

The Theology of the Psalms.

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THE PSALMISTS' GOD.

PERHAPS the most striking characteristic of the God who is portrayed in the fervent language of the Psalms is His *personality*. The Old Testament is the standing witness to the living God, against the pantheism which identifies Him with the creation, the dualism and the deism which in different ways unduly separate Him from the creature, and the various types of polytheism which spring from all three. Probably no book has done more than the Psalter to preserve for mankind the idea of a living, thinking, willing, loving, personal God, entering into gracious relation with His creatures, in accordance with the working of His own perfect nature. Modern theism, and pure theism of every generation, has found it a difficult task to preserve amidst its philosophical speculations the prevailing rule of a personal God. It is one proof of the inspiration of the Psalter that it is able to present so vividly the picture of the divine personality, without degrading it on the one hand, or causing it to evaporate in abstractions on the other.

It is true that many modern writers do not allow that the representation of God in the Psalms is free from derogatory and unworthy elements. We read a good deal about the 'mythology' of some of the Psalms, and Professor Cheyne speaks of 'that literary revival of Hebrew mythology' of which Pss. xix. 1-7 and xxix. are supposed to be examples.¹ 'The swift-running hero Shemesh, the caste or guild of the Elohim, the crashing voice of the thunder-god,' are supposed to be used for religious purposes by later writers, who desire to reclaim them for the worship of Jehovah. Ps. xviii. 7-10 is also represented as 'a fragment of a simple yet sublime triumphal song,' in which 'the mythic element centres.' The associations, however, of the words mythic and mythology are such that their use in this connexion is misleading. If we read the Psalms aright, the use of the strongly anthropomorphic language in which some of them abound is poetical only, not theological. The graphic portraiture of divine action which they contain is couched in language

¹ *Origin of the Psalter*, p. 202 foll.

which the psalmists and their early readers perfectly understood to be figurative only. The presence side by side in the same psalm of strongly—we might even say, violently—anthropomorphic language and highly spiritual conceptions of God, seems to prove this. To separate—without sufficient warrant on other grounds—one psalm into parts, and attribute the vivid anthropomorphism of one part to an early age, and the refined spiritualism of another to a late period, is unscientific. There is no real incongruity between the picture in the 24th Psalm of Jehovah choosing the temple as His dwelling-place, and the apparent limiting of His presence to one sacred spot on the one hand, and the sublime description of His omnipresence contained in the 139th Psalm on the other. As Schultz expresses it: 'The pious were not searching after the idea of the absolute, but after that of the efficient working of the divine personality. . . . Hence, even in the old popular religion, God is most assuredly conceived of as omnipresent in the sense required by the necessities of religion, but not in the philosophical sense, and least of all in a pantheistic way.'² It never occurs to the devout reader of to-day that there is any inconsistency between the Lord's descending from heaven, in response to the cry of the Psalmist, . . . 'He bowed the heavens also, and came down, and thick darkness was under His feet. He rode upon a cherub, and did fly; yea, He flew swiftly upon the wings of the wind' . . . and the equally sublime words, . . . 'Whither shall I go from Thy Spirit? or whither shall I flee from Thy presence?' The devout reader of two thousand five hundred years ago would be equally undisturbed by an incongruity which appears to the critic insuperable. It happens that the former words are from one of the very earliest, and the latter from one of the very latest psalms, and it may be conceded that certain forms of speech concerning God, which abound in the earlier, are comparatively rare in the later psalms. But the conceptions of the Divine Being held by the early psalmists

² *Old Testament Theology*, vol. ii. p. 144.

were truly spiritual, and the later psalmists do not hesitate to use decidedly anthropomorphic language in order to maintain that vivid apprehension of God as the living God, who, whilst free from limitations of time and space, enters into most real and close personal relation with all who seek His face and desire to do His will.

If there be a use of anthropomorphic language concerning God which is characteristic of mythology and superstition, there is also a shrinking from it, which implies a false refinement of feeling. The translators of the LXX. Version were not proving their superior spirituality when they paraphrased into tameness the bold language of earlier Scriptures concerning the Most High God. It is the glory of the Psalter that its language concerning God is concrete and realistic, while never ceasing to be reverent. The deeply religious soul dares to be familiar where the shallow religionist shrinks—and for himself rightly shrinks—from language which he is not sufficiently a ‘friend of God’ to use without blame. And as Job and Jeremiah wax very bold in their remonstrances with God, so the Psalmist dares to cry, ‘Awake ! Why sleepest Thou, O Lord?’ and does not hesitate to speak of finding refuge, not only in the secret place of God’s pavilion, but of being ‘covered with His pinions,’ and taking shelter ‘under the shadow of His wings.’ We read in the Psalter of the eye, the ears, the mouth, the hand of God. God is said to rise and to sit, to look down and to hide His face, to remember and to forget, to be angry and to laugh, as well as to chastise and to heal, to fight like a warrior with sword and bow, to ride in His chariot and show Himself mighty in battle. But the same God is high above all the earth, infinitely removed from the weakness and folly of the idol-gods of the heathen and all idol-worshippers. His ‘greatness is unsearchable’; His ‘understanding is infinite.’ The reconciliation between these two strains of language—if reconciliation be needed by any but the mere pedant—is to be found in the words of the 113th Psalm—

Who is like unto Jehovah our God,
That hath His seat on high,
That humbleth Himself to behold
The things that are in the heaven, and in the earth?
He raiseth up the poor out of the dust,
And lifteth up the needy from the dunghill . . .
He maketh the barren woman to keep house,
And to be a joyful mother of children.

The spirit of devotion loosens without difficulty knots which philosophers have vainly sought to untie, and for the Psalmist the immanence and transcendence of God are beautifully and harmoniously blended, without a trace of the moral confusion of pantheism or the mechanical hardness of deism. This feature of the Psalms must not, however, be too much taken for granted because it is familiar. In other sacred books we seek in vain for the expression of religious thought in language at the same time so simple and so profound. It is found in the Psalter, because the Psalmist was taught of God; and a better explanation or illustration of inspiration it would be difficult to find.

Similar characteristics mark the Psalmist’s representation of the *attributes* of God. This is a subject which in the hands of the theologian is apt to become painfully technical. By the time the exposition of the first group of natural or moral ‘attributes’ is complete in manuals of theology, the face of the living God is only too effectually obscured by metaphysical mists. Attributes are essentially impersonal distinctions in the Godhead, and tend to hide the personality of God. Nowhere are the distinguishing characteristics of the God of Israel and of the whole earth more clearly and fully brought out than in the Psalter; but the poet makes the abstractions of the philosopher to live and move, to breathe and burn. The righteousness of God, as the Psalmist portrays it, is not a cold, uninteresting and uninterested impartiality or justice, nor is the Psalmist’s Deity one

Who sees with equal eye, as God of all,
A hero perish, or a sparrow fall.

The divine righteousness glows with a beauty which attracts, while it awes, even the unrighteous and sinful. ‘Jehovah is righteous; He loveth righteousness; the upright shall behold His face’ (xi. 7). ‘Thy righteousness is like the mountains of God: Thy judgments are a great deep: Jehovah, Thou preservest man and beast’ (xxxvi. 6). The very wrath of God burns as a flame, lovely in its awful splendour: ‘God is a righteous Judge, yea a God that hath indignation every day—I will give thanks to Jehovah according to His righteousness’ (ix. 11, 17). For, with the Psalmist, this supreme quality of a moral governor is never separated, even in thought, from the ‘loving-

kindness' which is its fit complement and counterpart. 'Jehovah is righteous in all His ways, and gracious in all His works' (cxlv. 17). *Tsedaq'ah* and *Chesedh* are always delightfully akin; not once or occasionally, but always, it is true that 'mercy and truth are met together; righteousness and peace have kissed each other' (lxxxv. 10). It is the *Chesedh* or mercy of God which is illustrated when He 'renders to every man according to his work' (lxii. 12); and as a perfect parallel to the statement, 'Thy loving-kindness, O Jehovah, is in the heavens,' we find, 'Thy faithfulness reaches unto the skies' (xxxvi. 5).

Such language forms a wholesome corrective to the excessive analysis which sets the divine attributes, like mere qualities of an uncertain and inconsistent man, in contrast, if not in contradiction with one another. The words 'truth' and 'faithfulness' show us the intimate connexion between properties of the Divine Being which are very various in their operation and manifestation. Both in His righteousness and in His mercy, God is true and trustworthy: 'He cannot deny Himself.' It is this quality which makes the Most High the Rock in which the Psalmist so often rejoices and takes refuge. Omit the element either of righteousness or of loving-kindness from God's truth, and it is perverted into falsehood. He holds fast by the covenant He Himself has made. His word is pure, His promises are steadfast, alike for Israel and the ends of the earth (xcviii. 3); so long as the Psalmist's God exists at all, He will, He must 'remember His mercy and His faithfulness.' These twin attributes—melting into one like the two revolving orbs of a double-star when viewed from a distance—form the one clear guiding constellation of the Psalmist, as he seeks, often in great anguish of spirit, for safe leadership in a dark and difficult world. 'O send out Thy light and Thy truth: let them lead me; yea, let them bring me to Thy holy hill.' It is an equal joy to the faithful servants of God, who in the Psalter record their experiences and pour out their praises and prayers, to know that He 'keepeth truth for ever' and to give thanks to God, 'for He is good, for His mercy endureth for ever.'

The distinctive attribute, however, of the God of Israel is His *holiness*. It is a quality not easily defined, and has been variously understood by Old Testament students. Formerly interpreted as the perfection of moral and spiritual purity,

which makes it impossible for God 'to look upon iniquity,' it is now generally explained as indicating no special side or aspect of the divine character, but 'the general impression which the pious have of God's relation to His creatures.' Bengel speaks of the word 'holiness' as one of 'truly inexhaustible meaning,' and the variety of views held concerning it would seem to give countenance to this description. One writer represents it as designating not God's unparalleled splendour, but His self-abasing love, quoting in support of this the language of the 103rd Psalm: 'Bless the Lord, O my soul: and all that is within me, bless His holy name.' Another finds in holiness 'a concept not of material, but of relation.' Schultz says that 'in the ordinary language of Israel, the holiness of God must denote the peculiar relation of Israel's God towards His creatures and specially towards man.' Where authorities differ, it would be out of place to dogmatise, but the most satisfactory explanation of this cardinal biblical word קדוש = *áγιος* = Holy, refers it to the perfect moral and spiritual apartness or uniqueness of the Divine Being, that quality which sets Him alone in the universe and preserves unsullied, unrivalled, and unapproached, the incomparable excellence of His character. So substantially Oehler, following Schmieder, who says: 'The positive expression for God's absolute elevation and uniqueness would be, that in His transcendence above the world, and in His apartness from the creature, God is He who ever preserves His own proper character, maintaining Himself in that being which is withdrawn from creation.'¹ This meaning also best prepares the way for that use of the word in relation to the creature which is characteristic both of Old and New Testaments. 'Be ye holy, for I am holy,' is the language of both covenants alike. As God is a Being apart in His unapproachable moral and spiritual splendour, so Israel is to be a people set apart to Him and to His service. God's name is to be holy, so also His people, His day, His temple, His city, and everything that is His. Everything which is called by His name shares, ideally at least, this sacred character. It is the whole problem of religious life for men who know themselves to be sinners to reach and maintain the unspeakably exalted level of this high calling.

The word does not occur in the Psalms as often

¹ *Old Testament Theology*, vol. i. p. 155 (E.T.). See the whole discussion, pp. 154-161.

as perhaps we might expect. The adjective is found about five-and-twenty times and the noun about half as often. But in a large proportion of cases the word is not directly applied to God. Frequent mention is made of 'the mountain of His holiness,' His holy temple, His holy arm, and His holy name, whilst His worshippers are to appear before Him clad in holy apparel, or in 'the beauty of holiness.' Much more rarely is the word directly applied to God, as in Ps. xxii. 3, 'Thou art holy, O Thou that inhabitest the praises of Israel,' and in cxlv. 17, 'The Lord is righteous in all His ways, and holy in all His works.' The characteristic Isaianic name of God, 'the Holy One of Israel,' occurs in the Psalter three times only (lxxi. 22, lxxviii. 41, lxxxix. 18). This compound phrase appears to indicate that God's characteristic quality of holiness may be appealed to in a special sense by Israel, as a defence and comfort, so long as the nation is faithful to the covenant, and as a ground for awe and just apprehension of chastisement for all unfaithfulness.

But the psalm which perhaps more fully than any other illustrates and enforces this attribute of God is, the ninety-ninth. Its refrain is—'Holy is He.' Its opening words are, 'Jehovah reigneth; let the people tremble'; its closing words, 'Exalt ye Jehovah our God, and worship at His holy hill; for Jehovah our God is holy.' The brief survey of Israelitish history which this psalm contains furnishes a commentary upon the refrain taken as a text. Moses, Aaron, Samuel, priests, prophets, people—all that call upon His name find God true to His unchanging word; He hears, He answers, but He punishes. He punishes, yet He forgives; He forgives, though He punishes. *Holy is He!* Well may Bengel speak of the unexhausted and inexhaustible word which thus sums up what God has been, is, and will be, to His covenant people in all generations.

All the passages which speak of God's abode and service as holy virtually illustrate His character. 'The Lord is in His holy temple' is but another way of attributing holiness to the God of the temple. 'Who shall dwell in Thy holy hill?' The answers to this question in the 15th and 24th Psalms show what the Psalmist thought concerning Him who dwells in a place so pure and sacred. The phrase 'holy name,' which occurs six times in the Psalter, is but an expression for the holiness of

the divine character. God is said to 'speak in His holiness' (lx. 6, cviii. 7) and to 'swear by His holiness' (lxxxix. 35), whilst His saints are bidden more than once to 'give thanks at the remembrance of His holiness,' literally 'to the memorial of His holiness,' because every proof of the divine goodness and righteousness recalls to memory the unique brightness of the divine character and should claim devout and adoring gratitude. (See Pss. xxx. 4 and xcvi. 12.)

Glory is not for the most part an ethical attribute. It is to be ascribed in its fulness to the God whom the Psalmist worships, but the rays of excellence described by this word shine forth from God's works rather than from His personal character. He is the King of Glory (Ps. xxiv.), but in respect of that glory which is manifest in the earth (viii. 2), which the heavens declare and day and night abundantly utter (Ps. xix.). In His temple everything saith Glory! and the sons of the mighty are bidden to give unto Him, that is ascribe to Him, the glory due unto His name (Ps. xxix. 1, 2, 9), but the glory is that of Him who sat as King upon the Flood, and who sits as King over all floods and storms for ever. Even in lxxii. 19 the expressions, 'His glorious name' and 'let the earth be filled with His glory,' appear to refer to divine power and wisdom and the majesty of His dominion, rather than to the moral and spiritual excellence which is, doubtless, not very far off in the Psalmist's thought. In the 104th Psalm, verse 31 sums up in a line the carefully recounted splendours of God's work in creation, when it says—

Let the glory of Jehovah endure for ever,
Let Jehovah rejoice in His works.

The 'glorious honour' of the divine majesty is seen in His wondrous works, and the 'glorious majesty of His kingdom' is that which makes itself to be seen even by an unspiritual eye (Ps. cxlv. 5, 12). In the New Testament the word glory, like so many other Old Testament words, is enriched and ennobled. An ethical element is hardly ever absent from *δόξα*, whatever may be the case with *כבוד*. The radiance of New Testament glory is 'the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ,' and the abiding glory of God is seen in 'the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ.' For this high thought the Psalmist's use of the word does but remotely

prepare the way. Yet it would be a mistake too sharply to separate the ideas of holiness and glory, even though it be not exactly true; in the Old Testament at least, that 'holiness is hidden glory and glory disclosed holiness.' The course of nature does not directly set forth the holiness of God, but His holiness makes use of the powers of nature as well as the order of providence, the movements of history, and even the wrath of rebellious man, to show forth its own unrivalled excellence. The cry of the seraphim in Isa. vi. shows that to the eye of the prophet God's supreme moral and spiritual attribute is manifested in and

by means of that which might not at first sight appear to illustrate it. The Psalmist on earth, as well as the seraphs before the throne, may be said to sing to one clear harp in divers tones, 'Holy, Holy, Holy is Jehovah of hosts; the fulness of the whole earth is His glory!'

How it comes to pass that such a God enters into close and gracious relation with erring and sinful creatures, what is the nature and what the conditions of this high fellowship, and what are its peculiarly notable features as reflected in the Psalms, are further questions which will be considered in another article.

At the Literary Table.

THE BOOKS OF THE MONTH.

I.

THE WORKS OF BISHOP BUTLER, D.C.L. EDITED BY THE RIGHT HON. W. E. GLADSTONE. (Oxford: *At the Clarendon Press*. 8vo, 2 vols. pp. xl+462, x+464. 28s.) It is something to have a book; it is something more to have the best edition of it. We have all tried to read Shakespeare and Bishop Butler in very inferior editions, and got something out of them. But no one has ever been quite content until he possessed the Cambridge edition of Shakespeare, and now no one will ever be quite content until he possesses the Oxford edition of Butler. For these are the best editions of both these books, and the rest are not in sight yet.

To edit a good book is better than to write a bad one. And even when one is able to write a good book, it is a higher ambition to refrain from writing it in order to make a good book that is already written better. It would be well for us all indeed if, for the space of twelve months, all the writing faculty in the land were to abstain from adding to the number, and give themselves to improving the quality, of the books that already exist. It may be that there are books which are beyond our present authors to make better. It is probable that even Mr. Gladstone believed, and still believes, that he is unable to make Butler better. But it is as noble a service if he makes Butler more accessible; and every writer may

follow him in rendering the same service to some other book.

Mr. Gladstone has made Butler more accessible. He set out to do that. These are the first words of his preface: 'The purpose with which this edition of Bishop Butler's Works is published, is to give readier access to the substance and meaning of those works than the student has heretofore enjoyed.' And in order to accomplish that end, he wrought in this way. First, he broke up the *Analogy* into sections, and supplied each section with a descriptive title; next, he worked through the whole text of each volume minutely (supplying Notes as he went) in order to furnish a complete and accurate index to its contents; and then he kept persistently in mind his determination to secure all that Bishop Butler wrote, and secure it in the form Bishop Butler wrote it. And are not these the very things every editor should do to every man's works?

Now of all these services, the most natural to look for is the furnishing of explanatory notes. But it is the most surprising to find. For Mr. Gladstone, who can write as well as speak at considerable length when he pleases, has here withheld his hand so heroically that only on this page and the other throughout the volumes are there footnotes found, and every word in every one of them directly tells on the explanation or