

PSALM CXXXIX.

M. TAINÉ, in his *History of English Literature*, has said that there are three elements to be considered in estimating the character of any author—his race, his surroundings, and his epoch. It seems to us that each of these marks has been very powerfully stamped upon this fragment of ancient poetry. It is essentially of Judaic origin; its race is marked in every line. It breathes from beginning to end the spirit of the Theocracy, and it expresses that spirit in the most unqualified terms. The human soul stands face to face with the First Cause of its being, and it refuses to recognize any second cause. God is all in all: the Presence behind, the Presence before, the Presence around: the Power that designs, fashions, upholds in its minutest details the structure of the life of man. The whole concentrated essence of Judaism is breathed in the single utterance: “Whither shall I go from thy Spirit, or whither shall I flee from thy Presence?” It is distinctively the psalm of the Divine ubiquity; and, therefore, it is above all others the hymn of the national religion.

But if the features of the race are unmistakably stamped upon this psalm, there are other features in it which the race alone cannot explain. It is not merely that it displays an unusual amount of speculative power; for the same may be said of the books of Job and Ecclesiastes. There is in this psalm, if we are not greatly mistaken, an element which is not found in either Job or Ecclesiastes. The problems of those books are the problems of universal humanity, and they are discussed *as such*. We have as yet discovered no internal ground for placing them at one date rather than at another. This psalm also deals with a problem of universal human interest; but it seems to have been suggested to the mind of the writer by the struggle of a national crisis; the Poet, as M. Taine would say, has

revealed his surroundings and his epoch. What were those surroundings? what was that epoch? Can we penetrate the secret of the composition? Can we in any measure get behind the veil of time, and see the artist at his work? Can we catch a glimpse of the moral motives which prompted him to write in this way and in no other? Can we, in short, from a study of his literary production, assign him his place in history, his epoch in the world of time, and those circumstances of individual life which constituted the call to his mission?

The poem bears the title "A Psalm of David," but the inscriptions are, as we know, of no authority. That it belongs to the age of David cannot, we think, be maintained. There is, indeed, a ring about the close which sounds very like an echo of the spirit traditionally attributed to the minstrel king. There is a flashing out of the soul from calm into storm, from rest into anger, from meditation into action, which strongly reminds us of David. But, then, this is a quality of the Jewish race itself. It is strong in David only because David strongly represents the national character. In that character meditation and action are blended; and the action is strong only because the meditation is deep. The Jew was great in battle, because he was great in prayer. We cannot, therefore, draw any inference from this feature as to the age of the psalm, and we are forced to look elsewhere.

There are two directions in which we may look. We may consider the matter of the psalm, or we may contemplate its form; and an united view of these will impel us to assign a late date to the production. Beginning with the form or language of the psalm, we are arrested by the fact that it contains two Chaldaisms, one at the opening, the other near the close. Our minds are immediately carried far beyond the days of David, into an atmosphere and a culture which the age of David never knew. We are trans-

planted into the times of the Babylonian Exile. We are confronted by the Judæa, not of David, nor of Solomon, nor even of Uzziah, but of a nation that has lost its king and forfeited its freedom, and whose poetry is henceforth but a song by the streams of Babel. At first sight it would seem as if the *matter* of the psalm did not bear out this view. The mind of the writer breathes confidence, hope, even joy. He feels himself to be entrenched in a stronghold, and his feeling betrays itself in an exuberance of manly strength which makes the reader aware that he has taken his stand and will maintain it. One asks if this can be the voice of a captive, the voice of a Jew in a foreign land, with a foreign master, under a foreign faith. Is there anything in the spirit of this psalm which would lead us either directly or indirectly to associate it with a Chaldaic influence, any element in its teaching which can be made to harmonize with the fact that its language bears the traces of a soil not its own? Let us see.

The subject of the psalm is the Omnipresence of the Deity. The keynote, from beginning to end, is the refrain, God is everywhere. Upon this all the changes are rung, and all the variations are based. The Poet seems to exhaust every sphere of nature and of mind in the effort to answer the question, Where is God not? He ascends up into heaven, he traverses the earth to the uttermost parts of the sea, he makes an imaginary bed in the place of the dead itself; and in all of them he fails to find the spot without God. He enters into the world of his own soul, he interrogates his secret thoughts and the mysterious depths of his being; but here too he is unable to discover a field untenanted by the Divine Presence. He questions his minutest and most commonplace actions, such seemingly trivial incidents as his downsitting and his uprising; yet even in these insignificant details he finds himself to be beset by the very life of the Eternal, encompassing his path

and his lying down, and anticipating his humblest needs ere they have had time to cry. He sees that Divine Life girding his own individual life on every side. It besets him behind, in the past. It besets him before, in the future. It besets him side by side, by laying its hand on him in the actual touch of the present. The very darkness is not negation; it is but the disguised presence of light, the shadow cast by the wings of a Divine Love whose nearness passeth knowledge.

Now, if this picture *were* painted during the period of the Persian captivity, is there anything in the Parsee religion which would account for its production? Yes; there is the existence of a direct contrast. The doctrine of a Divine Omnipresence is the point insisted on by this psalm; the doctrine of the Divine Omnipresence is the point denied by Parsism. In many things the faith of the Parsee agreed with that of the Jew; but there was one point at which they were hopelessly at variance; and that was the article of belief which forms the subject of this poem. The very point which the Parsee would not admit was the thesis that God is everywhere. His God was not everywhere; he held only one hemisphere of the universe, the bright hemisphere. He occupied the kingdom of Light, but he had no throne in the kingdom of Darkness. He was present where joy was present, but not where grief and pain and death held sway. These belonged to the realm of darkness, and therefore were outside the government of the Life Divine. They were the subjects of another government, the servants of a malignant power which disputed with God the empire of the universe. The Parsee assuredly could not say: "If I make my bed in Hades thou art there! The darkness and the light are both alike to thee."

Now imagine what would be the effect of such an atmosphere on the mind of a Jew. Conceive a man, who all his

life had been accustomed to think of God as a Presence pervading every corner of the universe, compelled to acknowledge the outward sway of a religion whose leading and central position was the denial of that truth: what would be his natural impulse? If he were a man of enthusiasm, it would be an impulse of reaction and opposition; and if, in addition to that, he were a man of genius, his reaction and his opposition would express themselves in some such effort as the work before us. He would exalt his own God in the very point in which He had been depressed; he would praise Him most where men had dispraised Him. Such we believe to have been the position of the Author of this psalm. He found the Parsee worshipper shutting up his God in the bright places of the universe, and denying Him a share in its darkness; claiming for Him the great, but rejecting the trivial; recognizing Him as the Lord of life, but assigning to another the lordship over death. Against that doctrine he raised his voice; and it took the form of a song, the song of the Divine Omnipresence. He told the Parsees they were wrong in saying that darkness was the evil serpent; *that* we believe to be the real allusion in verse 11: "If I say, surely the darkness shall *bruise* me, even the night shall be light about me." It is as if he had said: "I cannot let you affirm that the shadows of life are outside the government of God. I cannot without protest allow you to assign these shadows a place in the kingdom of another power. They do not hurt except that they may heal; they are not the bruise of the serpent, but the wound of love. The serpent itself, that principle of darkness which you make the rival of the Divine, is but the delegated vassal and messenger of Supreme Goodness, working out unconsciously and involuntarily the plans of an Infinite Wisdom; the very wrath of the wicked is made to praise my God."

Here, then, is an interesting study in comparative theo-

logy. We see Judaism, as it were, on its trial in a foreign land, arraigned before the tribunal of another faith, and forced to consider the difference between herself and that faith. We see her, in the course of this trial, maintaining an attitude of strict conservatism; and not only holding fast her old tenets, but uttering them with a double emphasis. We see her in language more pronounced than she had ever used before claiming for her God the absolute empire of the universe, and refusing to acknowledge any limit to his power. Judaism is here revealed in her antagonism to the faith of the Parsee, and in her union with most other Eastern faiths. If, in her doctrine of Divine Omnipresence, she is opposed to the creed of Persia, she is by that very doctrine united to the mighty creeds of India, where God is all in all.

It is when we pass from the theology to the anthropology of this psalm that we meet with Judaism in her distinctive aspect. In his proclamation of the Divine Omnipresence, the Author is in harmony with the general tendency of the Asiatic mind; but in his doctrine of the nature of man he breaks with all forms of Eastern faith. Brahmanism had said, "God is everywhere"; but for that very reason it had added, "Man is nowhere." The fact that God was all made it necessary to the mind of the Indian that man should be nothing. It was to him an impious thought to suppose that the life of the creature was a reality; if God filled all things, where was there room for any other existence? And so, from his very sense of the Divine Omnipresence, the Indian denied to man the right to live, denied even the present fact of his existence. His life was but a shadow, but a dream, but an illusion, but a sudden and transient mist which hid the presence of the all-embracing Sun, and which the beams of that Sun would speedily dispel. In contrast to this picture of human nothingness, the psalm stands forth as the representative of

Judaism. Starting, like the Indian, with the thought of the Divine Omnipresence, it derives from that thought the opposite conclusion. It says: "Because God is everywhere, therefore man is great!" It maintains that the all-embracing presence of the Divine Life, so far from crushing the personality of the individual soul, is the only thing which gives to that personality its rounded completeness. It declares that man's highest claim to greatness is the fact that he exists in the thought of God; it anticipates the spirit of the gospel utterance: "Because I live, ye shall live also!"

There are two points in the anthropology of this psalm which seem to us worthy of consideration: its view of man's origin, and its hint of his destiny. Its view of man's origin is given in verses 15 and 16: "My substance was not hid from Thee, when I was made in secret, and curiously wrought in the lowest parts of the earth. Thine eyes did see my substance yet being unperfect; and in thy book all my members were written, which in continuance were fashioned, when as yet there was none of them." Now there is one fact which must strike us here very powerfully, and it is this. The Psalmist has no fear and no scruple whatever in ascribing to man a very humble physical origin. He is not ashamed to join with the writer of Genesis in tracing his pedigree from the dust of the earth. He speaks of him as being made in secret, that is to say, from the most unlikely materials. He speaks of him as having derived his substance from the lowest parts of the earth; in other words, as having on one side of his nature had an origin identical with the meanest things. He speaks of him in language strangely like that used by the modern advocates of the doctrine of Evolution. He sees his members fashioned in continuance, wrought up into unity through a process of time and development; and man himself appears as the resultant harmony of

elements which in their life of separation had presented varied hues.

All this, it must be confessed, sounds like a very ancient anticipation of the tone of modern science. The difference lies in the fact that, to the mind of the Psalmist, there is nothing in such a view which is fitted to shake man's sense of dignity. We feel instinctively that, had he lived in our days, he would have contemplated with a perfect calm the question of the truth or falsehood of Darwinism. If it had been proved to him that the life of the human soul had emanated from a development of the animal creation, he would have said: "What does it matter? God measures things, not by their beginnings but by their aim and end. *Thine eyes did see my substance yet being unperfect.* What can it signify that my earthly origin was the dust of the ground? Even then, even in that state of humiliation, the thought of my completed being was perfect in the heart of God. The lower creation was but the ladder on whose steps the Divine Life climbed to me. *I* was all along the purpose of this creation. It was *my* members that God saw in the dust; it was *my* life that He beheld in the unfolding of the animated kingdom. The world of nature was but my forerunner; it came before me in time, but I preceded it in the Divine thought. I may have come out of it; but, if so, it only lived to *bring* me out of it; the only ground on which it had being was its power to lead up to me. I am not a fragment of nature; in the sight of Heaven, nature is a fragment of me; for, in the days when the creation was still unfinished, the eye of the Eternal rested on *my* substance."

Such is, virtually, the meaning of this remarkable utterance. Nowhere perhaps throughout its whole compass does the Old Testament reveal itself in such close intellectual sympathy with the spirit of modern thought. Its line of reasoning is abreast of the highest religious culture of

our age; nay, it is precisely that argument which our age above all others requires. We are afraid, we are unreasonably afraid. We fear the advance of that doctrine of Evolution which threatens to become universal. We fear lest the humanity that is within us should be referred for its origin to the beast of the field. We tremble lest the law of conscience should be found to have had its root in an animal dread of punishment. We are perplexed lest those lofty rules of morality whose mandates are the law of our being should be proved to have had at the outset no higher source than the dictates of expediency. Why should we be thus perplexed? Why should we not learn that, whatever his origin may have been, man is at least man *now*? Can we not see that if we postulate a Divine Purpose in the world at all, we must hold that the first thing contemplated in the purpose was just the thing which has been last evolved? Do we not perceive that when the gardener plants the seed, his spiritual eye is resting on the completed bloom of the flower; that that which is last in time was first in thought? "In thy book all my members were written when as yet there was none of them," is the utterance of all others best suited to comfort our age. If we could grasp the spirit of the Psalmist, we should have peace. If we could feel like him, that in the early stages of the development of creation the final goal of humanity was not hid from the eye of the Eternal, we should be able at a stroke to cut the knot of all Darwinian difficulties. Without solving the question, we should be able to rise above it, and to feel ourselves independent of its solution. It would cease to touch our religious interests, cease to menace our immortal hopes; for we should find the true cause of man's being in beholding the purpose of his completed life.

This brings us to the second point in the anthropology of this psalm. It not only throws a light upon man's origin;

it also gives a hint of his destiny. The suggestion is contained in the words of verse 8: "If I ascend up into heaven thou art there; if I make my bed in the place of the dead, behold, Thou art there." The poising of these two expressions, "heaven" and "the place of the dead," is very remarkable. It is the reconciliation of the two greatest extremes which human thought can picture—life and death. Let us remember, too, that the extremes were greater to the Jew than they can ever be to us. We have learned to think of death with a feeling of hallowed reverence; but that is because we have felt the power of the Christian faith. To the mind of the Jew, death had no such association of calm beauty; it was naturally to him the symbol of an averted God. The nation which was able to trace the presence of its God through all the storms and vicissitudes of life was prone at times to waver when it looked upon life's close. It could see the face of God in every national crisis and in every personal misfortune, but in the last act of the individual drama it beheld a cloud over the Divine countenance. It was the doctrine of Cerinthus that, as the hour of Christ's crucifixion drew near, the Divine Nature fled away and left his human soul to suffer alone. The belief was wild and fantastical, yet it had its germ in the heart of Judaism. Judaism, which tottered nowhere else, was in danger of fainting at the gates of death; and there were moments when even her most pious sons were constrained to say: "In death there is no remembrance of Thee; in the grave who shall give Thee thanks?"

The writer of this psalm refuses to pause before this tragic veil; he demands the right to enter, and to claim for God the mystic world of death. He is more intensely Jewish than any of his predecessors, and he is so because he is environed by more opposition than they. He is an exile in the land of the Parsee, where God's universal empire is denied; and therefore the universality of God's

empire is for him the one truth of creation. His countrymen in the days of Judaic prosperity had claimed God's presence for life, but had confessed his absence in death. The author of this psalm, taught by adversity the value of pain, aspires to find for the Eternal a home even amid the shadows of the dark valley. As we read his words in this eighth verse, it almost seems as if in his person Judaism had bounded into a Christian hope of immortality. We are told a thousand times that the Jew had no knowledge of a heaven for the soul, that the only future he knew was that of a mysterious under-world where the spirits of the dead reposed. It is this under-world which the Psalmist here designates by the word translated "hell"; it is the universal Old Testament name for the place of the dead. But, in the hands of this writer, the under-world becomes well-nigh as fair as the upper; it receives the very glory of heaven. What *is* the glory of heaven? We do not ask what is its glory to a Greek or to a Roman; to these the future life of the Jew would indeed be hell. But what is its glory to the heart of a Christian, to that of a Paul? Is it not the fact that to depart is to be with God? The heaven of Christianity is not beautiful to its votaries by reason of its pearly streets and golden gates; it is beautiful because it is conceived to be the home of God. Now this is the thought which the Psalmist makes his own. He too recognizes that the joy of heaven is the joy of being with God; but, to him, God is everywhere. To say that at death the soul does not ascend is not necessarily to say that it is banished from heaven. God is in the under as well as in the upper world; and the pure soul will find Him there as in all places. Death cannot rob a good man of his God; whither can he flee from his presence? That presence will follow him equally whether he ascend up into heaven or whether he make his bed in the unknown under-world. However unknown it may be, it is not outside of Him; and

whatever is not outside of Him may be the heaven of the soul. Such is the thought of the Psalmist, a thought which flashes a ray of glory around the Jewish vision of death and throws back its light on the Jewish doctrine of immortality. We see that the Judaic faith in God had enclosed within itself a hope of eternal life. The Jew did not, like the Greek, conjure up the images of a locality which the disembodied soul would inhabit after death; he had no figure in his imagination wherewith to body forth his conception of the dark vale. But he knew of a Presence that belonged alike to his own world and the under-world, the Being of the Eternal God; and, in that knowledge, death itself ceased to be a foreign land. It lost much of its strangeness. It held something which the earth held, and that the source of all that is in earth or heaven, the very Life of the universe. That was the Jew's hope of immortality. He spoke more of God than of the life beyond death, because God was Himself the Life on both sides of death. Go where his spirit might, it would never get beyond the range of that charmed circle over which presided the life of the Eternal One; and within the range of that circle his spirit must, in death as in life, be united to all that was noble in humanity.

This leads us to observe a final point in the doctrine of this psalm. It is involved in the concluding portion, from verses 19 to 24, and forms at once the sequel and the proof of the view now taken. It will be seen with what seeming abruptness the psalm breaks away at its close from the contemplation of God to the contemplation of morality. There is really no abruptness in the transition; it is but the bud bursting into flower. To the Jew God was a revelation of immortality only because, to the Jew, God was a revelation of morality. The eternity of the Divine Life would have been no comfort to him unless he had believed that the law of that life had been written in his own soul. If he expected to survive death, it was only because he felt within

him that power of conscience which revealed his participation in the deathless nature of God. He felt the presence of a power that said to him "Thou shalt," "Thou shalt not." He could not explain its working by anything in himself; for it asserted its presence most powerfully at the very moment when he had willed to disobey it. Its mandates did not come from his own imperfect heart, and therefore they must be the voice of another heart. There was *in* him something which was not *of* him, a law which ruled him but was not made by him, a life which breathed through him but which was not his own. The law of God within him was his hope of glory. Heaven and earth might pass away, but this moral life would not pass away. It was the same in all times, and therefore it was independent of all changes, of the world, and life, and death. In the view of its imperishable glory, and in the sense of its Divine origin, the Psalmist might well close with the prayer "Lead me in the way everlasting."

GEORGE MATHESON.

*DOUBLE PICTURES IN THE FOURTH GOSPEL
AND THE APOCALYPSE.*

SECOND PAPER.

RETURNING to the subject with which we were engaged last month, and still keeping by the Fourth Gospel, we turn to another illustration of the point before us taken from Chapters xv. and xvi. of that Gospel. We are thus introduced, it is true, not to a narrative of St. John himself, but to one of the last discourses of our Lord; and it may seem as if an illustration drawn from such a source tended to destroy the simple objectivity of the accounts given us by the Apostle of his Master's words, and to bring them too much