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## The Theology of the Psalms.

BY PROFESSOR THE REV. W. T. DAVISON, M.A., D.D.; BIRMINGHAM.

### FELLOWSHIP WITH GOD.

THE Psalms, more than any other portion of the Bible, breathe the atmosphere of subjective religion. In Law and Prophets, Gospels and Epistles, we find objective revelation, but the Psalms are the language of religious experience. Whatever divine revelation they contain—no inconsiderable amount—is communicated through the medium of the inner personal experience of the devout men who penned them. The Psalter, as every one acknowledges, is pre-eminently the handbook of personal devotion. All the more important, therefore, is it that the conditions of the religious life herein reflected should be clearly understood. The teaching of the Psalms, if we may so speak, is held in solution, and therefore is all the more rapidly and completely assimilated. What, then, is the Psalmist's view of fellowship with God, the conditions of enjoyment of so high a privilege, the nature of the union attainable, the consequences following upon such high fellowship? These questions belong, though in a secondary sense, to the theology of the Psalms. Only next in importance to the primary question, Who and what

is God? is the kindred question, How may communion with Him be attained and enjoyed?

It must not be forgotten that underlying the whole of the Psalms there is a tacit premiss or postulate. The Psalmist does not speak as a mere ordinary member of the human race taken at random. He is a member of a privileged community. This community stands in a specially sacred relation to God, which is described by the word *Berith*, Covenant. Jehovah is Israel's covenanted God, Israel is Jehovah's covenanted people. The word can only be applied to a relation between God and man, with very considerable modifications, and it is evidently highly metaphorical. But it testifies to a spiritual reality, a bond into which God has deigned to enter in the sense of having made through His messengers important promises to His chosen people, if they on their part will comply with certain specified conditions. A covenant is made with Abraham, renewed to Isaac and Jacob, and redelivered to Moses with specially sacred sanctions; it is embodied in the law, confirmed by the prophets, and

enjoyed by every faithful Israelite. The enjoyment of the blessings of the covenant is partly secured to every member of the community, in privileges which are his independently of his personal conduct; but the full enjoyment of its blessings is reserved for the faithful only, and is granted in proportion to his fidelity and obedience. The people is 'God's own possession,' His 'special treasure,' and in return Israel may claim a special care and protection at the hands of God. Jehovah's 'portion' is His people, and Israel's 'portion' is Jehovah Himself. Proprietorship implies privilege and responsibility. Love begets love, and demands love in return. The exceptional blessings which the covenant secures to Israel demand an exceptional devotion in return. 'Be ye holy, for I am holy,' is a familiar but profound expression, embodying both the duties and prerogatives attaching to this sacred covenant bond.

Of all this we have no formal account in the Psalms. The obligation is declared in the Law and pressed home by the Prophets. But it is taken for granted in the Psalms. It is all the more important that the thoughtful reader of modern times should not allow this tacit premiss to escape him, else he will fail to understand much of the language of the Psalter. Sometimes this underlying assumption finds clear expression. 'Gather My saints together unto Me,' is the message in Ps. l. 5, and the word 'saints' is explained to mean 'those that have made a covenant with Me by sacrifice.' But for the most part the reference to the covenant is implicit only. 'Preserve my soul,' pleads the Psalmist in lxxxvi. 2; 'for I am godly.' The ground of the plea is apt to be misunderstood. 'I am holy,' we read in the text of A.V., with the variation 'One whom Thou favourest' in the margin. But this is to misunderstand the Psalmist's prayer. He urges that he is *chasid*, a true and loyal member of the community to whom Jehovah has bound Himself in *chesed*, a gracious and tender covenant love, which in itself forms an inexhaustible plea for help and deliverance in time of need. The fact that the suppliant is a member of the privileged community suffices for a ground of approach; but if he can urge that he is faithful to the religious bond which constitutes the nation God's 'peculiar,' that is, God's *own* people, his claim to be heard is complete.

Illustrations of this fundamental postulate of the Psalmist's prayers and thanksgivings abound. As an example, however, we may take Ps. lxxvii. The writer is in trouble, and if words mean anything, his trouble is personal and individual. 'In the day of my trouble I sought the Lord;' 'My soul refused to be comforted;' 'I am so troubled that I cannot speak.' He appears to be deserted by God—'Is His mercy clean gone for ever?' 'Hath God forgotten to be gracious? Hath He in anger shut up His tender mercies?' These expressions may no doubt be understood of national calamity, but it is far more natural to suppose that the pressure felt at the moment was individual, even though the sufferer was but enduring loss and trouble such as others of his countrymen had to pass through. When national trouble is indicated, the language is unmistakable, as in Pss. xliv., lxxiv., and lxxix. But under the pressure of suffering which the psalm describes as personal to the writer, how does he find deliverance? When he returns to his better self from a mood of despondency, almost despair, and cries, 'This is my infirmity,' it is in the thought of no personal dealing of God with himself that he finds relief and comfort. The needed balm is applied to his wounds when he remembers God's 'wonders of old,' His 'works,' His 'doings' in behalf of the covenant people to whom he belongs. 'Thou hast with Thine own arm redeemed Thy people—Thou leddest Thy people like a flock, by the hand of Moses and Aaron.' The connecting link of argument, which is not and needs not to be expressed, is, that poor, oppressed, insignificant as the Psalmist himself may be, he is safe in the hands of a covenant-keeping God—

Thou never, never wilt forsake  
A helpless worm that trusts in Thee.

But the ground of trust is not God's character in relation to all mankind, nor the frailty and feebleness of the Psalmist, which might appeal to the tenderness of the Creator. Sometimes these thoughts are found, but by way of exception only. The close and intimate fellowship with God which the Psalms so often describe, the immovable confidence in the divine faithfulness which is so notable a characteristic of them, and the boldness which sometimes marks their language, find a justification not in any dictates of 'natural religion,' but in the character of the covenant,

'ordered in all things and sure,' to which the Israelite was, indeed, often personally unfaithful, but which he held as a precious and almost inalienable possession.

It is in this sense that the frequent assertions of personal righteousness to be found in the Psalms are to be understood. Schultz goes so far as to say that 'righteousness and sinlessness in the strict sense have nothing to do with each other.'<sup>1</sup> It would be better to say that the standard of righteousness here recognised is not absolute, but relative. When one psalmist boldly claims, 'Thou hast tried me, and findest nothing: my steps have held fast to Thy paths, my feet have not slipped' (xvii. 3, 5), or, 'I will walk within my house with a perfect heart: I will know no evil thing' (ci. 2, 4),—is there anything fundamentally inconsistent with the penitent confession of another psalm, 'Behold, I was shapen in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me'? It may be said, perhaps, that the language of the 51st Psalm is to be ascribed to a different writer, or to a different period, or that it is the expression of an altogether different mood. Without denying the possibility of this, we shall do well to remember that all these expressions might without inconsistency come from the same man. The claim of 'uprightness,' 'integrity,' 'blamelessness,' is not absolute. It implies a loyal attempt to fulfil the terms of the divine covenant with Israel, which covenant an Israelite might faithfully and substantially keep, whilst at the same time recognising his frailty and sinfulness as a man in the sight of a holy God. The righteous man may say, and should say, 'Who can discern his errors?' or, 'If Thou, Jah, shouldst mark iniquities, O Lord, who shall stand?' The forgiveness which is described in the next verse (cxxx. 4) is a part of the covenant blessing, those 'sure mercies of David,' without which the Psalmist were undone, indeed.

At the same time, the covenant is *spiritually* understood. It is clear that a bond of this kind is capable of very various interpretation, that in some hands it will become legal in character, in others utterly formal and mechanical. By the spiritual man its meaning will be spiritually discerned. Very few psalms refer to the letter of the written law. Those which do, the 1st, 19th, and the 119th, for example, whilst highly lauding the divine

precepts and statutes, evidently contemplate the law in its spirit, scope, and issues. The statutes which are 'songs in the house of pilgrimage' cannot be viewed as rigid bonds or irksome fetters. The delight in law and the longing for divine commandments, of which the psalmists speak when the law is mentioned, are evidently the experience of men who have entered into the moral and spiritual excellence of law, and observe the covenant in the freedom of the spirit, not the bondage of the letter.

So with sacrifice. It forms part of the covenant, is indeed its solemn seal and sanction. The psalmists do not disparage sacrifice in itself any more than the precepts of the covenant; but, like the prophets, they desire to keep sacrifice in its due place. The punctilious presentation of appointed offerings no more constitutes a fulfilment of the covenant than the sanctimonious observance of the letter of the law. 'Sacrifice and offering Thou hast no delight in; burnt offering and sin offering hast Thou not required. I delight to do Thy will, O my God: yea, Thy law is within my heart.' It is quite in the prophetic spirit and even the prophetic manner that another psalmist asks in the name of the Most High God, 'Will I eat the flesh of bulls or drink the blood of goats?' That this language is not to be pressed into a disparagement of sacrifice altogether, is evident from the justification in the 51st Psalm of two such statements as, 'Thou desirest not sacrifice, else would I give it'; and, 'Then shalt Thou delight in the sacrifices of righteousness, in burnt offering and whole burnt offering: then shall they offer bullocks upon Thine altar.' It is true that the latter verse is generally understood to be a liturgical addition to the psalm, and it is even said that it was added by some later writer to counteract the impression produced by vers. 15 and 17. But no such addition has been made to the 40th Psalm, or the 50th, which is even stronger in its expressions. And there is no more difficulty in understanding how a devout psalmist could observe the sacrifices of the old covenant, without superstitiously trusting in them, than in understanding similar action in a modern church-goer. The outward observances which to an unspiritual man are either a stumbling-block or a talisman, to the spiritual man are the outward and visible signs of an inward and spiritual grace. Law and sacrifice both figure in the Psalms as the

<sup>1</sup> *Old Testament Theology*, E. T. vol. ii. p. 24.

external institutions of a covenant which was valued for its spiritual significance and power.

Hence the highly spiritual language of many of the Psalms need not appear strange to us, nor furnish a ground for relegating them to a very late date. It remains to be proved that the period B.C. 250 to 150 was one in which the Jews were so highly spiritual that all the psalms which breathe a lofty spirit of devotion must be—we had almost said—dragged down to as late a date as possible. It may well be that tradition has read into the character of David some elements which did not form a part of it, owing to the habit of ascribing psalms to him pretty freely, almost promiscuously. It may well be that in the pre-critical period of Old Testament study the development of religious thought was not understood as it is now, and that a certain confusion took place between features which belonged to an earlier, and those which characterised a later, period. But it would surely be a mistake with some modern critics to adopt the canon, 'All highly spiritual psalms are of a comparatively late date.' Spirituality is not always of the same type. A lofty and intense religion may be somewhat narrow in its character, a spiritual view of God, 'universalistic' in conception, may be comparatively shallow and superficial. In fact, great caution is necessary in framing any generalisations concerning the religious character of a period. Judgments of this kind need to be carefully checked by objective facts and illustrations, and even where a general statement may be warranted, exceptions to a general rule are always possible, of which examples may have come down to us in some of the Psalms.

Whilst reserving judgment as to date, therefore, we need not be staggered by the appearance of lofty spirituality in psalms of any period. The 42nd is in all probability a psalm of the monarchy, yet it has furnished expression for the devout longings of the most spiritual men in all generations. The Psalmist who recalls with joy how he 'went in procession' to the house of God is not thinking of the solemnities of temple-worship merely, his soul is 'athirst for God, for the living God.' The writer of the 63rd Psalm refers to the king as rejoicing in God; but surely there is no need with Canon Cheyne to make it 'Maccabæan,' because of its pure and lofty religious feeling. And is there not a huge *petitio principii* in the sweeping statement, 'Pre-Jeremian such highly spiritual

hymns obviously cannot be.'<sup>1</sup> Of more importance, however, than the determination of date is the fact of the appearance in the Psalter of such sublimely spiritual language as this psalm contains. The eagerness of desire for communion with God, expressed in the first verse by the figure of the weary and waterless land, is only equalled by the description of the Psalmist's glad experience of the joys of such communion, which is too long and too well known to quote. It is paralleled in the language of the 36th Psalm, in which occur the lofty lines—

For with Thee is the fountain of life,  
In Thy light we shall see light.

This psalm is perhaps composite, though in the writer's opinion that is the deeper and truer criticism which does not needlessly multiply 'hands' when a change of style or subject occurs, and which can recognise the coexistence in one lyric of varying moods and strains. But the crystalline purity of devout expression, of which the verse just quoted is an illustration, does not belong to one age only, but is found in psalms of various periods, extending from the 18th in David's time to the 139th, which may be seven hundred years later. Happily, the worship in spirit and in truth of God who is Spirit has been attained by men in all ages and in all climes. The work of that Spirit that doth 'prefer before all temples the upright heart and pure' is not limited to one age, and of this the Psalms are one standing and conspicuous example.

The blessings of such communion with God, as the Psalmist prayed for and enjoyed, are described in very lofty language. The difficulty sometimes is to understand how any Jew of any century before Christ could reach to such a level of spiritual experience. A study of the law does not help us, whether we consider the earlier or the later stages of its growth. Even the lofty 'ethical monotheism' of the prophets does not prepare us for the tenderness and delicacy, the purity and beauty of religious feeling which finds expression in the Psalms. Where in the law could the Jew find assurance of divine forgiveness, the 'mystic joys of penitence,' and the yet more mystic joys of pardon, such as are

<sup>1</sup> *Origin of the Psalter*, p. 99. The 'study' of this psalm, published by Canon Cheyne in the *Expositor* (1890), and reprinted in *Aids to the Devout Study of Criticism*, pp. 308-322, is full of beauty, but the arguments in favour of a Maccabæan date are very slight and unconvincing.

portrayed in the 32nd Psalm? The law only provided for outward atonement or cleansing, and this only with reference to certain classes of sins. But the writer of the 51st Psalm pleads for inward cleansing of heart with a fervour and variety of phrase, the deep significance of which has been too much blunted by familiar use. The Psalmist who so prayed for pardon and purity in his inmost soul (ver. 6) was a man who had known the 'joy of Thy salvation' (ver. 12), who had himself entered into the spiritual emancipation and amplitude of the 'free,' the 'willing,' the 'generous' spirit—the princely heart of innocence.' The psalmists of all periods are assured that if an Israelite does but turn to God with penitence and trust, the way is open for him; although they had never heard the Parable of the Prodigal Son, they are confident that the returning penitent will be received with open arms. 'There is forgiveness with Thee, that Thou mayest be feared'—for reverent love is impossible towards a hard and implacable Deity—'With Jehovah there is mercy, and with Him is plenteous redemption. And He shall redeem Israel from all their iniquities' (cxxx. 4, 7, 8). This does not imply an easy laxity in the divine government. For this assurance of pardon is for Israel only, and rests upon the covenant love and grace of God. And the repentance must be real and deep, combined with complete acknowledgment of God's righteousness and submissive acceptance of divine chastisements. No one who reads the 'Pauline' psalms, especially the 32nd, 40th, and 51st, will be inclined to say that the path of the penitent to pardon was felt to be easy, or that divine grace could be presumed upon with impunity. 'My bones waxed old through my roaring; my moisture was changed as with the drought of summer.' Forgiveness is to be accompanied by that heart-renewal which ensures righteousness, and which every true penitent desires in the same breath that he seeks for pardon. A 'clean heart,' a 'steadfast spirit' are part of the boon which the contrite sinner implores. If by any of the sons of men forgiveness has been abused as a mere license to sin again, it was not so with the writers of the Psalms.

The life of faith is described on almost every page of the Psalter. Four several roots are used to describe this close relation between God and His servant: *'āman*, to hold on by; *bātach*, to

confide in; *gālal*, to roll upon; *chāsāh*, to take shelter in; besides *yāchal*, to wait in hope; *q'āvāh*, to wait with constancy, and other words of kindred meaning, each with its own shade of beautiful suggestiveness. The theological meaning of faith has not yet appeared above the horizon, but its essence is found in these primitive words, which describe the attitude Godwards of the trusting soul in all ages. The Psalmist is not navigating either of the several parted streams of theological definition, but the quiet waters of the lake above, out of which they all alike flow; its name is Religion. The 37th Psalm draws freely upon the copious list of synonyms referred to, as it describes the peace which attends upon pious waiting, a peace which passeth understanding. The beautiful group of psalms (lii. to lix.), associated in the titles with scenes in David's history, present a number of chapters in the history of militant faith, and exhibit a variety and fulness in their description of faith tried and triumphant, which only the close student is likely to notice. Let the reader, for example, examine carefully the conflict between faith and fear in Ps. lvi. Fear evidently has the mastery in vers. 1 and 2; faith appears upon the scene, like clear flame rising amidst dense smoke, in ver. 3, 'What time I am afraid, I will trust in Thee'; it leaps up superior for a moment in ver. 4, 'I will trust, I will not be afraid'; and after some chequered experiences gains a complete triumph in ver. 11, 'In God I have put my trust, I will not be afraid; what can man do unto me?'

But space will not permit the detailed illustrations which would give life and reality to this bare outline-sketch. We find ourselves compelled to forego the description of the Psalmist's joy in communion with God, which goes far to belie Lord Bacon's saying, that in listening to David's harp 'you shall hear as many hearse-like airs as carols.' Nor can we enlarge upon a very fruitful subject, the guidance which the Psalmist looks for at God's hand, to be met on his part by loyal obedience. The wise man in Proverbs says, 'In all thy ways acknowledge Him, and He shall direct thy paths.' The Psalmist often reverses the order. 'For Thy name's sake lead me and guide me, and I will walk in the way of Thy commandments.' 'Teach me the way of Thy statutes, and I shall keep it unto the end.' 'True guidance,'—says Thomas Carlyle, who by this generation is accounted a prophet,—'true guidance, in return

for loving obedience, did he but know it, is man's prime need.' Nowhere is the gracious mental relation between the Divine Shepherd and His human flock, guidance in return for obedience, obedience in return for guidance, more aptly or variously pictured than in the Psalms. A whole

theology and a whole anthropology is wrapped up in the simple phrases which describe this relation between man's only safe Guide and God's wayward, yet trustful, followers. The scope and issue of the pilgrimage undertaken under such leadership must be reserved for a succeeding article.

## At the Literary Table.

### THE BOOKS OF THE MONTH.

#### I.

THE DAWN OF CIVILIZATION: EGYPT AND CHALDÆA. BY G. MASPERO. Edited by A. H. SAYCE. Translated by M. L. MACLURE. (S.P.C.K. Royal 8vo, pp. xii + 800. Second Edition. 24s.) It is only at rarest intervals that we find it wisdom to wait for the second edition of a book. But those who have waited for the second edition of Professor Maspero's *Dawn of Civilization* are almost to be envied by those who did not. The first edition came out only last year. It seemed to be as nearly perfect as any book which handled a progressive science could be. It seemed to be as rich and beautiful as any work of art could be made. Nevertheless the second edition is better. For Professor Maspero has brought his subject down to date—down to catch the latest discovery and include the latest decipherment. He has also revised the work throughout. And he has added the three coloured plates which appeared in the French original.

But if those who have waited for the second edition are thus to be congratulated, we advise no one to wait for the third. No doubt a third will come, but it cannot surpass this to any appreciable extent. Meantime you postpone the delight of a book so well written as to be independent of illustration, and so well illustrated as to be independent of any description in words. You postpone the knowledge which so authoritative a volume brings, and which cannot come too soon. You postpone the impression upon your life which a true book is able to make,—and is there any impression purer or more enduring?

Wilkinson has held this field long (that is, in respect of Egypt), but he cannot hold it longer.

We may regret, we do regret, that Professor Sayce, who writes the Introduction to Maspero, did not give us a new edition of Wilkinson rather. But the regret is only on the narrower ground of patriotism; in the larger interests of science and art, no regret can possibly be felt. Nevertheless the Englishman is not to be depreciated. If this is a better book than Wilkinson's *Manners and Customs of the Ancient Egyptians*, it is solely because the science of Egyptology and the art of pictorial illustration have made great strides of progress since Wilkinson's day.

We do not wish, however, to convey the impression that Maspero covers exactly the same ground as Wilkinson. He is much more historical and political, much less social. To Wilkinson the family was more than the State; to Maspero the State is more than the family. Still it is in no sense a history Professor Maspero writes. It is more inward far than that. It is the life out of which the history grew, the customs and creeds that made the men and then sent them out to make the history.

One feature of the book remains to receive special and thankful recognition. By a constant and abundant reference to the literature of the subject, it offers us at every step the opportunity of testing its statements or pursuing its points. This is most important. There are difficulties and differences at almost every turn of the page. We are afforded the means of making our own judgments upon them all. And still better, we are offered the opportunity and encouragement of entering more deeply into a subject which is certain to become interesting to us as soon as we have read Professor Maspero's own volume.