

## The "Protevangelium" and the Eighth Psalm.

---

PROF. E. C. BISSELL, D.D.

---

A RECENT examination of the eighth psalm has suggested a doubt whether the common opinion respecting its course of thought is correct. Some commentators regard it as an ascription of praise to Jehovah in view of the phenomena of the natural world, with a side glance at the dignity and worth of man. Others have put the latter theme in the foreground, and affirm that the author introduces what he has to say of the material creation simply to show man's superiority to it, all such things having once been put, and again to be put, beneath his feet. Neither of these themes, nor both of them combined, exhaust the contents of the composition or make it possible easily to explain its several parts in their mutual relations. With such a theory of the aim of the psalm, the third verse, in the connection in which it stands, is a specially disturbing element: "Out of the mouth of babes and sucklings hast thou established strength, because of thine adversaries, That thou mightest still the enemy and the avenger." Of the many explanations of it that have been offered, there is none that does not leave it quite too loosely connected with the rest of the composition. If it were omitted altogether, the psalm would gain in directness and the logical order of its development.

Suppose, however, that instead of seeking to adapt the verse to the psalm, we tentatively reverse the process and seek to adapt the remainder of the psalm to this verse. It may possibly give the key to a complete harmony. The seventh psalm ended with the thought that the enemy of God would be overthrown. His mischief should "return upon his own head," and his violence "come down upon his own pate." As the psalms are arranged in their relation to one another, this would have been enough to suggest the theme of the next one. As a matter of fact, the eighth psalm seems to have been meant to adduce an instance, and the chief one, where God, the righteous Judge, "a God that hath indignation every day," would cause him who had "conceived mischief" and "brought forth falsehood" to "fall into the ditch" which he had made to entrap others.

In short, its theme would appear to be the overthrow of Satan, the norm of its development being found in the promise made respecting the seed of the woman, as recorded in Gen. iii. 14, 15, and its context.

It has long been acknowledged by scholars that the author of this composition was directly influenced in his thought and diction by the earlier chapters of Genesis, especially by the account of the creation of the earth and of man. It has been justly concluded that he never could of himself well have originated the peculiar statement he makes concerning man: "For thou hast made him but little lower than God," considering the connection in which he introduces it, that is, in a context which refers to man's dominion over nature, but must have derived it from Genesis. This conclusion is made next to certain by the order in which he develops his theme and the peculiar coloring of his style (cf. Ps. viii. 6<sup>2</sup> with Gen. i. 26, 28, noting especially וְיָרֵד and וְיָרֵד). But if his mind is dwelling upon the theme of the creation and the position originally assigned to man in it, what more natural than that he should think also of his dreadful lapse and the bright promise of recovery that accompanied it? We may, indeed, just as easily suppose that the latter subject suggested the former to him as the reverse. It is not to be wondered at that the fall of man and the promise of his recovery are referred to in the Old Testament. The wonder is that they are so seldom directly referred to in it, considering the unity of its teaching and its steady outlook towards the great Restorer.

Suppose, then, that the psalmist is in fact meditating, with a poet's freedom of movement, on the denunciation of the serpent and the promise implied in it to our first parents: "I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed: it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise its heel," might he not most appropriately have arranged his thoughts in the psalm in the order in which we find them? He begins with an ascription of praise to Jehovah, whose name is "excellent in all the earth," and who has set his glory upon the heavens. Then comes the leading thought of the psalm, that Jehovah has established strength, a means to overcome and put to silence the enemy and the avenger. It is in the offspring of the woman, displaying the more his omnipotence through the helplessness of babes and sucklings. "When I consider thy heavens," he goes on to say, "the work of thy fingers, The moon and the stars which thou hast ordained," I might indeed be led to ask, "What is man, that thou art mindful of him?" But surely there is a reason,

“For thou hast made him but little lower than God, And crownest him with glory and honor. Thou madest him to have dominion over the works of thy hands; Thou hast put all things under his feet: All sheep and oxen, Yea, and the beasts of the field,” in the form of one of which the Deceiver came. “O Lord, our Lord, How excellent is thy name in all the earth!” There can be little doubt, provided such an interpretation of the third verse be justifiable, and it may fairly be understood to refer to the so-called protevangelium, that the rest of the psalm is in remarkable accord with it, and the whole composition secures a unity of aim which it previously lacked.

The doctrine concerning Satan is but little developed in the Old Testament. We should not expect it to be, considering the analogy of other doctrines, and especially the paramount importance of those emphasizing monotheism. He is not yet recognized as standing at the head of a kingdom; although the fact is noted that he is not alone among evil spirits who are at war with God and men (Deut. xxxii. 67; Isa. xiii. 21; xxxiv. 14). It was one of them who troubled Saul (1 Sam. xvi. 14). It was others who spoke through the lying prophets of Ahab (1 Kings xxii. 20). He himself was a **שׂטן**, an adversary (Ps. cix. 6), and already in the book of Job (i. 6) has come to the evil prominence of being termed **הַשָּׂטָן**, as also in the prophecy of Zechariah, where he is found assailing the high priest Joshua (iii. 1). The first actual identification of Satan with the serpent who tempted our first parents occurs in the apocryphal book of Wisdom (ii. 23); but it is only an inference from the general teaching of the Old Testament. And we accordingly find it taken for granted throughout the New Testament (John viii. 44; Rom. xvi. 20; Rev. xii. 9). If the author of the eighth psalm then, in the third verse, alludes to evil spirits, and especially to Satan as their chief, it can be considered no anachronism. He is spoken of only in general terms; but it is in words which are singularly appropriate, if his machinations in Eden are referred to.

The psalmist is speaking here not of *his* enemies, but of God's: “because of thine adversaries, That thou mightest still the enemy and the avenger.” **שבת** in the Hiphil may mean *to quiet, to cause one to cease from doing something*; though more frequently it means *to make an end of a thing, to do away with it*. The expression “the enemy and the avenger” is quite peculiar. It is not easy to resist the feeling that an individual, and not a class, is referred to. Graetz, who finds it necessary to date a large part of the Psalms after the Exile, and long after it, thinks that Antiochus Epiphanes must be

meant. The expression occurs nowhere else except in Ps. xlv. 17, a composition much more likely to have been post-Exilian than Ps. viii. But here, too, there is nothing to hinder at least a secondary reference to Satan, although the fitness of the application would be less marked than in the case before us. Besides the peculiarity of the whole expression, the word rendered "avenger," *מתנקם*, Hith-pael part. of *נקם* is also noticeable. It is found only in these two passages. It means *to be of a revengeful spirit, to seek revenge*, and well characterizes the conduct of the serpent in Genesis and of *השטן* throughout the Old Testament.

The words *יסדת עז*, "thou hast established strength," equivalent to "thou hast gained supremacy" or "thou hast gotten the victory," would certainly not be an inappropriate paraphrase of the thought in the "protevangelium." The LXX render *עז* in the sense of "praise," *αἶνον*, which, in fact, it sometimes has with verbs of giving, but could not well have with such a verb as *יסד*, meaning, especially in the Piel, *to found, establish*, as also, *to appoint, ordain*.

It might be questioned whether, if the "seed of the woman" spoken of in Genesis were referred to, the psalmist would have used the expression "out of the mouths of babes and sucklings." He intended, it would seem, to make a marked antithesis between what was feeble and what was strong — human weakness in its weakest form and the divine majesty and power. This would account for his choice of childhood, and he only selected the epithets then in common use to characterize it. By the wiles of the adversary, the woman had been overcome. By divine appointment and co-operation, her offspring, coming as helpless infants into the world, should yet overcome him and bring to an end his evil supremacy.

But is such an interpretation of the psalm in harmony with the view that already in David's time the doctrine of a personal Messiah had taken shape? It need not be out of harmony with it. Undoubtedly the promise in Genesis was regarded at first as emphasizing a triumph of the race rather than that of an individual. It was only gradually that the Messianic hope was limited, first to Abraham's descendants, then to the tribe of Judah, then to the family of David, and finally to the so-called "Branch" of Isaiah and Zechariah. But it was so limited only as it respected the direct means of attaining it, not in its results. In the latter particular, it is always represented that the whole world is to participate in the advantages of Messiah's triumph. In our psalm, where the thought of Genesis is in the fore-

ground, it is naturally the victory of the woman's seed that is looked forward to.

But what is to be said of the declaration that it is "out of the mouth" of children and sucklings that Jehovah has ordained defeat for his enemy and man's. If our exegesis thus far has been correct, these words present no difficulty. The mouth, as the organ of communication, especially of command, is often used metaphorically in the Bible for power, the medium through which anything is accomplished. Besides, it is wholly unnecessary to render מפי here literally. It might just as well mean, as it does in Job xxxvi. 16, simply "out of" or "from" as indicating the source from which the means used by Jehovah come. The use of כפי, לפי, and על-פי in such a tropical sense is well established.

Granting now that such an interpretation of the eighth psalm is admissible, it is remarkable how well it suits that put upon it by the apostle Paul and the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews. Our Lord, it is true, quoting the LXX., makes another application of the verse before us; but not one which in the circumstances can be regarded as antagonistic to it. "Did you never read," he said to those complaining of the children praising him in the temple, "Out of the mouth of babes and sucklings thou hast perfected praise?" The citation might at least have indirectly served to connect the psalm in their minds with him, and suggested to them that its language was made clear only by his coming.

Paul expresses himself with more directness (1 Cor. xv. 25-27), "For he," that is, Christ, he says, "must reign till he hath put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy that shall be abolished is death. For, He [Jehovah] put all things in subjection under his feet." From the same point of view, the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews represents that our psalmist's declaration concerning man has not yet been fulfilled for the whole race; but in Christ, its representative, who because of the suffering of death has been crowned with glory and honor, it has been fulfilled. The fulfilment for others, according to him, must be in and through Christ, who, perfected by suffering, has become the "author of their salvation" (Heb. ii. 6-11).