

*THE VINDICTIVE PSALMS.*

THEORIES of inspiration have certainly a great deal to answer for, and not least among their unfortunate results is the recurring necessity, in this nineteenth century, of apologising for the expression in Hebrew literature of feelings which, though not amiable, were perfectly natural and consistent, and of defending them as if they had not only the sanction but the express authority of the Divine Being.

Mr. Bernard's account of the Vindictive Psalms is quite satisfactory so far as it goes, but I should like to carry it a little further. The apology for Jael and David and the unknown author of Psalm cxxxvii., for not thinking and feeling and expressing themselves as Christians, is that they lived before the proclamation of the Christian standard of morals, and indeed before the possibility, except in the rare vision of one or two lofty souls, of the conception of that standard. Would that as good an apology could be made for language and, alas! actions, far outstripping in horror and cruelty anything in even the fiercest of the Psalms, actions which lie at the door of professed Christian Churches and Christian states. Curses after all, according to the proverb, return, like chickens, home to roost, and do most harm to those who utter them; but devilries like those of the Spanish inquisition and of Alva in the Netherlands blast and ruin.

Mr. Bernard remarks quite truly that the precept, "Thou shalt love thy neighbour, and hate thine enemy," is rather implied than formally enunciated in the Mosaic code. A formal statement of what was so firmly established in the unwritten moral code of the race was unnecessary. Nor when the law of neighbourly love was promulgated was there any need, as in the time of Christ, to ask in the case of an Israelite, "Who is my neighbour?" All of Hebrew race were included in the term. But the foreigner had no claim

on the Jew for the exercise of the duty of kindness. The natural and normal attitude towards him was that of hostility. What the author of *Ecce Homo* says of ethnic morality generally was true of Hebrew feeling: "That system of morality, even in times when it was powerful and in many respects beneficial, had made it almost as much a duty to hate foreigners as to love fellow-citizens. Plato congratulates the Athenians on having shewn in their relations to Persia, beyond all other Greeks 'a pure and heartfelt hatred of the foreign nature.' Instead of opposing it had sanctioned and consecrated the savage instinct which leads us to hate whatever is strange and unintelligible, to distrust those who live on the farther side of a river, to suppose that those whom we hear talking together in a foreign tongue must be plotting some mischief against ourselves." In the case of Israel the sentiment took an even intenser and fiercer form. The polytheism of the Greeks was more favourable to the cultivation of friendly relations with strangers than the stern monotheism of the Hebrews. If an island had been wasted, or a city sacked, there was always the chance that the priest of some offended deity might appear to demand expiation for the offence and restitution of the violated right. But in the Jewish creed all the gods of the heathen were idols, powerless to revenge an insult, while all other nations but themselves were enemies of the one true God, Jehovah. To destroy them was to work his will. Acts at which the Christian sense shudders were performed, or were believed to have been performed, by the express command of the national God.

In a race so reared and nurtured, national antipathy and hatred would be a religious sense; denunciations, even the fiercest, would seem the natural expression of feelings, not only justified, but commanded.

Among the greatest difficulties attached to Psalm cix., which he takes as the most pronounced of the Vindictive

Psalms, Mr. Bernard adduces the fact that "editor after editor, themselves inspired men, did not hesitate to receive this psalm as an inspired psalm, and to place it among the hagiographa." It is precisely this acceptance of the vindictive utterances of the Psalms as the righteous and natural expression of the combined religious and national sentiment, which furnishes their truest explanation and their best excuse. Criticism more and more tends to the opinion that in the Psalter we have the outcome rather of public than of individual feelings. That there are among the Psalms many that owe their existence to personal experience, no one will deny; but even these were adopted into the national hymn-book because they were suited for public needs. And in by far the greater number we hear, not David or Hezekiah, but the whole community, or at least the better part of it, giving expression to its patriotism or its religion, offering its prayers, pouring out its complaint, bringing to the feet of the nation's God gratitude for the past or hope for the future.

Now if the terrible imprecations of the Psalms can be shewn to come, not from an individual, smarting under personal wrong, but from the patriot who has seen and shared in his country's humiliation and oppression, they will sound, even to us, with less bitterness; if the fierce passion of revenge has been awakened, not by the sense of personal injury, but by the sight of injustice and cruelty exercised by some foreign tyrant on a helpless and innocent people, it will assume a different character even in Christian eyes. The spectacle of a man "unpacking his soul with curses" to relieve his own sense of injury is a poor and painful one. If however the wrong under which he writhes is one in which the whole of society has shared, so that its infliction marks a general degradation and corruption, the attitude of the sufferer assumes something of dignity, and his words rise to the height of a moral condemnation passed

by a righteous tribunal. Thus we never feel shocked at the "grand curses," of Shakespeare's *Timon*, though they are, both in their range and terrible animosity, almost a counterpart of the imprecations of Psalm cix. :

"Piety, and fear,  
Religion to the gods, peace, justice, truth,  
Domestic awe, night-rest, and neighbourhood,  
Instruction, manners, mysteries, and trades,  
Degrees, observances, customs, and laws,  
Decline to your confounding contraries,  
And let confusion live!"

Such a total collapse and ruin of all social life and happiness is of course far worse an issue than the miseries imprecated on the head of the unknown enemy in Psalm cix. and his family, supposing for a moment that its object is a single person; and yet we do not turn in imagination from *Timon* as a monster to be abhorred and loathed, which must surely be our feeling towards the author of the psalm in question, if his dread curses are the expression of an individual rage. But suppose no one individual, but Israel, down-trodden, betrayed, and oppressed, speaks in the psalm; suppose the object of the fierce invective to be, not some personal enemy, but the impersonation of the national foe, the Babylonian power, or the Seleucid policy towards Israel gathered up and concentrated and represented in the concrete, for the very purpose of giving a sharper edge to the bitter wrath that has so long been pent up; suppose too that identified with the foreign foe are some from the bosom of Israel itself, who, seduced by gold or promises, have proved traitors at once to patriotism and religion, to their country and their God,—in such a case, though we might well sigh over a state of feeling which could find utterance in such dire imprecations, we should not wonder at all, and perhaps should not have the right to condemn. The subject has been well put by

Reuss (*La Poésie Hébraïque*): "We meet here and there in the collection, amid the most touching expressions of resignation, of humility, of trust, compositions indicating quite another temper—fierce anger, terrible imprecations, maledictions, cries for vengeance, which frighten the reader and shock Christian feeling (Pss. lxix., cix., lii., lviii., etc.); and as the Psalter is a book put and intended to be put in the hands of all the faithful, it is often asked whether the reading of such compositions is not dangerous to morality? Alas! yes, if these imprecations are placed in the mouth of a political personage, to be launched at the head of a rival; if in reality we have to do in these psalms with dynastic quarrels or ambitious struggles, it would be quite necessary to agree with the conclusion that makes the scruple about reading them natural and legitimate. Such sentiments are deserving of blame, and mar a book of prayers. But is this view the right one? Does the Book of Psalms speak of the struggles for political supremacy, of the rights of a throne betrayed or avenged? Did Saul and Absalom profess a different religion from David? There is not the slightest allusion to matters of this kind. Two peoples are before us, two peoples separated by a gulf, having nothing in common, neither manners, nor language, nor laws, nor God. The antipathy between them is mutual and equal; but one of them is master and abuses its power in a manner the most cruel and hateful; the other is oppressed, misunderstood, harassed in every way, especially in regard to what it holds most dear, finally persecuted, hunted down, butchered: and is it wonderful if it sometimes loses patience, if it gives itself up to transports of rage, if, at times, despair causes it to lose that equilibrium which otherwise it knows how to preserve? Certainly, French Protestants will not blame too severely a display of feeling which, counterbalanced as it ever is by passionate expression of entire submission to the decrees of God, has found,

after long centuries, an echo in souls not less cruelly tried."

In order to give a complete representation to this view of the subject, it would be necessary to examine each of the Psalms which are distinctively vindictive, and shew from their contents that they in particular have this general application and express public not private sentiment. But perhaps it will be sufficient here to do this only in regard to the two compositions selected by Mr. Bernard as typical of the fierce spirit which seems so out of place in the Bible.

Now in the case of Psalm cxxxvii. a single word will suffice. It tells its own tale, and that too plainly for misconception. It professes to come, a voice of wailing, from the whole community of captive Israel, or at all events from the better part of it, the Levitical body it may be, which beyond question supplied many psalm-composers. The plural in the first verses and its resumption in the last verse leave no doubt that the community speaks, and not a solitary individual. It is true that with the bewildering indifference to our ideas of syntax which Hebrew poetry so constantly exhibits, there is a sudden change to the singular in Verse 5. Israel spoke, or rather her poets made her speak, indifferently in the singular or plural. Psalm cxxiv. opens: "If it had not been the Lord who was on *our* side, now may Israel say," and the poem proceeds consistently in the same number; Psalm cxxix.: "Many a time have they afflicted me from *my* youth up, may Israel now say," and preserves as consistently the singular throughout. But generally the bard, either for poetic effect or because he was weary of one mode of expression, or very frequently because some strain of an older song suddenly came into his mind, and he adopted its language without caring whether it fitted into the syntax of his own verse, allowed himself sudden and, to us, start-

ling interchanges both of number and person. In this case, however, the fact that the plural is resumed in the very verse that contains the vindictive wish removes any objection which a literal restriction to the singular in Verses 5 and 6 might require. It is certainly in the name of the whole nation that the Psalmist addresses the daughter of Babylon (*i.e.* according to a common figure, Babylon with all its people): "Happy shall he be that rewardeth thee as thou hast served *us*."

The 109th Psalm at first sight has a more personal tone. Mr. Bernard accepts the traditional Davidic authorship, which however has nothing but the title to support it. Even Delitzsch allows that there are linguistic reasons for placing the psalm much later, and most other critics unhesitatingly bring it down to the post-exile period, many to that of the Antiochean persecution. But neither authorship nor date is of great consequence for the appreciation of the psalm. The point to determine is whether it speaks for suffering Israel at large, to the impersonation of an oppressive and cruel power, or whether it is the outcome of individual resentment and rage.

And here, notwithstanding that the imprecations down to Verse 20 are all directed against a single person, and that under figures and in language which seem unsuited for a collective body, yet there are indications which bear out the theory that it was written from the point of view of the oppressed people, and was aimed at an impersonation of the Babylonian or Persian or Syrian power, and not against any individual. In the first place, the fact that it throughout preserves the singular of the first person does not, as we have seen, limit its utterance to the expression of personal feeling. The first verse might have run, "Hold not thy peace, O God of my praise, *may Israel now say*." Then as to the object of the maledictions, the opening plurals "the wicked," "the deceitful," "they compassed me about," "my

adversaries," certainly prepare us to expect that the poet's wrath will be hurled at the whole body of persecutors. But there is no device of literature that the Hebrew genius loves so much as personification. It must look at everything in the concrete. It does not favour abstract ideas or abstract terms. Where a modern would write of *policy*, *tyranny*, *injustice*, *treachery*, and the like, the Hebrew describes what he sees in his mind's eye, *a sceptre extended*, *a right arm raised to strike*, *a snare spread for the innocent*, and so on. In accordance with this habit of mind, powers like those of Assyria and Egypt are usually denoted by one concrete term, either the name of the chief city, the title of the ruling prince, or are described by some readily recognized symbol, "The beast of the reeds," "Rahab," and so on, or are gathered up and presented in the person of some monster of baseness and wrong. The latter was the plan adopted by the author of this psalm. From the mention of the adversaries who had rewarded him "evil for good and hatred for love," he goes on in a way most misleading to our ideas, but perfectly natural for a Jewish writer, to collect all his passion of revenge and pile it on one victim, obtaining by a literary figure the advantage desired by the monarch who wished all his foes had a single head, that he might destroy them all by a single blow.

The spirit of fierce revenge which could thus, during all the history of Israel down to Christ, justify itself by the patriotism which resented the injuries and humiliations to which the nation had been subjected, and by the religion which taught that the national foes were likewise the foes of God, does no doubt sometimes, here and there directly, and often by implication, find condemnation in the Old Testament itself. It is, no less than private revenge, condemned by the teaching of Christ. But can we wonder that it should so long have existed in a nation, which in other respects was so deeply imbued with a true religious

sense, a nation to which was entrusted as its special mission to preserve and hand on the knowledge of the one God,—can we wonder that Israel should have hated its foreign foes so bitterly and cursed them so passionately, when eighteen hundred years of Christian light have not been able to put an end to war, or taught men that international jealousies and hatreds are as sinful and foolish as the enmity and rancour of individuals?

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### THE EPISTLE TO TITUS.

#### VIII. ST. PAUL'S GOSPEL.

##### *Chapter iii. 4-7.*

INTO this single sentence, St. Paul, no longer a young man, has compressed the main outlines of that Gospel, to proclaim which had been the business of his manhood. The verses might almost be adopted by any one in search of a creed as a summary, no less authoritative than convenient, of the Pauline or "evangelical" system of doctrine. There is no point of faith touched in this statement which does not receive an ample discussion in one or other of St. Paul's Epistles. There are indeed fundamental doctrines of the faith, such as the Trinity or the Divinity of our Lord, which are here implied rather than expressly taught. But for a succinct statement, at once comprehensive and precise, of what St. Paul and the whole New Testament teach on what is properly termed "the Gospel," that is, God's way of saving sinful men, I hardly know where we shall turn to find a better.

It is plain that within the limits of a short paper my exposition of such a passage can be nothing more than a sketch. The truths to be passed in review are numerous; they are all vital, and at another time would all deserve the