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The Psalms and their Interpretation.

AMONG the many blessings which are the direct outcome of this war stands first the quickened sense of devotion. Never was the world so painfully conscious of its need of God. Never in the history of mankind has there been such a giving up of old gods and such an inquiry among heathen and civilized nations alike for Him Who is the Truth, the Life and the Way, by Whom alone man cometh to the Father. Voluntarily or involuntarily men are learning to pray, according to the promise :

“ O Thou that hearest prayer,
Unto Thee shall all flesh come ” (Ps. lxxv. 2).

“ All the ends of the earth shall remember themselves and be turned unto the Lord.

And all the kindreds of the nations shall worship before Him ” (Ps. xxii. 27).

Of the innumerable books of devotion that this war has already evoked there is nothing to equal the Psalms. They have been called the looking-glass of the soul. But they are more. In the Psalms we see sketched as by the divine hand of the divine Physician a spiritual pathology fitted to the use of the Church Universal in every stage of her pilgrim career. What is the secret of their power ?

(1) In the first place the Psalms exhibit *the close PERSONAL contact of the soul with God*—that intimate converse with God such as Moses had “ with whom the Lord spake face to face as a man speaketh unto his friend ” ; such as John had when he says of himself and of his fellow-Christians at Ephesus : “ Truly our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ ” ; such as we ourselves may have according to His promise Who said : “ We will come unto him and make our abode with him.” There are, alas, not many men of whom this can be said. But David was one, a man of “ royal disposition ” (Ps. li. 12), a man of exquisite sensitiveness of soul (Ps. xxxv. 3), and yet so human, so approachable, so versatile that in him a whole world of experiences seems to reproduce itself. He was the incarnation and flower of the Jewish nation :

“ A man so varied that he seem'd to be
Not one, but all mankind's epitome.”

In him the Divine and human seemed to meet. He was one of those

“elect” souls who “knew” that his prayers were always answered (iv. 3). He “loved” Jehovah with a peculiar personal love (xviii. 1), and felt that he was “chosen to approach” the living God (lxv. 4). To him, and to him only of all the authors of the Psalms that have come down to us, was it granted to prophesy *directly* of Christ to come. The first two books of the Psalms, which close with Psalm lxxii (concluding with the words: “The prayers of David, the son of Jesse, are ended,”), close also, with one exception, all the *direct* prophecies of Christ to come. And that exception, Psalm cx., is itself also a Psalm of David’s.

Again (2) the Psalms present a *great VARIETY of religious experience*. The mere editing of the Psalter covers five hundred years of Jewish history. In that range of time how many things had happened—the fall and the restoration of the Monarchy, the founding and revival of the order of Prophets, the schism and the captivity of the Ten Tribes, the reforms of Josiah and Hezekiah and the invasions of Shishak from Egypt and of Sennacherib from Assyria, the Jewish exile and its return from Babylon, the building of the first and the second Temple—what a host of memories are conjured up at the bare recital! The Psalms are the inner reflection of that race that was being specially prepared and made “perfect through sufferings” to provide in due time a maternal bosom for the Son of Man. For “Salvation” was “of the Jews.” It was from them that “after the flesh Christ came Who is God over all the for ever Blessed. Amen.”

But (3) the chief undying interest of the Psalms consists in the fact that *the Jews were a TYPICAL people*. They lived not for themselves but for the world. Their experiences were not for an age but for all time. They formed, so to speak, the soul of mankind, of which other nations formed the body. Their history was in a special manner a religious history in which all mankind could see themselves typically represented. In them God worked out His purposes as on a divine theatre. In their history could be seen as on a placard the legible writing of the Divine Hand. Other nations had, of course, a religious history. But the Jewish history was nothing but a religious history. They had no secular history. Their government, as Josephus was the first to point out, was a theocracy. God was their King. And God alone, it has been well said, was the only hero of their national literature! How God dealt with this nation was an image of how God deals with all nations. Their

history, then, was a "parable" (Ps. lxxviii. 2, Mt.) of things to come. "The things that happened unto them happened by way of TYPES" of that future universal Church which Christ was yet finally to set up (I Cor. x. 11, *ἐν τύποις*).

Let us examine some of these *types*. In the youthful David's fortunes before and after he ascended the throne, how deep and malignant was the treachery of Saul and his satellites, Doeg the Edomite, Cush (i.e., Shimei) the Benjamite, and even Ahitophel, Joab and Abiathar, his own former friends and accomplices, in turning him from the throne and utilizing his own sons, Absalom and Adonijah, in the general conspiracy against "the man after God's own heart"! In all this we see the first sketches of that spirit of ANTI-CHRIST, who, as the history of the Jews rolled on, was to reappear as Judas in the life of the Son of David and, later still, in the history of Messiah's followers was to persecute and betray to the Roman authorities the infant Christian Church! Those terrible imprecatory Psalms from liii. to lxiv. culminating in the awful retribution of Psalms lxix. and cix., have been for the Jews fearfully fulfilled to the letter (as Chrysostom shows) in the last two thousand years. And has not Psalm lix. received in them its special fulfilment—that God's people were to be treated as "heathen," "not" to be "destroyed" but "scattered" even "to the ends of the earth?" These Scriptures Christ and St. Paul and St. Peter quoted in proof that God had foreseen the treachery of His people and had used them as His unconscious instruments to fulfil His sovereign purposes for the world's redemption (John xiii. 18; Acts i. 20; Rom. xi. 8-10).

On the other hand, when the ark was brought from its hiding-place with pomp and sacrifice to Mount Zion David foresees in this ritual action, both as priest and king, the ASCENSION and session of His Son, when "He went up on high and led His long line of captives" (lxviii. 18), when the "eternal gates" of the New Jerusalem "lifted up their heads" to welcome "the King of glory" (xxiv. 7), before He "sat down" as "Priest for ever" on "the right hand" of God (cx. i. 4). As St. Peter truly says: "David seeing this before spake of Christ."

How clearly, too, in the Psalms does David grasp the fact of Messiah's lifelong SACRIFICE of willing obedience when He "came as in the roll of the Law it was prescribed for Him, to do God's will" (xl. 10)!

His "ears" were "bored" as being God's slave (Exod. xxi. 6)—the better to hear His Master's words! (cp. Isa. l. 4)—yielding thus His "body" to be "fashioned" (lxx.; Heb. x. 5) for the Master's use (Ps. xl. 6); until at last He comes to His CRUCIFIXION, when the soldiers "pierce His hands and feet" and "part [His garments among them," and then the taunts of the Jewish rabbis are distinctly heard: "Roll Thy burden upon the Lord *if* He will have Him; let Him *now* deliver Him if He delighteth in Him!" (xxii. 8, 16, 17). To the crucifixion succeeds the RESURRECTION, about which "the sweet psalmist of Israel" rests in confidence that even his "*flesh*" will "dwell securely" when he "wakes up after" the Divine "likeness" (xvi. 11, xvii. 16).

How bitterly, again, does the Psalmist's conscience feel the "hateful" yet universal power of SIN (xxxvi. 2, liii.)! How completely impotent is the law, through the weakness of our sinful flesh, to grapple with it apart from an "imputed righteousness" (xxxii. 1, 2), and the gift of the "Holy Spirit" (li. 11)! St. Paul himself might have written: "Sacrifice and offering Thou wouldest not (but myself), for Mine ears hast thou pierced open" (xl. 6). Lastly, when David's son, SOLOMON, ascends the throne amid all his rivals, and marries the daughter of the Egyptian king, and extends his conquests by trade and arms over many lands and over many seas, the Psalmist anticipates another aspect of Christ as the Prince of Peace, Who shall espouse the Gentiles to Him for His own Bride, the Church (xlv.), Who shall be accepted as co-regent on His Father's throne, so that all men shall honour, or "kiss, the Son" just as they honour the Father (ii. 12); and of His kingdom there shall be no end (lxxii. 7-11). If ever there were any doubt of the inspiration of Scripture the Psalter alone would supply the refutation. *Here are events of high significance foreshadowed in the life of David and Solomon which were awaiting their more complete fulfilment in the person of Christ and of His Church.*

Even the titles of the Psalms have, some of them at any rate, their TYPICAL significance. Of these the most mysterious is that of *Al-taschith*, i.e. "destroy not" (Pss. lvii., lviii., lix., lxxv). What is the meaning of this phrase? David had been promised the throne of Saul. And Saul knew it (1 Sam. xxiii. 17). He therefore made David swear an oath to the effect that he would "*not destroy*" him if ever he (King Saul) fell into his hand (1 Sam. xxiv. 21).

Jonathan, Saul's son, renewed the oath that Saul's seed should be spared in the day of David's prosperity (1 Sam. xx. 15, 16). At last the fated day arrived when Saul in his hunt for David's life was twice discovered by David's men and twice spared in memory of David's oath, that he would "not destroy" the Lord's anointed (1 Sam. xxiv. 4-10 and xxvi. 9). David knew that God would find some occasion of ridding him of his enemy: he himself would not hasten events by precipitating the final catastrophe.

Now Saul was a *type* for all time of an apostate from God's kingdom, persecuting the faithful heir of God's promise, like Ishmael's hatred of Isaac, like Edom's cruelty to Israel, like Herod, who tried to kill the infant Jesus. Saul was, in short, the first picture of Anti-Christ in the Church, who is not to be in his final manifestation an ignorant heathen, but one who falls away from the faith he once held. Hence, that maxim of David, "Destroy not," is applied *typically* to Saul's courtiers, and to all the Jewish people who could not discern in David the Lord's anointed, and to all who in their later descendants could not see in Christ their own Messiah. In Psalms lvii.-lix. this fact of their diabolical treachery is brought out; hence they are threatened for their anti-Christian plottings against David with being "not destroyed" but "scattered unto the ends of the earth" (lix. 11, 13) as a standing example of the divine vengeance! In Psalm lxxv. the anti-Christian power of Sennacherib was in like manner "destroyed, not" by Hezekiah (who refused to encounter the Assyrian army) but by the angel of the Lord who went out and smote Sennacherib's army with a pestilence. In Isaiah's words, the Assyrian yoke was destroyed from off Hezekiah's shoulder "because of the anointing" of David's line of kings (Isa. x. 27). In other words the phrase "Destroy not" was a maxim to remind the kings of Israel and Judah that it was not for man to lift his hand against any one, however evil, who was the Lord's anointed king, or to doubt, like Eli and Uzzah, of God's protection of His own Ark and His own people. That was God's work.¹

In a second article we propose to treat of *the inspired order and structure of the Psalter* as having been (in Chrysostom's language) divinely pre-adjusted to the facts of the Gospel history.

A. H. T. CLARKE.

¹ Dr. Thirtle, in his *Titles of the Psalms* (1904), has attempted to establish, on the model of Habakkuk's Psalm, the theory that the musical notices are placed *after*, never *before*, the Psalms to which they belong. This theory, while it seems to explain the double ascription of Ps. lxxxviii. and the reference to the "dove" in Ps. lv. fatally overlooks *Al-tashith* in Ps. lix. 11.; and "the hind of the morning" loses its meaning if transferred to Ps. xxi. To vindicate his theory on the title of Ps. lxxxviii. he translates *Mahalath l'annôth* ("sickness and afflictions") by "with dancings and shoutings" in order to bring the title into line with the previous Psalm.