

NOTES ON COMMENTARIES.

3—THE PROPHETS.

THE commentaries on *Isaiah* are far too numerous to be even so much as enumerated. Those who are familiar with German should not fail to consult Ewald's great work on the Prophets, though in this, as in all his works, he needs to be read with caution and with much allowance for his critical and sceptical infirmities. To merely English readers I would commend Mr. Cheyne's Translation and Notes on the Book of Isaiah (published by Macmillan); the incomplete exposition of Rowland Williams contained in his volumes on the Hebrew Prophets contemporary with the Assyrian Empire (published by Williams and Norgate); Delitzsch's Biblical Commentary on the Prophecies of Isaiah (published by T. and T. Clark); and, above all, Sir Edward Strachey's "Jewish History and Politics in the Times of Sargon and Sennacherib" (published by W. Isbister and Co.).

The two books which I have placed first on the list, like Ewald's greater work, need to be read with discretion. Mr. Cheyne's conceptions of the life and writings of Isaiah are, indeed, confessedly based to a large extent on those of the great German exegete; and in his handling of these sublime compositions, especially in his attempts to recast them on insufficient critical and chronological data, he betrays a good deal of the caprice and dogmatism for which Ewald was notorious. Nevertheless he is a good and accurate scholar, and may often be consulted with advantage. Rowland Williams impresses one

as rather a student of Hebrew than as a finished scholar, and the questioning and sceptical attitude of his intellectual nature often misleads him. But there was a certain freshness and originality in his mind which render his thoughts valuable, and at times he shews much insight into the truths which the Prophet was commissioned to announce. Delitzsch's work ranks far higher than either of these. It is indeed of the highest exegetical value. For a careful and scholarly exposition of Isaiah's language I know no commentary to compare with it.

And what is lacking in Delitzsch may be found in the admirable work of Sir Edward Strachey—to which, as it is less known than it deserves to be, I wish to call attention. I have worked with it for nearly twenty years, and can speak of it, therefore, with the emphasis of experience. Published originally, in 1860, by Kerslake of Bristol, it is now sent out in a much improved form by Messrs. Isbister and Co. of London. Nor is it improved in form only. Sir Edward has evidently had the book much in his thoughts during the years which have elapsed since he wrote it; and in the new edition he has not only revised, often recast, the whole text of the volume, but has also made considerable additions to it, and has even—a still harder task for an author—cut out or compressed many sentences and paragraphs. Still, even now, the work is substantially the same as it was sixteen years ago. Despite its new name, it is really what it was first called, “A Critical Commentary on the Prophecies of Isaiah, and their Fulfilment in History, with an Amended Version”—a very useful and admirable translation it is—“of the

Text." The features in this commentary which impressed me when I first read it, and which have grown upon my liking as I have used it, are these: Sir Edward Strachey has read and digested the best German commentaries on this Scripture. With all his respect and admiration for the great scholars of Germany, however, he has not permitted them to run away with him, to dominate his mind. He gives us what is best in them, but gives it to us strained through the calm good sense of an Englishman, refined by culture, but with a firm grip on the essential facts both of literature and of human life. He shews, moreover, a familiar acquaintance both with classical and modern literature, so that he can speak to cultivated Englishmen in their own language and tone. And, above all, he looks on the prophecies of Isaiah with the eyes of a practical politician and statesman, really believing that the men of that time were very like the men of the present day,—“fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same summer and winter,” actuated by the same motives, susceptible to the same influences, and living under the same retributive law; and that if he can only ascertain what the great moral principles were which Isaiah laid down, and which the subsequent events of history have demonstrated and confirmed, he will discover the principles by which the moral government of the world is still conducted, and on which both he and all men will do well to act. There is, I apprehend, at least to students of a secluded life, a singular charm in commentaries written by non-professional men who are conversant

with public affairs, and who, though sincerely religious men, discuss the phenomena of the Sacred Writings and Chronicles with the same freedom and in the same method that they would take to the study of any other history or literature. And this charm is very potent in Sir Edward Strachey's book.

Moreover, the book, though written in this tone and spirit, is written reverently, and—in the best sense of the word “orthodox”—reaches orthodox conclusions. Sir Edward, for example, will not for a moment give in to the theory that “Isaiah,” in its present form, is a comparatively late compilation from various authors. He not only argues the point as a question of authority, but as a question of literary art, and maintains that, as the separate prophecies, so also the entire Scripture, is a coherent and finished whole, which proves itself, by the subtle lines of sequence and connection that pervade every part of it, to be the product of a single hand. A few words may be cited as indicating his general conclusion on this point, and as an instance of his telling and animated style:—

“If we find indications that the whole Scripture, looked at as a whole, is more like the growth of an individual mind than a collection of writings of men who lived in times far apart from each other; if we can, as we proceed, trace the manner and method in which the Prophet's views opened out as he came in contact with, and sought for, the deepest springs of the circumstances and events of his own times, then the proportion and relation of particular parts to each other and to the whole will become an important element of the question, and those of

which the genuineness is disputed will be seen in a light, and with advantages, not available to us if we merely analyze each separately. The fact of such a vital coherence and interdependence will, I believe, become more and more apparent as we go on; we shall find a harmony, not resulting from mere mechanical compilation, but from the presence of one informing and enlivening spirit, and our reason no less than our religious feeling will resist the dismemberment of any part of the organized whole. And if so, we shall escape from the negative and the hypothetical, to the positive and the historical."

On *Jeremiah* and *Lamentations*, Dr. Nägelsbach (in Clark's translation of "Lange's Bible-Work") and Keil (also published by Clark) may be consulted with much advantage; but, as I have already said, the exposition of the Dean of Canterbury, in "The Speaker's Commentary," is by far the best popular exposition of the writings of this plaintive prophet with which I am acquainted.

Of *Ezekiel* and *Daniel* I have no exposition which at all contents me, though on the latter prophet Dr. Pusey has much that is good: and as for the *Minor Prophets*, their expositor is still more evidently to come.¹ Keil, indeed, is at his best here, and often throws light on obscure passages. But neither Keil nor any other commentator has set this wonderful series of poems in their proper historical framework in which, like opals kindled by adjacent brilliants, they would shed forth their subtle and many-hued lustre. For Joel, Habakkuk, Haggai, Zechariah, and

¹ I have not yet seen, however, the volume on the Minor Prophets just issued by the publisher of "The Speaker's Commentary."

Malachi I have myself attempted this service in the pages of "The Bible Educator," with very imperfect success. And I am not aware that any one else has so much as attempted it. May the Lord of the harvest soon send forth servants to reap this wealthy field, and to gather in its fruit for the nourishment of his Church.

I append extracts from two of the commentaries already named, both that I may give some little taste of their quality and because they touch on points of literary structure and usage in which Biblical students take no little interest. In his "Introduction" to the Book of Lamentations—a book of which the *alphabetical* construction is very marked—the Dean of Canterbury has the following sensible and valuable remarks :—

It has been sometimes objected to this method of arrangement that it is incompatible with real feeling. With equal truth it might be said that rhyme is inconsistent with real feeling. It is probable that to most Orientals the arrangement of words so as to end in similar sounds would seem trivial; the same objection has been brought by us in the West against their method of arranging their thoughts in alphabetical order. Really both methods depend upon the same law of our natures. It is a distraction and relief to the mind in sorrow to have some slight external difficulty to contend with, and the feeling diffused before in vague generalities is thus concentrated and assumes a definite form. What can seem at first sight more artificial than the lyrical poetry of the Greeks and Romans, in which, throughout the whole ode, the quantity of every syllable is fixed and line answers to line with unvarying exactness? Yet how naturally do all the deeper emotions of the mind yield themselves to these restrictions! And so here. The sorrow of the prophet would have spread itself out in boundless generalities but for the limitations of form. According to Oriental habit these restrictions are at the beginning, with us chiefly at the end, of each verse; with the Greek and Romans all through. But it was the limitation which gave shape to the sorrow which otherwise was floating vaguely around him. Tersely and vividly thought after thought

shaped itself round each letter of the alphabet in order, and in the effort the prophet found relief from his anguish. So with men now. The necessities of rhyme and rhythm are an aid, not a difficulty, in expressing their emotion at times when deeper feelings are stirred. The slight effort required enables the sufferer to concentrate his thoughts; it helps him in finding for them proper expression. And usually the deeper the sorrow the more complex is the structure of the poetry in which it is embodied, because the effort is in itself a relief.

In the Commentary on Habbakuk contained in "The Bible Educator," when dealing with the sublime Ode recorded in Chap. iii., the author, after tracing the general course and sequence of thought in the Ode, has the following remarks on the hints which Habbakuk himself drops on its structure, form, and use:—

In the superscription he calls it "a prayer," and ordains that it be sung '*al shigyônôth*, that is, "in dithyrambic measures." Thrice, in verses 3, 9, and 13, he appends the musical "note" or mark, *Selah!* And in the subscription, he addresses it, "To the conductors of the Temple music," and intimates in the words, "With my stringed instruments," the kind of orchestral accompaniment to which it is to be set. Of course, all these hints or signs conclusively mark out the ode as intended for the public worship of the Temple, as a "hymn" or "psalm" to be sung in or by "the great congregation." But, besides this general meaning, each of the words or phrases has a significance peculiar to itself, which we must try to recover. Even the fact that Habakkuk calls his poem "a prayer," has in it a valuable suggestion, especially when we remember that the Psalms of David are also called "*the prayers of the son of Jesse*" (Psalm lxxii. 20). It suggests that the current conception of prayer is too colourless and too limited. According to Habakkuk and David, prayer is not the mere utterance of desire in the simplest forms of speech; nor is it always even a direct address to the Almighty. It includes much more. It is often and mainly a devout meditation on God, on his works and providence, and on our relations to Him; it is a meditation on spiritual facts and verities, conducted under a reverent and stimulating sense of the Divine Presence. It is thinking *with God in all our thoughts*. And, often, it utters itself in words full of colour, glow, and passion, depicting the scenes of nature or the events of history in phrases steeped in the kindling hues of imagination, or in poetic cadences that chime like sweet bells in tune. As used by the prophet, then, the word "prayer" prefixed to his ode meant that it was to be adopted into the Temple

liturgy; but its main value to us lies in its suggestion of the wide scope of thought and utterance permitted to man in his intercourse with the Majesty of Heaven.

All the other hints attached to the ode by the prophet relate to its public performance rather than to its theme, and compel us to glance at a subject of which but little is known. Of the Hebrew modes of music we know nothing, or hardly anything, beyond the fact that they had many distinct and clearly marked modes and forms of musical composition. In the titles of the Psalms we find them denoted by such phrases as *'al haggittith*, *'al n'ginôth*, *'al shigyônôth*; but what these styles were we can only infer from the roots from which these words are derived, and even on this point there is a wide diversity of opinion. Very possibly *'al haggittith* means "in the Gittite manner," and denotes a style of music borrowed by the Hebrews from the Philistine clan of Gath.¹ Very possibly *'al n'ginôth* means "on the strings," and denotes a purely instrumental form of music, a form in which only stringed instruments, as viols, harps, citherns, were employed. Very probably *'al shigyônôth* means "in wandering measures," and denotes music of "a stormy, martial, and triumphal" mode. This is the term Habakkuk uses in his superscription; and the most probable meaning of the term is, that his ode was to be sung to music of the most impulsive and passionate kind, full of abrupt changes and transitions, such as the words of the ode demand. In short, it seems to have been the Hebrew analogue of the Greek dithyramb, or hymn to Bacchus (Dithyrambus), which Plutarch describes thus: "And verily to Bacchus they do chant in their songs certain *dithyrambick* ditties and tunes, full of passion and change, with motions and agitations to and fro."²

The orchestra of the Temple was much larger, more various, and well organized than is commonly supposed. It included stringed instruments, wind instruments, and instruments of percussion—viols and harps, for instance, flutes and horns, timbrels and cymbals; the conductor himself, strangely enough as it seems to us, playing the cymbals—probably that he might the better mark time.³ The ordinary

¹ In the "Life of Sir Henry Lawrence" there is a hint which seems to confirm this conclusion, and which it would probably repay some Oriental scholar to pursue. In vol. i. pp. 474-76, Sir Henry gives us two odes composed by a Nepaulese minstrel, in honour of the Chief Minister of her native Court. These odes are superscribed thus:—"Translation of songs composed by Heera, one of the minstrels, in eulogy of General Matabur Sing, her patron; *in the measure of Bhoopal.*" It is at least curious that this custom of prefixing to a song or ode the "measure" in which it is to be sung—this measure, moreover, being borrowed from an alien yet neighbouring race—should be still preserved in the "unchanging East." And there may be something more than coincidence in the fact that just as a Hebrew Psalm was to be sung *in the measure of Gath*, so a Nepaulese song may still be sung *in the measure of Bhoopal.*

² See Holland's *Plutarch*, p. 1134.

³ 1 Chron. xvi. 5; and xv. 19.

band of the Temple consisted of 166 musicians, presided over by a body of twelve skilled players, with one of the sons of Asaph, Heman, or Jeduthun as conductor. Now we know that the service of the Temple was divided into twenty-four "courses," in one of which every priest and Levite took their turn of duty. And, as even the musicians of the Temple were chosen from the Levitical tribe, we might perhaps have inferred that there were twenty-four such bands, each serving in its turn; so that on grand festal occasions, it must have been possible to bring together close upon four thousand ($166 \times 24 = 3984$) competent musicians, *i.e.* instrumentalists, besides the vast choirs of singing men and singing women.¹ But this doubtful inference is put beyond doubt by the express declaration of 1 Chron. xxiii. 5, that "*four thousand*" Levites were set apart to "praise the Lord *with the instruments.*" So large a number of skilled instrumentalists, devoted to the study and practice of music age after age, implies a degree of musical culture which could not but issue in the formation of many expressive styles of composition, and an indefinite variety in the form and mode of accompanying the singers, whether in solo or in chorus. Every great composer would orchestrate differently, choosing such instruments, and in such numbers and combinations, as would best express his conceptions. The Hebrew rabbis assure us that such changes were made, and lay down the limits within which they were lawful. "Of psalteries (a kind of guitar) not less than two were to be used, and not more than six; of flutes, not less than two nor more than twelve; of trumpets not less than two, but as many as were wished; of harps or citherns not less than nine, but as many as were wished." It is to this custom of suitably selecting and grouping the instruments of the orchestra, that Habakkuk seems to allude in the "direction" subjoined to his ode, "With *my* stringed instruments;" that is, "Let the ode be sung to the sound of the harps, viols, psalteries which I commonly employ, or which I have specified." Like most of the Hebrew prophets, Habakkuk seems to have been a trained and accomplished musician, and no doubt he was on good terms with "the conductors of the Temple music;" of whom there were twenty-four, chosen from the sons of Asaph, Heman, and Jeduthun, so that they would at once understand which instruments

¹ That women took part in the musical service of the Temple is evident from the fact that (1 Chron. xxv. 5, 6) the *three daughters*, as well as fourteen sons, of Heman were "under the hands of their father for song in the house of the Lord, with cymbals, psalteries, and harps, for the service of the house of God." It is also implied in the fact that (Ezra ii. 65) singing women as well as singing men are mentioned among the captives who returned from Babylon. The *trumpeters* do not seem to have been included even in this vast array of instrumentalists. According to 1 Chron. xv. 24, and xvi. 6, the priests, as distinguished from the Levites, were appointed to sound the trumpets; and in the dedication of the Temple under Solomon, with the Levites who sang and played on "cymbals, psalteries, and harps" were associated "a hundred and twenty priests sounding with trumpets" (2 Chron. v. 12, 13; vi. 6).

he would have them employ, and what was the style of music to which he wished his ode to be sung.

The word "Selah," which is thrice inserted as on the margin of the ode, appears to have had a double meaning. I am disposed to think that it is one of those puns, or plays on words in a double sense, which so often occur in Hebrew literature, and especially in Hebrew poetry. It may be derived either from the verb *sálâl*, "to raise," or from the verb *sálâh*, "to suspend." And it seems to have been used in both meanings. To the singers, it was probably a direction—answering to the modern "rest"—to pause, to "suspend" their voices; while to the instrumentalists it was a command to "raise" or elevate their tones, and answered very much to our modern *forte*. Some critics go so far as to say that it marks the point at which, the voices ceasing, the wind instruments were added to the strings, the silver trumpets pealing high over all, and the cymbals marking time with a clang. But all we have probable warrant for—and we have only probabilities even for this—is that the word *Selah* marked the points at which a brief symphony came in, the singers pausing, while the instrumentalists played with added power.

The conclusion in which all these hints combine to land us is this, that Habakkuk intended his ode to be introduced into the liturgical service of the Temple; to be set in the freest, and boldest, and most various style of the Hebrew music; to be sung by the cultivated Levitical choirs, accompanied, in subdued tones, by the stringed instruments of the Temple orchestra, and broken by symphonies in which the full strength of the orchestra would be employed to set forth the sublimity or the tenderness either of the passage that had just been sung, or of that which was about to be sung, or in effecting an artistic transition from the one to the other. We may also infer from them, perhaps—as many of the best critics have inferred—that Habakkuk was himself an accomplished musician, as well as a poet of the first rank. The inference that he was also a Levitic instrumentalist, accustomed to take part in, if not to conduct the musical service of the Temple, appears to be a more doubtful one, though some of our ablest commentators have no doubt about it.

EDITOR.