

THE HEBREW "COTTER'S SATURDAY NIGHT."

(PSALM CXXVII.)

IT may seem incongruous, or to some even irreverent, to mention in the same breath the sweet psalmist of Israel and the ploughman-bard of Scotland. Yet the association may be defended without attempting either to elevate Burns to a false sanctity or to degrade the psalmist to the level of a secular poet. Apart from a parallel that might be drawn between the peasant-poet with his "passions wild and strong" and the poet-king with his great sin and his bitter remorse, there is not a little in common between the poetry of the Psalms in general and that of Robert Burns. Through both breathes a spirit of "broad humanity" which has carried them far beyond the narrow spheres in which they originated.¹ Both are also intensely patriotic. To the Hebrew poet and prophet alike there was no nation or country like their own,—highly favoured in the past, richly endowed with the best blessings, destined to the most glorious future. As for Burns, he himself tells us what his life-long wish was:—

"That I, for poor auld Scotland's sake,
Some usefu' plan or book could make,
Or sing a sang at least!"

So closely, indeed, does he identify himself with his country that it would be quite easy to discover a personified "Scotia" as the speaker in some of his best poems, just as critics find the "Church" speaking in the Psalms. Now "love of country," according to a current Eastern saying, "is of the nature of religion." And, notwithstanding his personal faults, and the severity of his language when he censured the religionists of his day, Burns had nothing but

¹ William Jacks, in his *Robert Burns in Other Tongues* (MacLehose, 1896), has collected specimens of renderings of the national poet in at least sixteen European languages.

the deepest reverence for true religion. In the "Cotter's Saturday Night," which is intensely patriotic, personal religion and family piety are made the foundation of a nation's greatness. It is well known that "the saint, the father, and the husband" who, in that poem, leads the family worship, is the father of Burns himself, of whom he always spoke with the deepest reverence. Of that worship

"Those strains that once did sweet in Zion glide"

formed a conspicuous part, and the old melodies with which they were associated made perpetual music in his heart. The songs of Burns, accordingly, have not a few points of contact with the Psalms; and the late Professor Blackie (who had poetry in every fibre of his nature, and was, though in a very unconventional way, a religious man) was in the habit of classing them together. Among his last words were these: "The psalms of David and the songs of Burns, but the psalms first." Blackie's countrymen, who will insist on recognising a strong religious element in their national poet, will not easily be persuaded that King David, with all his faults, had not grace enough to write a psalm.

I have ventured to bring Psalm cxxvii. into collocation with the well-known poem of Burns, because, though the Psalm is less elaborate, and its imagery necessarily unlike that of a poem produced in a very different atmosphere, it seems to me to breathe essentially the same spirit. I am, of course, aware that quite another interpretation of the Psalm is in vogue. The Jewish scribes are supposed to have inscribed it "to Solomon," because the "house" and the "city" were taken to refer to the first Temple in Jerusalem; perhaps, also, because they saw in the "beloved" a hint at the name Jedidiah bestowed upon the infant Solomon (2 Sam. xii. 25). Modern expositors in like manner refer the Psalm to the rebuilding of the Temple and the re-peopling of Jerusalem after the exile; and the

recent paper of Mr. Barnes,¹ though not perhaps a completely "fresh interpretation," is a very ingenious presentation of the modern view in the light of a suitable historical situation.

Nevertheless, as Professor Cheyne well observes,² "in a lyric composition we should prefer the easiest interpretation." If, therefore, by taking the words in their obvious and simplest senses, and by adhering to the ordinary constructions of the language, we find the Psalm yielding a connected meaning, self-contained and complete in itself, we may claim consideration for an interpretation at once simple and easy. The opening words very literally rendered are:—

" If the Lord build not a house,
 In vain do toil its builders on it;
 If the Lord keep not a city,
 In vain waketh watchman !"

There is no need to look for an "occasion" beyond the first line of the Psalm itself. Though the Hebrew writer might have employed the article, in a generic sense, before "house" and "city" and still have preserved an indefinite reference, he has made assurance doubly sure by omitting it. This is certainly an "easier" interpretation than to refer the *undefined* terms to the temple and city of Jerusalem.

The building of a house is not only a familiar thing, but a significant thing, in the East at the present day; and it must have been so among "the thousands of Israel" of old. It means an advance, a new departure, the assuming of a position of greater responsibility. The style in which an eastern house is built is very simple, and for the peasantry very convenient. It may begin as a single room placed in its garden; and it may never be more. But if things go well with the family, if children increase, if

¹ EXPOSITOR, April, 1898.

² *The Book of Psalms*, p. 117, col. 1.

perhaps a son brings home a bride, the house grows by the addition of room to room till it may attain considerable size. But whether it is the first building or a later expansion, it is always an important matter. To a poor man it is no small effort, even to a rich man it is suggestive of the vicissitudes of an unknown future. These young ones, for whom this sacrifice is made—what will be their lot when the parents are gone? Will they or will they not sustain the honour of the family and hand down an untarnished name? All these thoughts pass through the minds of the builders, so that the building of the house becomes almost a sacramental act. The friends and neighbours, also, who are consulted about the undertaking, and who give a helping hand—as I have seen all the able-bodied men in a village do, when it came to the placing of the great beam that is to support the roof,—rejoice with the household when the work is accomplished, and pray for a blessing on the family. To have one's house built is the Scriptural phrase for name and fame and position in Israel; and "May God build your house" is one of the commonest and most expressive of modern benedictions. So our village poet, when the toil of the day is over, and the more wearied of the labourers have retired to rest, tunes his lyre, and, sitting down in a small circle of listeners by the side of the house, puts into words the thoughts passing through all their minds: "If the Lord build not a house, in vain do toil its builders on it."

It is only an extension of the thought that follows: "If the Lord keep not a city, in vain waketh watchman." The transition from the house to the town is most obvious. There were many walled towns besides Jerusalem; and, whether the town were walled or not, the watchman was a familiar personage. For there were the flocks in the fold and the herd in the stalls; and, besides the famishing beast of the desert, there was the fell avenger of blood on the

track of his victim, or the lurking thief whose covetous eye had fallen upon some precious possession of his neighbour. I remember how, when I was travelling up and down Palestine, if a greedy mule was tempted to swerve from the path into a field of growing grain, or a bold muleteer to step aside into a vineyard of ripe grapes, a remonstrating voice would be heard from a distant hill-top, giving notice that the watchman was on the alert. And at night, when we were turning into our tent, and one of the muleteers, a dashing young Druze, posted as sentry for the first watch, used to fire off his musket to inform all whom it concerned, as he said, that we were prepared to defend our property, an answer would come, first from the dogs of the nearest village, and then from the musket of some one who, like Assad himself, was posted as guardian for the night. Certain it is that, at hours when all seems wrapt in slumber, there are wakeful eyes and sharp eyes about, and even the wariest watchman may be circumvented or surprised.

Thus then the poet has struck the key-note of his song. It is the old *nisi Dominus frustra*, the *Islam* (or recognition of God's will) that is older than Mohammed, and on which his religion was grafted; the truth which the Oriental, with his lazy fatalism, has learned wrong, and the Occidental, with his self-reliance, finds it so hard to learn right. For it has its practical aspect, which our poet is now to unfold. Even while he has been singing, the master of the house, who had scarcely taken time to finish his supper, has been up and about, putting things in order against another day's toil, and the bustling housewife is still giving the last touches to her day's drudgery. To them says the poet:

"Vain is it for you that ye are early to rise, late to sit down, eating bread of sorrows:

So He giveth His beloved sleep!"

Here are two exquisite pictures contrasted: the one, in the sharp, hurried clauses, representing the anxious ones who

are on their feet at earliest dawn, and sit not down till far in the night, eating their food in carefulness and haste; the other, by a graphic touch, exhibiting the favourite of Heaven because childlike in faith, going calmly to sleep without thought or care.

It is here that expositors find their chief difficulty. Prof. Wellhausen, in his new translation of the Psalms (in the Polychrome Bible), gives the translation adopted by "nearly all modern expositors," with the confession that "it is entirely inadmissible":

"Even so He gives to His beloved in sleep."

He adds: "Nor is the rendering of A.V. and R.V. any better: *For so He giveth* (R.V. *unto*) *His beloved sleep*. The Hebrew words are unintelligible." This, however, may be because the expositor is looking for something in the Psalm which is not there. On the simple literal interpretation, this "So" is a graphic touch of vivid brightness. The word is used *δεικτικῶς*, not as a particle of comparison with anything already mentioned, but in place of a gesture, to indicate what is before the eye, or the mind's eye, of the speaker. A striking example of the same usage is found in John iv. 6: "Jesus therefore, being wearied with His journey, sat *thus* on the well,"—as if the speaker suited the action to the word. Similarly in 1 Kings ii. 7: "Show kindness unto the sons of Barzillai the Gileadite, and let them be of those that eat at thy table; for *so* they came to me when I fled because of Absalom thy brother"—the whole scene of that never forgotten day starting into view before the mind's eye of the dying king. So here by one touch the artist has produced a picture. Was it suggested by some pet child who "ought to have been in bed" but had been allowed to thrust himself into the little circle, and was now nodding into slumber at the poet's knee? Or was it that they were sitting under

the sheltering vine by the side of the house wherein the wearied family had betimes retired to rest? Whatever was the suggestion, it was not far-fetched, and it brings into striking contrast the ceaseless activity of the wakeful "you," and the "no thought for the morrow" of God's beloved. "See how He giveth His loved one sleep!"

What is gained by the rendering "giveth . . . in sleep," which is now fashionable, it is hard to see. It introduces two unnecessary difficulties, the adverbial use of the noun *sleep*, and the omission of an object to the verb *he giveth*. For there is no object in the context. Houses and cities are not given while men sleep; and no "things" are mentioned for which people labour late and early. It is the anxiety, the care, the thinking of their own labour as effective, that the poet reproves. And if God gives *mercy* and *favour* in the eyes of Pharaoh, for example (Gen. xliii. 14; Exod. iii. 21), if He gives *peace* in the land (Lev. xxvi. 6), *power* to get wealth (Deut. viii. 18), and similar blessings, why should there be any difficulty in saying He gives to His loved one sleep? Or what better word could a poet have chosen for the contrast? No wonder that poets especially "have clutched greedily at this beautiful interpretation"¹ and the poetic instinct ought to count for much in the estimate of a composition of this kind.

What follows in the remainder of the Psalm is also to be taken in the literal sense; and there is not only a natural connection in the parts, but perhaps also a more real climax in the composition than at first sight appears. An exquisite piece of word painting in one of our Lord's parables will serve to make the connection plain. A man goes to his neighbour's house at midnight and says, "Friend, lend me three loaves, for a friend of mine on his journey is come to me, and I have nothing to set before

¹ Cheyne, *The Book of Psalms*, p. 335,

him." And the master of the house from within answers: "Trouble me not: the door is now shut, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot rise and give thee" (Luke xi. 5-7). Now why could he not rise and give him? He was by this time wide awake. It is a matter of every-day experience in the East to borrow bread, for the family has its "baking-day," and borrowed loaves are always returned, so that he was not actuated by greed. To be sure, he was somewhat churlish, and grumbled at being disturbed; but the excuses he urges, "the door is now shut, and my children are with me in bed," are meant to be sufficient to support the conclusion, "I cannot rise and give thee."

It is the picture of a sleeping apartment that is before us. When night comes on, what has been used as a sitting-room by day is turned into a bedroom in a few minutes. There is no heavy furniture to be moved; the mattresses, which have been rolled up during the day, are spread upon the floor, a quilted coverlet is spread upon each, and the thing is done. The number of mattresses is in proportion to the number of sleepers; and if the family is large, the greater part of the floor-space may be occupied. It may even be necessary to awaken some of the sleepers before the door can be opened, and, in any case, it is a matter of some difficulty for a man whose children are with him in bed to arise at midnight and look for bread.

Such is the picture, unless I am mistaken, presented in the Psalm, the picture of the household wrapt in healthful, peaceful sleep. Then, the idea of house-building, with which the poet started, not having yet spent its force, there leaps into the field of his fancy the picture of the family of sturdy boys, the pride and the most coveted blessing of Hebrew parents:

"Happy is the man that hath his quiver filled with them.

They shall not be ashamed when they speak with enemies in the gate."

One short step more—and it is suggested in the closing words—and the poet would have concluded with the customary "Peace upon Israel." It is precisely the train of thought of the *Cotter's Saturday Night*:—

"From scenes like these old Scotia's grandeur springs,
That makes her ov'd at home, rever'd abroad."

What, now, is to be said in favour of this interpretation? First of all, it claims to be perfectly simple and easy. Words are taken in their primary sense, figures in their obvious significance, the connection is natural and the sense complete. If details have been introduced which are not directly mentioned in the Psalm itself, we have not to go far in search of them. They are all found in a cottage in a garden, and they are less cumbrous furniture of a lyric poem than a Temple and a walled city and streets full of people.

As to the "period" and historical situation of the Psalm, the poet, just because he is a lyric poet, says little to inform us. To him, at all events, it was a time of peace. Is it possible that, after all, the Jewish scribes who prefixed the title were not so stupid as we are accustomed to regard them, and thought of the period when "Judah and Israel dwelt safely, every man under his vine and under his fig-tree, from Dan even to Beersheba, *all the days of Solomon*" (1 Kings iv. 25). Be that as it may, what I wish to submit is that the Psalm, on this interpretation, if not a *quodlibet* of a "historical document," is "*a sang at least.*"

As to the view that the Psalms are all the expression of the "Church-consciousness" of the post-exilic Judaism, that is a matter of opinion; but that the Psalm, on this interpretation, is less spiritual or exalted, I strenuously deny. On the contrary, I maintain that a religion like this is the necessary foundation of any Church-religion worthy of the name. The current interpretation of the

Psalm reminds me of a palimpsest. The words that obtrude themselves upon the eye of the reader are those of some chronicler or scholiast; but beneath and between the letters gleams forth the "holy writ" of the old gospel. And I cannot persuade myself that the original poet had so mean an estimate of his art as to mar a fine figure, when he had got it, by an artificial application of it. Burns was right; personal godliness and domestic piety are the stability of any time; this is the subsoil into which even the loftiest prophecy and poetry must strike their roots for sustenance. And without the existence of such a religion in old Israel I cannot conceive how the nation could either have lasted so long as it did, or have had grace to sorrow after a godly sort when the evil day came.

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THE LIGHT OF GALILEE.

II.

"THE people which sat in darkness saw a great light."¹ This is the text borrowed by the Evangelist Matthew from a Hebrew prophet to convey an idea of the benefit that came to Israel, and specially to the northern part of the Holy Land, through the public ministry of Jesus, of which he is about to give an account. "A great light"—the light of the dark land of Galilee—such is his conception of Jesus as He appeared in the work which He commenced after His return from the Jordan. It is the Evangelist's way thus to illustrate with prophetic oracles the plain, simple, unadorned story of the evangel of the kingdom as told, say, in the earlier Gospel of Mark. Thereby he doubtless gratified his own liking, and at the same time

¹ Matt. iv. 16.