can such words as these be justified?

The first point to be considered is, as before, that whatever these imprecations portend, they are aimed at wicked and treacherous and blood-thirsty men. This is distinctly stated in the words which follow the curse we have just cited: "*For* wickedness is in their dwelling—in their midst." And it is conspicuous all through the Psalm. It is the oppression and hatred of the wicked (verse 3) which have wrung from the writer this agonized cry to God. They have accused him wrongfully: they have heaped iniquity upon him (*ibid.*). So fierce is their hatred, that he is in terror of his life<sup>1</sup> (verse 4). They are men of violence and strife (verse 9); of deceit and guile (verse 11); are unresting in their schemes of iniquity (verse 10); are false and treacherous. One who has been his bosom friend (verse 14) has nevertheless plotted against and betrayed him (verse 20); and they are all of them men of deceit and blood; men who have shed blood, or who long

<sup>1</sup> The terrors of death are not to be interpreted as "deadly terrors." They are the terrors which the prospect of death inspired.

to shed his (verse 23). In fact, so full-blown is the impiety of these red-handed conspirators that it seems to have suggested to the writer's mind the thought of the builders of Babel,—men who plotted even against high Heaven,—and it recalled the memory of Korah and his company.<sup>1</sup> Such are the miscreants against whose malice he prays for protection and for whose treachery he desires a just retribution.

But is it a *just* retribution? Is it just that they should be "swallowed up"—that death should steal a march upon them, and take them "full of bread, with all their crimes broad blown, as flush as May"? Is it just that they should "go down alive into Hades"? Certainly it is *by Jewish law*, which was the law of equivalents. The doom he desires for them is none other than the death they have plotted for him. They had compassed his destruction: had sought to swallow him up. He simply prays, according to the precepts in which he had been nurtured, that with the measure which they have meted to him it may be measured to them again. Moreover, he had a precedent for his prayer. These enemies,

<sup>1</sup> That this Psalm contains references to the example and fate of Korah seems to me indisputable. For we have in verse 9 the prayer, "Swallow them up" (שָׁלַט; Authorized Version, "Destroy"), which is the same word as in Numb. xvi. 32, "The earth *swallowed them up*," and as in verse 34, "Lest the earth *swallow us up* also;" while in verse 15, "Let them go down alive into Sheol," is surely a reminiscence of Numb. xvi. 33, "They went down alive into Sheol." And in the petition, "Divide their tongues," we may legitimately see a reference to the Confusion of Tongues. (Cf. Gen. x. 25, *Heb.*, with שָׁבַט, "Divide.") It may perhaps be objected that this interpretation ascribes to the writer a complete confusion of thought, making him pray, first, for a total destruction of his enemies, and then for a frustration of their counsels. The answer to this is, that such confusion of ideas would only be another indication of the excitement and intensity of feeling which characterize the entire Psalm, and which have occasioned the abrupt transitions of verses 12, 15, 20.

in his belief, were as guilty as Korah and his company. He merely desires for them the fate of Korah. He would not have them "die like the death of every man" (Numb. xvi. 29, *Heb.*), or be visited after the visitation of all men, lest others should be encouraged in crime. It was because they had had no changes, no vicissitudes, no manifestations of the finger of God in their career (verse 19),<sup>1</sup> that they had disregarded or defied the Almighty. If, after all, they died in their nest, if they "came to the grave in a full age, like as a shock of corn is carried in in its season;" if "length of days," the prime recompense of *virtue*, was granted them, then what could their contemporaries conclude from their lives but that Justice had a halting foot? nay, rather, that there was no reward for the wicked, no God even that judgeth in the earth? Consequently the satisfaction of justice, the repression of lawlessness, the peace of society, the personal safety of the writer, and, above all, the glory and honour of God, all demanded that these open and notorious sinners should be openly and speedily checked in their career and be made an example to their age. And how could this better be than by God's dealing with them as He had already dealt with sinners of the same stamp,—by bringing them down alive to the pit of destruction? For the petition of verse 15, therefore, and for the corresponding prediction in verse 23, we may find ample justification in the annals of the Hebrew people.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The meaning of this verse is much disputed. This interpretation seems as satisfactory as any which has been suggested.

<sup>2</sup> For a general defence of this and similar prayers see THE EXPOSITOR, vol. iii. pp. 196-200.

But as to the spirit of the prayer, was it not, after all, justify it as we may, an outburst of vindictiveness? I fail to find a syllable which affords the least warrant for any such charge. Doubtless it is the cry of one deeply and cruelly wounded; doubtless a feeling of resentment may have struggled for expression in the writer's mind; but unless we insist on putting upon his words a construction which he disclaims, and which probability also rejects, this is not the language of mere resentment. I say the writer disclaims, practically, the idea that he is actuated by resentment. For he assigns a reason, *the* reason, for his imprecations, and that reason is *their* wickedness and villany (verses 9, 10, 15). And I say, too, that probability rejects a malevolent interpretation of his words. For the question really is, whether the Psalmist has offered vindictive prayers to a Being who has distinctly and repeatedly condemned vindictiveness; whether the Psalm, that is to say, exhibits the egregious inconsistency of appeals deliberately made to God in a way which the writer must have known all the while would be distasteful to God. In favour of this most improbable conclusion nothing can be alleged, and against it is the fact that the Psalm is characterized throughout by the calm assurance that the author is only asking what is just and right; that he is praying in complete accordance with the Divine will and pleasure. (See verses 17, 19, 22, and compare the prayer of verse 15 with the persuasion expressed in verse 23.) I submit therefore, that it is much more difficult to believe that this Psalm *is* vindictive than to hold, as we do, that it is not.

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