

## STUDIES IN PRACTICAL EXEGESIS.

### III.

#### PSALM VIII.

ONE can perfectly sympathise with that ancient scribe who gave the heading to this psalm which assigns it to David. Has not its poetry a clear mark of an altogether exceptional genius? If the scribe could have compared this psalm with contemporary songs, oriental or Greek, how he would have been struck by its moral superiority! In all ages, indeed, it has been difficult to infuse a moral meaning into a poem without spoiling it. But *our* poet, aided by that most delicate of artists, the Divine Wisdom,<sup>1</sup> has been easily successful. Can we wonder that this psalm was a favourite with the Lord Jesus, who quoted it at the climax of His history, and must have partly derived from it His best-loved title, "the Son of man"; or that two of the greatest New Testament writers quoted it to justify their loftiest intuitions?<sup>2</sup> We must not however approach any Old Testament passage from the point of view of Christian applications of it. In our study of the Old Testament we must make but this one theological assumption: that Christ is not only the root of the new Israel but the flower of the old, and that the literature of the Jewish Church contains many a true germ of the truths of the gospel. Beautiful as mystical interpretations may often be, it is not wise to indulge in them, unless they are consistent with the original meaning which the writer himself put upon his words.

<sup>1</sup> Prov. viii. 30.

<sup>2</sup> 1 Cor. xv. 27; Heb. ii. 8.

It is a hymn in three stanzas that we are about to study, with the two first lines repeated (in ver. 9) as a chorus,—

*“Jehovah our Lord,  
How excellent is thy name in all the earth!”*

The three stanzas are vers. 1 and 2, 3-5, and 6-8. The first gives the occasion of the poem; the “sweet psalmist” dedicates his powers to the glory of Him who is at once the God of Israel and of all nations, of man and of the universe. Like the author of the 103rd Psalm, he looks upon man as the priest of nature, and in the abeyance of proper worship from the Gentiles, upon Israel as the priest of mankind. “Jehovah our Lord” then means “Jehovah, Lord of praiseful Israel, and of mute mankind.” God in His lovingkindness chose the family of Abraham to set an example of that righteous way of life which He approves, but with the further object that in distant days all nations of the earth should “bless themselves by Abraham.”<sup>1</sup> But as yet, few, if any, of the Gentiles “are joined unto the people of the God of Abraham.”<sup>2</sup> The restored exiles have no material strength; they are, as the psalms so often say, the “poor and afflicted,” and the nations around are hostile to them, not out of pure spite, but because Jehovah’s religion is so unlike every other. “Thine adversaries,” the psalmist calls them, and also “the enemy and the avenger”; or, to put it more clearly, “the self-avenger” (*i.e.* the revengeful). How well one can understand this in the light of what we are told of Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite in the book of Nehemiah, and again of what we are told in Psalm lxxxiii. of the furious nations, whom “Asaph” calls “thy (*i.e.* God’s) enemies,” and whose desire was “that the name of Israel might be no more in remembrance” (vers. 2, 4)! Against such foes what weapons had so small and weak a people? None but the greatest of all. Do you guess what I mean? It

<sup>1</sup> Gen. xviii. 18, 19.

<sup>2</sup> Ps. xlvi. 9, Prayer-Book Version.

is prayer; not only that kind of prayer which expresses itself in passionate cries for help—cries, like those in the 83rd Psalm, but also, when Israel has had time to collect himself, the prayer which is transfigured into praise.<sup>1</sup>

*“ Out of the mouth of babes and sucklings hast thou established strength,*

*Because of thine adversaries,*

*That thou mightest still the enemy and the avenger.”*

Need I justify myself for explaining the phrase “babes and sucklings” of true believers? Who does not remember our Lord’s saying, so thoroughly Old Testament-like in its expressions, “I thank thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes”?<sup>2</sup> The psalmist means that notes of praise in their clear and heavenly purity rise far above the harsh discords of earth, and reach the throne of God.<sup>3</sup> There they become like the cherub on which the fancy of the olden time pictured Jehovah descending to fight for His people. A later psalmist of more spiritual imagination beautifully said that God “inhabiteth the praises of Israel.”<sup>4</sup> Another declared that praise was His favourite sacrifice,<sup>5</sup> and our present psalmist that the praises of the Church are like a tower of strength, from which He will invisibly issue forth to deliver His people. For who, if Israel be destroyed, will praise Him? *“Who will give thee thanks in the pit?”*<sup>6</sup> *“This people have I formed for myself; they shall show forth my praise.”*<sup>7</sup>

And what shall be the subject of Israel’s praise? Let another psalmist answer. *“Many, Jehovah, my God, are thy wonderful works which thou hast done, and thy thoughts which are to us-ward.”*<sup>8</sup> Israel will assuredly praise his God

<sup>1</sup> Ps. xlii. 8.

<sup>2</sup> Matt. xi. 25.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Lam. iii. 44.

<sup>4</sup> Ps. xxii. 3.

<sup>5</sup> Ps. l. 14.

Ps. vi. 5.

<sup>7</sup> Isa. xliii. 21.

<sup>8</sup> Ps. xl. 5.

for the wonders of his history ; but shall he be silent when he " considers " the wonders of creation, especially the glorious " moon and stars " of an eastern night, which give so deep a notion of infinity ? You see that to this psalmist, as well as to the author of Psalm civ., the name Jehovah suggests, not what some might call a narrow, national idea, but the grand thought of the universe, heaven and earth, moon and stars, man and his willing subjects. "*How excellent is thy name !*" But what, more precisely, do we mean by the " name " of Jehovah ? The Divine name can neither be shut up in a word nor in a house. " Our Father " can be worshipped by those who, like some theists in ancient and modern times, fear to name Him, and who have an almost morbid distaste for sacred places and liturgical forms. The " name " of which the psalmists adoringly speak is that " wonderful " and ineffable name, in which all the manifestations of Himself, which God either has granted or may grant, are summed up. That great storehouse is like some mighty stream, from which millions of men can draw without exhausting it ; save that the Nile and the Euphrates have but a provincial course, whereas Jehovah's name " is excellent in all the earth. " Time was when a temple-poet could say, " His name is great in Israel. " <sup>1</sup> But our psalmist can go beyond this ; to praise Jehovah is the birthright of every child of man, seeing that he is also ideally a child of God. <sup>2</sup> The prayer, " Hallowed be thy name, " shall one day be a reconciling force which shall " make wars to cease unto the end of the earth. " Why not ? Are not the prayers and praises of the Church the true cherubim ? And must not Jehovah's manifestations of Himself in the future be as great as those in the past ?

That some of these angels, as a psalmist might have called them, are on their way, we may learn from the second line of the first verse, "*Thou that hast set thy glory above* (not

<sup>1</sup> Ps. lxxvi. 1.

<sup>2</sup> Luke iii. 38.

merely upon) *the heavens*." The thought is the same as in that other song of creation—the 104th Psalm (see vers. 1-3). There is a never to be explored storehouse of Divine glory above the heavens, where Jehovah invisibly sitteth, wrapped in light as in a mantle. No more than all that light which was created, according to a prose-poet, on the first day, was expended on the sun, the moon, and the stars, can the glory of Jehovah, whether in the natural or the spiritual sphere, have been as yet fully revealed. His mighty acts, not less than His tender mercies, "are new every morning,"<sup>1</sup> and there is the freshness of the morning dew upon each of His works. Yes; the saying, "There is nothing new under the sun," may be half true when applied to man's works; it is altogether untrue when applied to God's. Shall we not then resist those subtle influences which tend to impair the faculty of admiration, by which, in a certain sense, as Wordsworth says, "we live," not less than by hope and love? Shall we not seek to renew it, if it is impaired, and say, in the words of an Egyptian hymn, "O my God and Lord, who hast made me and formed me, give me an eye to see and an ear to hear Thy glories?"<sup>2</sup> For if we are only able to perceive it,—

*"Day unto day poureth out speech,*

*And night unto night showeth forth knowledge"* (Ps. xix. 2).

One of the greatest of the prophetic writers says, "He wakeneth mine ear morning by morning" (Isa. l. 4). This openness of the inner eye and ear we call faith. The same spiritually minded poet to whom I have referred assures us in platonic style that every child has visions, denied to the grown man, of the heavenly palace from which he came, and bids us give thanks for those shadowy recollections which "are the fountain light of all our day," and are intimations of immortality. Let us follow him in his happy faith respecting those who in age are children: a faith which accords

<sup>1</sup> Lam. iii. 23.

<sup>2</sup> Renouf, *Hibbert Lectures*, p. 216.

which is not indeed described as a vision, but is as much a vision as any poetic description of what is ideally, but not altogether really true, ever was. We need not be surprised that one of the temple-poets glides into the same style. In ver. 2, he is in the midst of the daily life of his people, and speaks of the spiritual "stronghold" which Jehovah has granted to it. Then, being a special admirer of the first of the two primitive histories in Genesis, he throws himself into its idealizing mode of thought, and contemplates God's high purpose for man. But with the biblical writers the ideal is not "baseless as the fabric of a vision" of the night; it is the prophecy of the real that shall be. St. Paul therefore rightly interprets our psalm<sup>1</sup> in the light of Isaiah xxv. 8, "He hath swallowed up death for ever." Death is the great hindrance to the realization of God's purpose for man, and death, according to the unnamed prophet of the Jewish Church who wrote those words, is to be annihilated in the Messianic age. "For behold," as another glorious unnamed prophecy says, "I create new heavens and a new earth, and the former things (darkened as they were by the shadow of death) shall not be remembered, nor come into mind."<sup>2</sup> And that scholar of St. Paul, though different in many ways from his master, who wrote the Epistle to the Hebrews, with not less substantial truth speaks of Jesus Christ as the Person who was for a little while made lower than the angels, and yet was Lord of all, because in Jesus the spiritual ideal of man is fully realized.<sup>3</sup> The psalmist does, in fact, look forward, not consciously to the coming of Jesus Christ, but to the realization of the human ideal through some mighty act of the Divine Spirit. He recapitulates the ancient charter of man's royal dignity, and refuses to admit a doubt as to man's ultimate assumption of his rights. So to think is to have a foretaste of future

<sup>1</sup> 1 Cor xv. 26, 27, 54.

<sup>2</sup> Isa. lxxv. 17.

<sup>3</sup> Heb. ii. 6-9.

blessedness; so to trust is to be beyond the power of grief to sadden, or of trouble to cast down.

“What a piece of work is man!” exclaims Shakespeare. “How noble in reason! how infinite in faculties! in form and moving how express and admirable! in action how like an angel! in apprehension how like a god!” But who can say this unless he believes with our noble Milton that Time can take away nothing that is “sincerely good and perfectly Divine”? It remains true that only as we live in God have we the promise of realizing our ideals in a blessed immortality. Unless we can say the 16th Psalm, the despairing question recurs in all its gloom,—

*“What man is he that shall live on and not see death,  
That shall deliver his soul from the hand of Hades?”*

The charter of man’s dignity is a dead letter to those who have no germs of the Christlike character.

*“Man that is in honour, but understandeth not,  
Is like unto the beasts that perish.”*<sup>1</sup>

Man is not only not above nature, apart from Christ, but among the weakest of nature’s slaves. The beasts suffer less, the trees are more long-lived than he; civilization does but make him less independent, less easy to content. He cannot even comfort himself with his ideals, for what proof is there that they will ever be realized? A Jewish saint could only build up his faith on the intuitions of greater saints than he; a Christian saint can build up his upon facts—upon the facts of the historical revelation of God in Christ. Well may we Christians say, with a clearer consciousness of the meaning of the words than the psalmist can have enjoyed,

*“What is man, that thou art mindful of him?  
And the son of man, that thou visitest him?”*

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<sup>1</sup> Ps. xlix. 20.