

PSALMS CXIII.-CXVIII.

THE lawgiver of whom later ages formed so high an opinion, that they might seem to be groping their way to a conception of Christ,¹—the lawgiver after whom the first five books of the Old Testament are named, took up and sanctified certain customary Semitic festivals, which had their origin in the changing phenomena of the seasons. By connecting these with the great deliverance which made Israel, ideally at least, a Church-nation, he converted them into picture-lessons of the mighty works of Jehovah, which, as a psalmist said, God “commanded Israel’s forefathers to teach their children.”² But as time went on, each of these festivals received a still richer meaning through the new associations attached to it by history; and the Feast of Tabernacles in particular, as it came round autumn by autumn, revived grateful recollections of two of the greatest events in the post-Exile period, *viz.* the rebuilding of the altar of burnt offering, in B.C. 538,³ and the recovery of the public means of grace, B.C. 165, when Judas the Maccabee again rebuilt the altar, and the faithful Jews rejoiced eight days, to compensate for the miserable Feast of Tabernacles which they had so recently kept “in the mountains and in the caves like wild beasts.”⁴ The 118th Psalm has been explained by Ewald from the former and by Hitzig from the latter event. Certain, or at least highly probable, it is that it was Simon, the second and more ideal David or Solomon of the Israelites, who re-organized the temple service with special regard to the psalmody, and appointed the group of psalms called the Hallel, or Song of Praise (Pss. cxiii.-cxviii.), to be sung on the eight successive days of the Feast of Tabernacles.

¹ See the apocryphal book called the *Assumption of Moses*.

² Ps. lxxviii. 5.

³ Ezra iii. 1-6.

⁴ 1 Macc. iv. 44-47, 56; 2 Macc. x. 6.

Read these psalms in the light of this great period, and they will gain vastly in colour, warmth, and meaning. Read the 118th Psalm in particular, and all that may have shocked you in it becomes pathetically intelligible. Can you not imagine the deep thankfulness and impassioned love to God with which, as long as the memory of these events was recent, the priests, shaking their festal branches, moved in procession round the altar, chanting again and again the 25th verse,

“ Ah, Jehovah ! save (still) ;

Ah, Jehovah ! send prosperity (still) ” ?

I must confess however with some regret, at least from a Church point of view, that Psalm cxviii. is not throughout as congenial to Christianity as could be wished. The Huguenots, who used it as a battle-song, showed thereby that they knew not “ what spirit they were of.”¹ And if even Luther, to whom evangelical doctrine was so dear, and who was free from the excessive regard for the Old Testament displayed by the French Protestants, called this psalm, at one great crisis in his fortunes, his “ proper comfort and life,” he could only do this by qualifying some verses of it (see vers. 10-12) with an infusion of later Christian truth. The Authorized Version indeed does not permit the English reader to realize fully the fierceness of the original expressions.² Reuss and Bruston, translating for students, are less considerate; the one gives, “ Je les taille en pièces,” the other, “ Je les massacre.” So that coming fresh from the tender meditations in Psalm cxvi. (written perhaps a little later by some one who had not gone into battle “ with the high praises of God in his mouth and a two-edged sword in his hand ”), the Anglican worshipper is conscious of an effort as he reads or sings

¹ Luke ix. 55.

² The margin, however, gives “ Heb. cut down ”; R.V. renders, “ I will cut them off.”

it in the congregation.¹ The biblical student however is delighted with the psalm, because it gives us a contemporary record, not indeed of the facts, but of the feelings of the period. Judas the Maccabee was a divinely inspired hero, but he was as ruthless as, if we may follow Joshua x., xi., Joshua was of old to the Canaanites. He was a very Elijah in prayer (see the prayer reported in 1 Maccabees iv. 30-33), as well as in "jealousy" for the name of Jehovah; but he had not the versatility by which the ancient prophet passed from the declaration of awful judgments to the relief of the necessities of a poor heathen woman. But how can we blame him for his limitations? Ardent natures could not restrain themselves when the future of the true religion was at stake. The "flashing zeal" of Judas and his friends purified the moral atmosphere, and for good and evil affected subsequent periods. "Fanatics" is too mean a title for those who sang these words:

*"Should not I hate them, Jehovah, that hate thee?
And loathe them that rebel against thee?
I hate them with perfect hatred;
I count them mine enemies."*²

Once, and once only, in the New Testament the Maccabæan times are referred to; it is in the noble eleventh chapter of the Epistle to the Hebrews. Does the writer blame the Jews for the fierceness and bitterness of their struggle? No; he forgets it, or, rather, sees underneath it that absolute, rock-like faith which, as he says, is "the

¹ It is significant that none of the accounts of Christ's purification of the temple suggest that He thought of the purification of Judas; the quotations are from passages of a more spiritual tone than Ps. cxviii. Soon afterwards He *does* quote from this psalm, but with reference to another subject (see Mark xii. 10, 11). We must not, however, overlook the expressions of humility and faith which are not wanting in Ps. cxviii. (see especially vers. 13-18).

² Ps. cxxxix. 21, 22. Written obviously before the Maccabæan revolt, but well expressing the thoughts of its leaders. Prof. Reuss (art. "Asmonäer" in Herzog's *Realencyclopädie*) heartily admits that Judas the Maccabee stands alone in his greatness among fanatics.

assurance of things hoped for, the proving of things not seen."

Now I think that we English people are to be blamed for our ignorance of these stirring times. In spite of Handel's grand musical reminder, it is but seldom that we find in our literature such a happy reference to the Maccabæan story as that made by Edmund Burke in these words :

"I am as sure as I am of my being, that one vigorous man, confiding in the aid of God, with a just reliance on his own fortitude, would first draw to him some few like himself, and then that multitudes hardly thought to be in existence would appear and troop around him. Why should not a Maccabæus and his brethren arise to assert the honour of the ancient law, and to defend the temple of their forefathers, with as ardent a spirit as can inspire any innovator to destroy the monuments, the piety, and the glory of the ancient ages?"¹

It is possible that our popular religious literature (which few men can profess to know thoroughly) might yield a few striking allusions.² But I can myself only recall the late Bishop Wordsworth's stirring exhortation to resist the removal of the real, or supposed, safeguards of Christianity in England, in two sermons preached at Cambridge, as I believe, in 1871.³

If the truth must be told, this unacquaintance with one of the great epochs in the history of our religion is of purely Protestant origin; we ignore the Books of Maccabees equally with the glorious Book of Wisdom, because they form part of the Apocrypha. On this, as on some other points, the greatest mediæval poet shows a wider spirit than many moderns. Among Dante's references to the

¹ Burke, "Letter to Wm. Elliot, Esq." (*Works*, vii. 366); quoted by the late Bishop Wordsworth.

² Since the above was written, Prof. Church and Mr. Seeley have undertaken to interest the novel-reading public in the stirring times of the Maccabees (*The Hammer*, Seeley & Co.). The present writer does not venture to recommend what he has not read, but Prof. Church's reputation as a scholar and a historical novelist justifies the expectation that this last product of his skilful pen will be equal to its predecessors.

³ *The Church of England and the Maccabees*. Second edition, 1876.

Maccabees, who does not admire that noble passage where, in the cross of Mars, next after Joshua, shines resplendent "the lofty Maccabee"?¹ It is not that he neglects the heroes of the Scriptures correctly called canonical; few poets have known the simple Bible-story better than he: but he has a conception of the religious history of Israel which, though of course not critical, is yet as complete as our own too often, from our neglect of the Apocrypha, is incomplete. The services of the Church helped him in this. In the time of St. Augustine² the Latin Church had already sanctified the kalends of August as the spiritual "birthday of the Maccabees," by which was meant, not the entrance into rest of the five heroic sons of Mattathias, but that of the seven sons of a fervently believing mother, whose death of torture is related in 2 Maccabees vii.³ Probably this great episode in the story of the Maccabees was all that was generally known in the Christian Church. "The seven Maccabees" seems to have been a common phrase; and to these martyrs, according to St. Augustine, a basilica was dedicated at Antioch, "ut simul sonet et nomen persecutoris et memoria coronatoris." How popular the festival (*πανήγυρις*) of the Maccabees was at Antioch we know from St. Chrysostom, whose works contain two sermons "on the holy Maccabees and their mother."⁴ St. Gregory Nazianzen has also left us an oration on the same subject, largely based on the so called fourth Book of Maccabees.⁵ All these eloquent Fathers (to whom a Syriac-writing theo-

¹ *Paradise* xviii. 37-42. The dramatic scene (so familiar to us from Raphael) of the discomfiture of Heliodorus forms the subject of another striking passage. William Caxton has also a fine reference to Judas Maccabæus in his preface to our English epic of *Morte d'Arthur*.

² See Sermons CCC. and CCCI. (*Opera*, ed. Ben., V. 1218, etc.).

³ Cf. Mr. Rendall's note on Heb. xi. 35.

⁴ *Opera*, ed. 1636, I. 516, etc., 552, etc.; cf. V. 972 (Serm. LXV.).

⁵ Orat. XXII. (*Opera*, ed. 1630, I. 397, etc.). The oration is very fine, but the phrases are borrowed. The preacher draws very largely, as I have said, on 4 Maccabees, which Freudenthal has shown to be most probably a Hellenistic-Jewish sermon.

logian might, if space allowed, be added) dwell much on the essentially Christian character of these heroes of faith—none however as forcibly as St. Augustine, whose words may be here quoted as applying to others besides the martyrs specially commemorated on August 1st :

“Nec quisquam arbitretur, antequam esset populus Christianus, nullum fuisse populum Deo. Immo vero, ut sic loquar, quemadmodum se veritas habet, non nominum consuetudo, Christianus etiam ille tunc populus fuit. Neque enim post passionem suam cœpit habere populum Christus: sed illius populus erat ex Abraham genitus. . . . Nondum quidem erat mortuus Christus; sed Martyres eos fecit moriturus Christus.”¹

The early martyrdoms of the Syrian persecution have found no *vatem sacrum* in the Psalter. The next scene in the history is the flight of the aged priest Mattathias and his five sons to the desert mountains, where the faithful Jews gather round them. According to St. Chrysostom this situation is presupposed in Psalm xliv. Many modern students lean to this view, and though the psalm falls short of the faith in the resurrection so nobly expressed by the martyrs according to 2 Maccabees vii., yet there are the gravest reasons for doubting whether the doctrine of the resurrection was generally accepted in the Jewish Church as early as B.C. 167. Certainly Psalms cxvi. and cxviii. do not give the impression that these writers were wholly emancipated from the fear of death. The “rest” spoken of in cxvi. 7 is probably that of an assured tenure of earthly life, not that of which Richard Baxter writes in the lines :

“Lord, it belongs not to my care
Whether I die or live;
To love and serve Thee is my share,
And this Thy grace must give.”

The psalmist may have advanced beyond his fellow singer, who cried out in the agony of his soul, less as an

¹ *Opera*, ed. Ben., V. 1218, 1219.

individual than as a Churchman, to whom a share in the "felicity of God's chosen"¹ is far more than isolated happiness,—

*"Return, Jehovah, deliver my soul,
Save me, for thy lovingkindness' sake.
For in Death there is no mention of thee ;
In Hades who will give thee thanks ?"*²

But not many days before he did ejaculate the first part of his "bitter cry" (see Ps. cxvi. 4), and it is only the presence of a sort of undertone in some parts of Psalms cxvi. and cxviii. which permits us to hope that the writers had now and then been visited by glimpses of the fair prospect opened in the 16th and other kindred psalms. I refer to such passages as cxvi. 15 :

*"A weighty thing in the sight of Jehovah
Is the death of his loving ones" ;*

and the refrain which recurs in Psalm cxviii.,—

"For his lovingkindness endureth for ever" ;

on the former of which St. Chrysostom finely remarks, connecting it with ver. 12, "He includes it among God's bounties, that not only the life, but the death of the saints is a matter for which He cares."

Yes, the Maccabæan psalms do not at first present a very consistent psychological picture, and it is only by thinking ourselves into the peculiar mental situation of the faithful Israelites that we can at all understand them. Not only are different views of death suggested by different passages, but different estimates of the religious capacities of the heathen. "Israel could not altogether disown the new spirit of friendliness, not to polytheism, but to polytheists," which the second part of Isaiah had communicated to the post-Exile Church. Let the reader work out this idea for himself in connexion with the history of the times; I should fear to try his patience were I to enter upon so fruitful a

¹ Ps. cvi. 5 (Prayer-Book).

² Ps. vi. 4, 5.

topic. Suffice it to add, that if Psalm cxvii. was chanted as a preface to Psalm cxviii., when this newly written hymn was introduced (by Simon?) into the liturgical services (it does at any rate form part of the Hallel), the harsh expressions in Psalm cxviii. become greatly softened, and Luther may not have been so far wrong in selecting this psalm for his own special Scripture.

Let us now sum up a few of the leading ideas of Psalm cxvi.

(a) St. Augustine begins his exposition of the Psalm at the wrong end; he spiritualizes too much, applies the words too directly to the joys and sorrows of the individual. "Let the soul sing this psalm," he says, "which, though at home in the body, is absent from the Lord; let the sheep sing this, which had gone astray; let the son sing this, who had been dead, and became alive again, who had been lost, and was found." But evidently the trouble from which the grateful speaker has been delivered is the danger of physical not spiritual death, and he utters his thanksgiving in the name of the Church. I hasten to add that the reason why he values life is, that he as an individual shares in the work of the Church, which is (see Ps. cxviii. 17) to "tell out the works of Jehovah" to those who as yet indeed know Him not, but who, as prophecy declares, shall one day be added to Jehovah's flock. Even where the psalmist says, "I will call (upon him) all my days" (ver. 2), he means chiefly, "I will join my prayers to those of the congregation," as is plain from the other context in which the same phrase occurs (ver. 13). The psalm is therefore a strong though unconscious protest against dwelling too much on our own individual joys and griefs. Deliverance from selfishness is most surely and perfectly attained by absorbing ourselves in the cause, not of any party or sect, but of the kingdom of God.

(b) What has the psalmist to tell us of the "name" or

revealed character of Jehovah? Three attributes are mentioned: His compassion, His righteousness (or strict adherence to His revealed principles of action), and His readiness to answer prayer. The Divine lovingkindness is not referred to expressly in this psalm (which differs in this respect from Psalm cxviii.). But the Divine "righteousness" is only the other side of "lovingkindness" (*khesed*), and the "love" of Jehovah's "loving (or, pious) ones" (*khasidim*) presupposes that of Jehovah. The fact however that the psalmist lays so much stress on Jehovah's "compassion" is significant. There are moods in which, either from conviction of sin, or from the overpowering consciousness of our own weakness and misery, it is a solace to recall the infinite pity and sympathy of our Creator. The psalmist was probably in one of these. He had said "in his panic" that "all men were liars" (ver. 11), *i.e.* that none of the powers of this world was ranged on his side. But thoughts of Him who is "the father of the orphans and the advocate of the widows" once again (cf. Pss. lxxviii. 5, cxlvi. 9) more than reconciled Israel to his loneliness. "If God be for us, who can be against us?"

But what can Israel say to the seemingly conflicting evidence respecting the Divine righteousness? The Church-nation has indeed been saved from extermination, but at the cost of precious lives. The law promised a long and happy life as the reward of obedience, and yet true Israelites have had to choose between life with transgression and death with fidelity to conscience.¹ This is the difficulty which so greatly harassed the author of the 44th Psalm.² Does our psalmist throw any light upon it? Incidentally he does, by the declaration that it is no light matter³ with God to permit the lives of His faithful ones to be cut short

¹ 2 Macc. vii. 2.

² Ps. xlv. 17-19.

³ "It is an expense that God delights not in," is Jeremy Taylor's comment on the word "precious" in the A.V. of our psalm.

(ver. 15). If the promises of the law have been so strikingly unfulfilled, it is because the Church is now fully prepared for the higher revelation which is on its way. There is a plan in the dealings of Jehovah both with the Church and with individuals, and His righteousness is not less closely linked with His wisdom than with His lovingkindness.

The third attribute specially referred to in Psalm cxvi. is Jehovah's readiness to answer prayer. And whose prayer is permitted to reach His ear? A more complete answer could be given from other psalms; the special contribution of the writer of Psalm cxvi. is, that those whom Jehovah preserves are "the simple," *i.e.* those who feel that they "lack wisdom," and that, as Jeremiah says in one of his prayers, "it is not in man that walketh to direct his steps."¹ Simplicity, in this sense of the word, was specially called for at the terrible crisis through which the Church was now passing. No other principle but the simplest faith could possibly have inspired either the prompt resolutions or the fearless courage of the glorious six years of Judas the Maccabee. But would it be true to say that Jehovah only "preserveth the simple"? Does He not also answer the prayers of those who feel that they have already received the earnest of God's promised gift of wisdom, and that they cannot be any longer "children," but must "grow up unto him in all things, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ"?² Next to and because of Jehovah, the psalmist, who humbly ranks himself among the "simple," doubtless loves the book of revelation. But is it not the special property of this volume that, rightly used, it can "give wisdom and understanding unto the simple"?³ And would not St. Paul reproach us, as he reproached the Corinthian Church of old,⁴ for our slowness in obeying the call of Providence, when some too dearly

¹ Jer. x. 23.

² Eph. iv. 13, 15.

³ Pss. xix. 7, cxix. 130.

⁴ 1 Cor. iii. 1.

loved relic of "simplicity" has to be exchanged for a comparatively clear intuition of the truth? Gladly as we listen to those who, like St. Augustine and Christopher Wordsworth, bid us learn from these Christians before Christ how to die for the truth, we decline to accept in all points the definition of Christian truth current in any one age; for that would mean, not strength, but weakness of faith relatively to that Spirit of wisdom who, as Christ promised, is guiding disciples into all the truth. The word "faith" ought not to become a symbol for intellectual narrowness, and blindness to the leadings of Him who, not without storms and revolutions, "reneweth the face of the earth."

Psalms cxvi. and cxviii. are the most striking psalms of the Hallel. But other members of the group deserve to be studied more in connexion with the Maccabæan period. When was the description in Psalm cxiii. 7, 8 more exactly verified than in the elevation of the previously little known Asmonæan family to the rank of "princes of God's people"? Even if the psalm were written somewhat earlier, yet its words received their fullest historical justification in that surprising event. And does not the three-fold division of the faithful in Psalm cxv. 9-13, and the emphasis laid there on the one sufficient helper, Jehovah, justify the irrepressible conjecture that this psalm, like the 118th, is Maccabæan? Why should Christian ministers hesitate to answer in the affirmative? Truly, if they can honestly do so, they will find it become all the easier to use these psalms for purposes of edification? If the story of the Maccabees is as important even now as Christopher Wordsworth assures us that it is, would it not be a great help to students if they could illustrate it from the most certain of the Maccabæan psalms? When will some English scholar, with the gift of interesting the people, seize the noble opportunity of usefulness presented to him? The

Jews at any rate have long since set us a good example by appointing Psalms cxiii.-cxviii. to be recited on each of the eight days of the two great historical feasts of the second temple, the Tabernacles and the Dedication.¹ Is it reverent in us who are under such deep obligations to the Jewish Church to set at naught this example? Surely the lesson of faith in God was never more urgently needed, both in Church and in State, both in thought and in practice than to-day. And from whom can this lesson be learned better than from those psalmists whose works can be shown to possess definite historical references? For these poets express not merely the mood of the individual, but the stirrings of the mighty heart of the Church of God.

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¹ The Maccabæan festival of the Encænia (John x. 22) was, in fact, a kind of supplementary Feast of Tabernacles. "See that ye keep the days of the feast of tabernacles (*τῆς σκηνοπηγίας*) of the month Chuseu" (2 Macc. i. 9).