

PSALMS OF THE EAST AND WEST.

WE propose here to establish some kind of comparison between "The Psalter" as the hymnal of the Jewish Church and an epitome of devotion in the Christian world with a modern production, entitled *Psalms of the West*, by an anonymous writer who tells us however in the preface of his second edition "that nothing could have been further from the author's desire than any such comparison." At first sight it might seem a bold step to compare the lyrical anthology of the Hebrews, extending over eight or nine hundred years, and now more or less in use for 3,000 years, with a private collection of a single writer of the present day. But the collection before us is in a sense representative, being thoroughly saturated with the spirit of the age, whilst the author is one well qualified by scientific training, wide culture, and considerable attainments to speak as the mouthpiece of a large class of cultivated people whose appreciation of the volume is manifested by its appearance in the fourth impression ten years after its original publication.

Bearing in mind, then, the main contrast between the two collections—the one being a collection of collections by several writers, and the outcome of historical national events extending over a long period in the distant past, whilst the other is the production of one writer under the influence of entirely different surroundings in a single epoch in modern times—we may say at once and in general terms that intense devotion in relation to a personal God is the leading peculiarity of the Hebrew Psalms as the outcome of the Semitic mind; whereas in the Arian mind, and in this modern book of Psalms we note the tendency to abstract speculation contemplating the absolute. In the former there is an evident striving after the love of God, in the latter a most diligent search after the knowledge of

God, theology predominating in the one, philosophy in the other; the latter having an aptitude for Science and Art, the former a genius for Religion; this one gifted with Divine intuition, though narrow at times in its conceptions, that possessing an extensiveness of view which in its vast sweep takes in the whole cosmos, but lacks intensity in a corresponding degree.

Put side by side, these two collections, simply regarded as "human documents," display distinctive features: the Hebrew Psalmists in their boldness of access approach the Deity in a manner quite unlike our modern Psalmist in his wistful uncertainty and distant awe regarding the Divine Presence in the manifestations of His power.

Take, for example, the third and fourth Psalms, generally regarded as morning and evening hymns! They are the national utterances of a friend of God, confident of His Divine protection. Psalm xiii. contains the supplication of a child addressing its father; Psalm lxxxv. is a confidential colloquy between the worshipper and the object of his adoration. In all these we note the "direct immediate contact with God"; whilst the western Psalmist, in tones of hesitating doubt with wondering reserve addresses the inscrutable power which pervades the universe.

Again, there is a tone of mellowed affection in some of the Hebrew lyrics which in days when their composite character was not so well understood caused them to be regarded as the sole production of "the sweet Psalmist of Israel." Light rather than sweetness, the dry light of science, is the predominating characteristic of *Psalms of the West*. At the most we get here "cosmic emotion," as in frigid aloofness the modern man stoops before the altar of "the unknown God."

If there are these contrasts which strike us at every turn, there are also curious coincidences both in thought and expression. These in a great measure arise from the fact

that the later writer is indebted to a great extent to his predecessor, as appears from the evident hebraizing tendency in the style adopted, though perhaps unconsciously. We meet with phrases in *Psalms of the West* which constantly remind us of Psalms of the East, though the meaning attached to them is very different from that of the original whence they are derived. Thus in the very forefront of the collection, which begins with the words "Awake, my heart, and sing praises to the God of our salvation" we come across such expressions as "the strength of our Redeemer," "the health of his righteousness," mingling with other phrases with a peculiar modern ring in them, as in the description of the sun as "a governor to the planets," imparting "vital power" to "his family of worlds," described as a "minister of thy forces," or in the curious thought expressed in equally singular words, "the book of the Infinite hath no letter of the print of time."

In the same way Psalm xix. of the modern book is by no means unlike Psalm xix. in the ancient, though interlarded with modern phrases; whilst one of the most modern Psalms of the West, that on General Gordon, is indited especially in the language of Hebrew psalmody, and reads, indeed, like one of the Maccabæan Psalms. It reminds us of the curious fact that warriors have always been fond of the Hebrew Psalms, the Venite—Psalm xiv.—being the battle song of the Knights Templars.

At other times we meet in *Psalms of the West* with expressions of the most pronounced modernity, as in Psalm v., which is really a condensed agnostic version of Jehovah's speech at the close of the book of Job. In not a few of these Psalms the author assumes the attitude of critic, and censor of "metallic creeds," i.e. the popular religion or theology of the day, and in which he sometimes approaches the confines of militant heterodoxy.

Nor is our modern Psalmist behind in giving expression

to pragmatic doctrinaire statements as to the results of modern thought (see *Psalms of the West* xxxvi., xxxviii., xxxix., xlii., xliii., xlv., xlvi., lxiii.—lxv., lxvi., first ed.), which sometimes savour of scientific dogmatism, and at other times may be regarded as pæans of modern progress (Ps. lxxxiii.). These are in complete variance with the simple views of nature peculiar to the Hebrews living in pre-scientific days. In their Psalms we have the communings of the soul with God expressed with mystic indefiniteness, but also with fervid ardour; they are “aus der Seele des Volkes gedichtet,” they come from the very heart of the people. In *Psalms of the West* the popular element is altogether absent. Here we have the cultured utterances of a superior mind, writing for the “fit and few” who are in sympathy with the writer. The most striking coincidences between Psalms East and West are to be found when they formulate principles of conduct, i.e. in their ethical tendencies; here they are almost identical. Both make for righteousness. This may be seen if we compare Psalm i. as a prologue to the book of Psalms with Psalm xv. of *Psalms of the West*, in which the modern trials of the soul, its “sad warrings,” and “silent trouble” are spoken of, and the writer exhorts himself to go forth “in the plain robe of truth.”

If thou knowest right, do it; if thou desirest right, seek it strenuously; if thou searchest truth, work faithfully in light and reason.

Have we got here a modern paraphrase of many well-known utterances in Psalms of the East?

Perhaps nowhere do we possess a better illustration of both the resemblances and the differences than in what are called the Nature Psalms. Here it is that the cleavage between ancient and modern, scientific and pre-scientific, Western and Eastern modes of thought become most pronounced, and what we notice in the Hebrew

Psalms of this description is a complete absence of our modern love of nature. The writers, or redactors of the Psalms are, indeed, under the influence of their natural environment; they take in readily the impression produced on their mind by the configuration of the soil, the fauna and flora of the Holy Land; they feel intensely the beauty and terror of natural phenomena. In these typical nature Psalms—take the 8th, 15th, and 29th, for example—the variety of scenery, snow-clad mountains, and valleys standing thick with corn, sunny plains, and dreary deserts, contrasts of heat and cold, the rigour and softness of the climate, fructifying streams, and destructive cataracts—all these give stimulus to the imagination. They also suggest bold metaphors and tropes for conveying spiritual truths, such as deliverance from “the horrible pit” (Ps. xl.), the shadow of a great rock as the symbol of Divine protection, the “well of life” (Ps. xxxvi.), the river which maketh glad the City of God, not to mention other physical features suggesting mental images at every turn. Many of these Psalms have for their distinguishing feature a constant reference to the God of nature, and it is a marked tendency in Hebrew poetry to view nature in its close association with man and his Maker. “When I consider,” etc., “what is man?” etc. The modern nature poet is apt to represent the soul of man as absorbed with, or responding sympathetically to, the pulsations of the spirit of nature. So the first half of Psalm xix., considered as a fragment of a longer nature Psalm, may be fitly compared with Psalm xix. in *Psalms of the West*, written, we are given to understand, on a glorious morning in Cromer. Listen to the modern writer :

In the silence of many voices, we hear them not; but their tremor is from all creation.

In the felt darkness we see no light, but the heavens are filled with the glory of unnumbered suns.

Yet darkness glitters with the beauty of motion; the black sky is alive with everlasting radiance:

The music of light in multitudinous cords, the many voiced choir of praise in their circles of unseen melody.

Sweetly do the heavens sing in their ever-changing lyrics; the elements, with their colours, unite in the whiteness of purity.

Compare this with the Hebrew Psalm, and no doubt the scientific presentment helps to make the conception grander in its cosmic aspects.

But the impression of beauty and sublimity is not heightened much, although the older poet, in his childlike simplicity, knows nothing of the solar system, the revelations of the spectroscope, and in other respects is far behind the scientific Psalmist of the West.

Again, take Psalm xxix., where in *v.* 3, "the God of majesty" (Wellhausen's translation) is the storm God "sitting above the water flood." Here the terribly beautiful imagery is so impressive that Goethe has produced it in the song of the three angels at the close of the second Faust. It has been called one of the grandest memorials of Hebrew lyrical poetry. But here, too, as in Psalm xlvi., He who appears as supreme over the forces of nature also employs and controls them in crushing the powers of evil arrayed against man. In all these Semitic and the Arian poetic aspects of nature differ, but the Hebrew loses little by comparison. The plastic genius of Hellenistic art succeeds in symbolizing "the unseen powers beyond the veil of visible things." The modern poet notices the vital power of law interpenetrating all physical phenomena. They are apt to worship the beautiful and the true respectively. The ancient Hebrew poet knows nothing of such abstractions; he sees in all the operations of nature a personal God full of goodness and truth, and he worships Him only.

In Psalm civ., in which are described the wealth and economy of nature, the writer's mind is lost in æsthetic

rapture, but what inspires his muse is the all-pervading thought of God over and above nature. In silently watching the natural process the feeling produced is intense religious reverence for the Author of nature in all His wonderful operations. The Western Psalmist feels something like this, too, as in Psalm xxxix., which begins :

In the silence of night I beheld the firmament, and a great awe transfixed the current of life.

But, then, he goes on to ruminate after the manner of modern thinkers :

Is this earth a rough model of God's experiment, an untempered vessel to be cast aside from the City which His hand will fashion? Are all the worlds better than ours, or are all more woefully cankered? etc., etc.

Thoughts like these may have passed through the mind of such Hebrew writers as the author of the book of Job, and a few of the later Psalmists in sympathy with its contents. But grand as these speculations on nature are, and natural enough in our age of scientific criticism, they take away the freshness, the ardent, devotional feeling, the firmness of faith in an all-ruling Providence, which give the first place to the book of Psalms among manuals of devotion all over the world.

Our modern Psalmist is impressed, over-awed by the endless extent of the ocean of being, by the enigmas of existence; it is with a feeling of misgiving that he appeals to the Eternal Silence which gives no reply to his questions. Still, living as he does under Christian influence, having within him the "anima naturaliter Christiana," he rights himself: "the universe apparent is not all," "man the atom in the worldstream" sees "confusion and stress and a mighty battlefield of blind forces."

"But the lord of the body is the soul, and the Lord of the Cosmos is God."

This introduces the mystical element in the Psalms, and

we proceed to note coincidences and contrasts between the spiritual songs of Zion and of *Psalms of the West* in this respect.

To begin with Psalm xvii., which opens with a piercing cry of much tried innocency and closes with a "faint foreshadowing of the beatific vision," "I shall behold Thy face in righteousness," i.e., it would seem, communion with God. So again, Psalms xlii. and xliii. contain the utterances of the languishing soul thirsting after the living God, as Psalms lxi., lxii., lxiii., too, contain the spiritual musings of Hebrew mysticism. They are indicative of the Semitic intensity of feeling already referred to as forming so strong a contrast to the reticent manner, the measured tone, the somewhat frigid, self-contained attitude of the Western Psalmist. He too feels the *Seelensehnsucht*, the longing of the soul to enjoy communion with the Divine Soul of all; but he is restrained by an intellectual shrinking from expressing too much. This partly arises from a profound consciousness of the gulf which separates the finite from the infinite. The fervid heat which kindles the Jewish breast cannot be quenched or repressed, it must be uttered in words. For this reason the Hebrew Psalms form the necessary complement in the English liturgy and Scotch hymnology; they supply what the colder, or phlegmatic temperament of the north-western people could never have independently evolved out of their own inner consciousness.

There is a mystic tone of sacred poetry which belongs to a later stage of religious development, when the pale cast of philosophic doubt has clouded the mind, as in the following passage taken from *Psalms of the West*, which reminds us of Byron's "Melancholy Star" in the *Hebrew Melodies*.

Lo! the star has rested and is still! the meteor of hope which guided us through many lands in doubt and weary waiting hath become a fixed star, shining with the calm beauty of truth, etc., etc.

On the other hand there are passages in which the author speaks of a stirring mystery in common things, "the sublime simplicity of infinite potency, the unbounded eloquence of silence," which remind us of the mysticism of Maeterlink, passages which would convey no meaning whatever to the ancient Psalmists, nor to modern Christians under the sole influence of Hebraistic modes of religious thought and feeling.

To sum up, the real contrast between the ancient and modern Psalms here under review is that between implicit faith and an inclination to fatalistic doubt. The characteristic trait of the Hebrew Psalms is fiduciary trust and hopeful resignation. The characteristic of the modern Psalmist is unflinching fidelity to truth, as ascertained by observation and experiment, and with it a manly submission to the laws of nature with resigned cheerfulness in the performance of duty. The latter is really a recrudescence of the sceptical mysticism of the Stoics as distinguished from the mystic ardour of the heroes of faith. If "Psalms of Trust" are not altogether absent from the modern collection, it is because the writer here is under the influence of a religious sentiment derived from his Christian training and surroundings, as may be seen from the language he adopts. How strong this influence is may be inferred from the fact that even Heine, the most modern of moderns, the most thoroughly hellenized Hebrew of the Hebrews, in one of his last poems re-echoes consciously or unconsciously the sentiments of Psalm xxiii., the so-called "shepherd-song of God's flock."

The third point to which we would now draw attention is the philosophy of the Psalms considered as poetry of reflection. As a constituent portion of the wisdom literature of the Hebrews, the Psalms touch upon and express views on human life in its relation to the universe and God, as well as on man's destiny here and hereafter.

Life in the Psalms is always represented as a state of conflict between the friends and foes of Jehovah, a continued struggle between the powers of good and evil, in which God takes the side of the true in heart, and the children of Abraham are the defenders of the faith and where God's foes are those of His people. "God is on my side," is the device of the righteous; "the wicked shall be taken in their own craftiness" (Ps. x.).

The national Deity is appealed to by the Psalmists, speaking in the name of the people of God: "Fight Thou against them that fight against me." Of the quietism of the East there is little in the "Praises of Israel." Throughout they more or less reflect the perturbed state of the national life, the heaving and sinking of the heart kept between hope and despair, between fear and rallying faith.

In *Psalms of the West* the atmosphere is more serene. There are stirrings within and storms without here too; but in the turmoil and agitation an attempt is made invariably to speak peace to the soul, to regain perforce intellectual equipoise, to face fearlessly the storm in maintaining tranquility of mind, "amid the confusion and stress and a mighty battlefield of blind forces," in short, the aim here is a perfect calm which is a mixture of Christian resignation and manly reliance.

"Let us steadfastly search for saving belief and right action as becometh the capacity of manhood."

Of sin in the sense of the Hebrew Psalms there is little said in *Psalms of the West*, though in both there are the same allusions to the holy war in which the "warrior of heaven" is engaged to exterminate the evil that is in this present world. In the Psalms of the East sin is constantly represented as the war plot of nature, disturbing the harmony of the universe, as, for example, at the close of Psalm civ., where the praise of the whole creation ends with the prayer, "may sinners be consumed out of the earth." In *Psalms*

of the *West* we have the modern conception of sin as imperfection to be gradually removed by the evolutionary process on which depends the ethical progress of the race.

As to the final question of man's ultimate fate, death and hereafter, perhaps the most gloomy as well as the most characteristic view of the ancient book of Psalms is that of death as a shepherd, "They lie in hell like sheep" (Ps. xlix. 5), which, as Prof. Cheyne points out, corresponds to a similar trope in an old Arabic poem, where we read, "To-day they are driven forward by death like a troop of camels," and which, again, suggests a gloomy passage in Pascal's *Thoughts* comparing mortals to a number of condemned prisoners led forth one by one out of the dungeon to be executed in the sight of the rest. This, however, only alludes to physical death, whereas the Hebrew Psalmists regard death as a finality, and compare man to the "beasts that perish." *Psalms of the West* look "beyond the gates of death," and speak of "a new pilgrimage to the region of the mansion of heaven." Here and elsewhere we have the modern scientific deduction from natural phenomena as to the existence of an "invisible universe," the hope of future existence extended beyond the grave, an idea derived from the moral fitness of things like the arguments contained in that interesting monograph on *Death and Hereafter* by Sir E. Arnold. Here, too, we meet with the modern notion of posthumous existence in the influence we continue to exercise on others who survive us mingled with a vague hope of personal continuance in another state of existence. "A moment of time is a movement of life, for time has no being apart from change. All that thou doest is recorded everlastingly, and every thought hath operation in distant futurity."

In the present conflict between faith and science, then, which of the two manuals, *Psalms of the West*, which tells us that "Faith in reason, and confidence in our strength,

which was given for a high purpose, will avail more than many prayers, and the work of true science will gain what supplication had asked in vain since the world began," or the Psalter, which says, "Trust in the Lord; He is their succour and defence"—which of them, we ask, is most suitable for present needs?

To this we reply that we are not called upon to choose between the two epitomes of devotion; the use of the one need not exclude that of the other. The older volume has its peculiar traditional advantages, and the more recent compilation, intended as it is to supply a need for a scientific age, may be used conjointly with it as specially adapted for modern readers, bearing fully in mind the superior claims of the book of Psalms for the purposes of edification.

"Commune with thine own heart and be still," are words in the ancient book of Psalms by no means out of harmony with the following in the modern book of Psalms:

"Commune ever with the fountain of light; let all thy thoughts and actions be laid in his sight. . . .

"The harmony of humanity is the echo of the voice of God."

Further, there is certain correspondence between science and conscience—Wissen und Gewissen—producing a conformity between truth and justice, law and loving pity which requires for the sake of completeness such a confluence of Semitic and Arian, ancient and modern forms of devotional thought.

In the last place let us ask which of the two reflects most correctly the working of the modern mind, or serves most effectually to correct its aberrations—Jewish optimism in the Psalms, or modern pessimism in *Psalms of the West*.

It has been said, "The Psalter is the book of spiritual happiness," that modern pessimism would have been unintelligible to the ancient Psalmists. But there are many psalms, such as Psalms xii. and xiv., which are full of doleful sadness.

There is the serious element in the composition of the Semitic mind where tragedy predominates. Pessimism and optimism may both be read between the lines, as, indeed, they both represent tendencies of humanity under different conditions, irrespective of race and creed.

In the same way *Psalms of the West*, compared with other modern poems or prose compositions contained in the recently published breviaries and hymnbooks of pessimism, might almost be called optimistic, though here and there occurs a passage which has a strong flavour of pessimism. In fact no work of this character would effectually appeal to the human heart unless it contained something of both.

In short, each of these collections of Psalms contain expressions which appeal to the universal heart, in sorrow and in joy; in both there is a complete absence of unhealthy sentiment, such as we are apt to meet in some of the mediæval hymns, or the sickly effusions of modern pessimistic mysticism.

In intensity of feeling, vigour of expression, in unshaken trust in the promises of God *Psalms of the East* surpass *Psalms of the West*. In grasp of scientific truth, in breadth of view, in mental balance, *Psalms of the West* may claim the palm. Both are excellent in their own way, expressing as they do the old and new time-spirit respectively. But inasmuch as the changes of time and place have not been able to diminish the freshness and force of the old, whilst its modern rival, if such it be, cannot claim to have added anything to its spiritual contents, in throwing upon it the full light of modern science and modern thought, the majority of modern readers, comparing the old with the new and acknowledging in full their comparative merits, will be inclined to say—and in this the author of *Psalms of the West* would readily agree with the verdict—"the old is better."

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