

## ECCLESIASTES XII. 1-7.

WHILE examining of late the periphrases and metaphors used in Icelandic poetry, which they call "kennings," I found, among illustrations from other poetry, many curious "kennings" in the Bible. And some undoubtedly there are in this passage of Ecclesiastes, nay, as it appears to me, more than the common interpretation supposes. The writer, after saying, "Serve God while thou art young, before old age comes, when pleasures fail; serve Him while yet all is bright, while suffering is not constantly recurring like perpetual bad weather," begins a more particular description of old age,—how limbs and senses fail. And this description is marked by some very curious metaphorical substitutes for the plain names of the parts or senses of the body.

"In the days when the *keepers of the house* shall tremble."

The *keepers of the house* are, as all agree, "the arms or hands."

"And the *strong men* shall bow themselves."

The *strong men* are "the legs."

"And the *grinders* cease because they are few, and *those that look out of the windows* be darkened."

"Teeth" and "eyes" are of course meant.

Now, before going on to the next verse, be it observed that this way of describing parts of the body by figures receives much illustration from Icelandic poetry; such "kennings" (as northern grammarians call them) are common. Here are some. The tongue is *the steelyard of song*, also *the plane of the voice*; the mouth, *the temple of words*; eye, *moon of the brows*; brows, *crag of the eyelids*; ears, *mouths of listening*, *tents of listening-door*; hair, *harvest of skull*, *sword of the head*. Sometimes these expressions were meant to be hard and enigmatical; perhaps some of Solomon's phrases were meant to be obscure. For to wrap up wisdom in riddles was an Eastern practice (Prov. i. 6).

Knowing then what kind of language we may expect, return we to our text.

“ And the *doors* shall be shut in the *street*.”

I find in one old commentary, “ the street doors shall be shut upon thee as now retired to thine own house without care of others’ visits or business.” But it is unlikely that the writer would go back thus suddenly to plain and literal language (returning, as he certainly does afterwards, to figures). *The doors* must surely be *the doors of some other avenue of sense*. Almost beyond a doubt they are *the doors of hearing*. Deafness, as an evil of old age, would hardly have been omitted. *Doors* is a likely metaphor for any inlet of sense. The Psalmist speaks of “ the door of my lips.” And Sophocles does in effect describe ears as doors when blind Œdipus is made to say (O.T. 1386): “ Had I been able to dam the stream of hearing through my ears, I had not spared so to shut off my wretched body by deafness as well as blindness.” Again, Icelandic poetry illustrates this metaphor. To listen in Icelandic is *hlera*, and *hleri* is “ a door or shutter.”

And if in this verse of Ecclesiastes *doors* be “ ears,” then “ when the sound of the grinding is low ” expresses that sounds are low and indistinct to an old man. Grinding, as a very common sound in the East, might be put as an example. This seems better than to go back to the teeth, and explain (as one does): “ Thy slow feeding shall make thee unfit for other men’s tables.” The next words of our passage are—

“ And he shall rise up at the voice of a bird, and all the daughters of music shall be brought low.”

The common explanation is, “ The old men shall be startled at a bird’s voice.” To me this seems very doubtful. It would be more natural, after speaking of failure of eyes and ears, to go on to failure of voice. And might not this be found in the words, “ The old man’s voice shall rise

to be as the voice of a chirping bird," *i.e.*, thin, weak, quavering. The word for bird here (*zippor*) means a small, twittering bird. Homer compares his talking greybeards to "cicadas uttering their thin, piping voice." Shakspeare says of the old man :

" His big manly voice,  
Turning again toward childish treble, pipes  
And whistles in his sound."

If we thus explain these words, then it would seem more consistent to take *the daughters of music* as "the musical tones of the voice," not (as most interpret) "singing women." Of course "daughters of music" could mean "singing women," and we all remember that old Barzillai describes himself as not able now to hear "the voice of singing men or singing women." But that the latter part of this verse 4 refers to the failure and weakness of voice and musical tone appears to me more probable.

Verse 5, "They shall be afraid of that which is high, and terrors shall be in the way."

The old fear to mount or climb; they travel with labour and nervous dread: this much is plain. Then follow again curious metaphors.

"The *almond tree* shall blossom."

Most commentators agree that the blossoming almond tree is a figure for a hoary head.

"And the *grasshopper* shall be a burden."

It always seemed to me unlikely that this could mean, in a Hebrew writer, "the old man will find even a grasshopper too heavy to carry." Who would think of *carrying a grasshopper*? Surely it is again a metaphor, and means, "The once nimble leaper shall be a burden to himself, shall move heavily." One Hebrew word for grasshopper (not exactly that used here, but one akin to it, as Gesenius thinks) means "a leaper." So indeed does our own English word. And one may add that the verb "shall be a burden" is in

the reflexive conjugation (Hithpael) in the Hebrew. The phrase may again be illustrated by the Icelandic adjective *bungfærr*, "heavy to move or carry," a word often applied to old men in the Sagas, e.g. "Egil now grew old, and in his old age became heavy in movement and dull both in hearing and sight; he became also stiff in the legs."

In the next expression of verse 5, between "desire" and the "caperberry" (R.V.), I do not presume to decide. After all, they express the same idea, the failure of appetite or of its stimulant. One would rather expect another metaphor after the blossoms of the almond-tree.

Verse 6, "Or ever the silver cord be loosed, or the golden bowl be broken, or the pitcher be broken at the fountain, or the wheel be broken at the cistern."

The general purport of this is, "Remember God before the end of life comes." The breaking off or end of life seems put into metaphors. Some explain: "Life and its powers and uses end, as does all use, when the cord is loosed, the bowl, pitcher or wheel broken." Some take the several phrases to mean parts of the human body: "the spinal marrow, the heart, the tubes and arteries about it." Can any confirmation be found elsewhere of these special meanings? If the phrases could be shown to be "kennings" for parts of the human body, it would harmonize with much of what has gone before, and would strengthen the argument for those expressions being "kennings" which I have argued to be so.

Be it understood that I do not presume to change in any material point the *translation* of R.V., only to suggest a rather different *explanation*, by which the whole passage seems to me to be more consistent and homogeneous. It may be that some of my suggestions are not new, but they are not in any books to which I have present access.

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