

## A STUDY OF PSALM CXXXVII.

PSALM cxxxvii. ("By the waters of Babylon") must be described in point of interpretation as one of the more difficult of the Psalms. It is not merely that it contains words which have been diversely explained, *e.g.*, תוללינו ("They that wasted us," *v.* 3) and השרידה ("That art to be destroyed," *v.* 8). The very structure of the Psalm is not so easy as it appears at first sight. According to the arrangement usually followed we get these divisions:

(a) 1-6. The faithfulness of the exiles in Babylonia to the memory of Zion.

(b) 7. A prayer against the Edomites for the part taken by them in the destruction of Jerusalem.

(c) 8, 9. A cruel beatitude on the destroyer of Babylonia.

Three important difficulties are involved in this view of the structure of the Psalm.

(a) The prayer against Edom shows a brevity which is unlike the style of *vv.* 1-6, and a restraint which is alien from the passion of *vv.* 8, 9.

(b) Verse 7 interrupts the connection between *vv.* 8, 9, and the rest of the Psalm.

(c) We should expect that if the Psalmist turns in *v.* 8 from near Edom to far-off Babylonia, he would make clear the transition (which would also mark the climax) by some such phrase as, "And *thou*, Daughter of Babylonia." He does nothing of the kind.

Now these difficulties may be removed by accepting a supposition which may at first sight seem far-fetched, and yet is simple in itself. The phrase "Daughter of Babylonia" is generally taken to be a phrase similar in kind to "Daughter of Jerusalem" (Isa. xxxvii. 22 *et passim*), *i.e.* as meaning "people of Babylonia." But another explana-

tion has much to be said for it. The terms "Son," "Daughter," "Sister" may describe other relationships besides those of natural kinship. Ezekiel (xvi. 45, 46) calls Jerusalem, in effect if not expressly, the "Daughter of an Hittite" and "Sister of Sodom." Malachi (ii. 11) calls a foreign wife a "Daughter of a strange god."<sup>1</sup> Ahaz, again (2 Kings xvi. 7), describes himself as "Son" of Tiglath-pileser, in asking that monarch for the protection of a suzerain. The adherents of Athaliah (2 Chron. xxiv. 7) are called her "sons."

Judged by these passages, the "Daughter of Babylon" may (it seems to me) be the description of some power which *either* (1) had "moral" kinship with Babylon, *or* (2) was politically the dependent of Babylon, *or*, again (3), combined both characteristics. Such a power was *Edom*.

If, accordingly, we may take the words "O daughter of Babylon" (v. 8) as addressed, not to the population of Babylon, but to the Edomites mentioned just before (v. 7), three results follow: (1) The difficulties in the structure of the Psalm disappear; (2) a satisfactory explanation of *השודרה* (v. 8) can be given; (3) a significant phrase, which is usually treated as insignificant, receives justice (*אל הסלע*, "against the rock.")

To take the second point first, it may be said that if the "Daughter of Babylon" be *Edom*, the difficulty regarding *השודרה* disappears at once. According to the accepted view of the structure and reference of the Psalm, Babylon is threatened with destruction in v. 8, and yet in the same verse is described by the epithet *השודרה*, the most natural translation of which is "The Destroyed." If, however, it be *Edom*, Babylon's accomplice and "Daughter," who is menaced with future retribution, the epithet implying past punishment, "The Destroyed," can be given without hesi-

<sup>1</sup> I abstain from citing "Daughter of Belial" (1 Sam. i. 16) until some general agreement has been reached as to the meaning of "Belial."

tation to Babylon. Nay, does not the address gain in force, "O Edom, Daughter of Babylon the Destroyed! [thy turn comes next]"?

If we may thus dissociate the Daughter of Babylon from Babylon herself, and may attach the epithet to the "mother," we need no longer hesitate to see a reference in השרודה, "The Destroyed," to the destruction of the walls of Babylon and the slaughter of her chief inhabitants, after a terrible siege<sup>1</sup> by Darius Hystaspis (Herod. iii. 159). The Psalmist points to the punishment of the author of his country's ruin, and threatens Edom, the accomplice, with a like fate.

Passing on to the next point, may we not say that the vivid touch at the very end of the Psalm shows that the Psalmist is thinking of vengeance to fall on Edom and not on Babylon? He blesses the destroyer who dashes the enemy's children in pieces *against the Rock* (אל הסלע, πρὸς τὴν πέτραν).

Now this expression, "against the Rock," is not a mere detail of a phrase; rather it embodies the climax of the Psalm, and echoes back through the preceding verses. The phrase "dash in pieces" (Heb. נפץ in *piël*) is complete in itself. In the remaining fourteen places in which it occurs in the Old Testament it has no finishing detail such as "against the stones" or "against the rock." A similar statement may be made regarding its synonym (רשש in the *piël*), which occurs six times in the Old Testament. It is impossible, therefore, to read here "against the Rock" without feeling that some emphasis falls upon the phrase.

But if the expression be emphatic (cp. the arrangement of the verse in the R.V.), we must not be content with an explanation of it which is vague and almost tautological. A definite and telling reference is possible. In seven places

<sup>1</sup> Nöldeke (*Encycl. Brit.* "Persia") suggests the reign of Xerxes as the date of this siege.

of the Old Testament "Rock" (סלע, or "the Rock" = הַסֵּלַע) is used as the name of a strong city of Edom, perhaps its capital, at any rate its representative stronghold. How forcible, then, is the last word of this Psalm, if we may explain the cruel beatitude of *v.* 9 as pronounced upon him who shall dash Edom's little ones in pieces against Edom's rocky fortress, now in the hands of Edom's enemy!

To return to my first point. If I have rightly understood the structure of the Psalm, it falls into *two* (not *three*) divisions:

(a) *vv.* 1-6. The wrongs done by Babylon remembered with a certain calmness, both because Judah has already returned, and because Babylon has been already chastised.

In contrast to this:

(b) *vv.* 7-9. The wrongs done by Edom remembered in wrath, and laid up for future reckoning.

A word must be added on the moral difficulty involved in the last three verses of the Psalm. These display exactly the spirit which our Lord rebuked in James and John when they wished to call down fire from heaven. Moreover they are not an inconsiderable part of the Psalm to be passed over with slight attention, but, indeed, colour the whole poem and abide in the memory, What are we to say of them?

In the first place, we may recall the pregnant saying of Origen (given on the title page of some editions of Butler's *Analogy*), to the effect that he who believes that Nature and the written Word come from the same Author must expect to find difficulties of the same kind in both. Hence if Nature sometimes appear to be cruel, it is not surprising if some sayings of the written Word appear cruel too.

But next it may be said, If Nature puts us on our trial in a moral sense, testing our faith (when Nature's riddle is

hard to solve) and our love (when her face is stern<sup>1</sup>), may it not be one function of Scripture to test us in the same way?

Is it not possible that along with all the pure gold of the Psalter we have offered to us also this dross, that we may learn to refuse the evil and to choose the good? The Master Himself is reported to have said (Clementine Homilies iii. 61 apud Westcott, *Introduction to Gospels*, Appendix C): *For it is thy part, O man, to try my words as silver is tried before the money-changers.* God grant His people a pure conscience able to try His Word!

W. E. BARNES.

<sup>1</sup> Though Nature, red in tooth and claw,  
With ravin, shrieked against his creed.

(*In Memoriam.*)