

in heaven, that is an apparent antinomy to be solved, but it must not be solved by denying that His death on earth was a priestly act.

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THE SIXTEENTH PSALM.

I.

HERE is a psalm well worthy to be called, as the margin of King James's Bible translates the Jewish heading, a "golden" psalm. Golden indeed it is; it belongs to that Bible within the Bible which the Christian instinct teaches all of us to rediscover for ourselves, and in which the New Testament writers took such keen delight. In childlike faith these holy men of old found their Saviour in the 16th Psalm; and so may we, on the single condition that we do not disregard those laws of the human mind which God Himself made. Childlike faith must in us be coupled with manly reasonableness. The first believers practically rewrote the Psalter for edification, without thinking of its original meaning; they took every one of the 150 psalms into the shrine of Gospel utterances. We who come after them cannot give this particular proof of our belief in the divinity of the Old Testament revelation. In adapting the Psalms to the needs of edification, we who desire to consecrate our intellect to Christ must seek counsel of a criticism and an exegesis which are nothing if they are not psychological; that is, if they are not in full accordance with the laws of the human mind.

It is a noteworthy fact, that the latest German com-
sacrifice for His own *sins*. Those who make *τοῦτο* include both have to take *ἀμαρτιῶν* in the sense of infirmities. So Ochlichtingius and Hofmann.

mentator on the Psalms¹—the editor of an exposition by that unimpassioned but yet evangelical theologian Hupfeld—has no hesitation in including Psalm xvi. among those which were influenced by the Second or Babylonian Isaiah. Certainly the exegesis which finds Christian elements or anticipations in the psalm is much more credible from a lay point of view upon this theory of the date than upon any other. Let us assume the theory to be correct for the purposes of practical exegesis, and regard this not as a royal, but as a Church-psalm.

“ Preserve me, O God : for in Thee do I put my trust.

I have said unto Jehovah, Thou art my Lord :

I have no good beyond Thee.”

The words in the third line are not a mere flower of rhetoric. They tell us that the “pleasant land,” so fruitful and so fair, would have no charm in the eyes of true Israelites without the spiritual glory of the knowledge of Jehovah’s will. Do not mistake the meaning of “I have said.” The speaker does not mean to tell us that at a certain day and hour he “read his title clear” to the Divine favour. No; he refers not to the past, but to the present. The words of the solemn confession have been uttered just now in his heart, and the rest of the psalm is but an expansion of them. “Thou art my Lord; Thou art my only happiness.” How thoroughly Christian this is! The Christian and the Mohammedan both address their God as “Lord,” but in what a different sense! A Christian looks upon his God as not merely his Master, but the director and helper of his work. God and he are united in the same great moral enterprise. The sense of this constitutes his happiness.

“ As for the saints that are in the land,

*And thine excellent ones, all my delight is in them.”*²

¹ Dr. Wilhelm Nowack. See Hupfeld’s *Psalmen*, 3rd edition, vol. i., p. 233.

² Here I have been obliged to deviate from the Revised Version. Nor can I

Why this mention of the "saints," or, literally, "holy ones" (*i.e.* the faithful Israelites), and the "excellent (or, glorious) ones" (*i.e.* the priests, who in Isaiah xliii. 28, 1 Chronicles xxiv. 5, are called "holy, or consecrated, princes") almost in the same breath with Jehovah? Because, in the troublesome days which followed the reforms of Ezra and Nehemiah, the society which a man kept was the test of his religion. Israel was surrounded by heathen peoples, and, as Psalm lxxiii. shows, many believers in Jehovah stumbled at the prosperity of the ungodly (*i.e.* of the heathen). Our psalmist disclaims connexion with such; Jehovah is his Lord, and Jehovah's priests are his honoured leaders. The house of David has passed into obscurity, and the priests and the teachers of the Scriptures are more and more seen to be, under God, the true defenders of the Church-nation.

"They multiply their own griefs, who change (Jehovah) for another."

The meaning of this depends on our interpretation of the close of the psalm. Presupposing that vers. 10 and 11 involve the belief in "eternal life," one may hold that the above words refer either to the great judgment day, or to the preliminary judgment of the soul after death, when the wicked, as the prophet says, "shall lie down in anguish."¹ How should the psalmist desire the short-lived pleasures of these doomed sinners? "Let me not eat of their dainties," says a like-minded temple-poet.² For at every meal there would be a libation of wine to some false god ("blood,"

adopt an ingenious, and, as Nowack thinks, thoroughly satisfactory correction of Baethgen's, based upon the Septuagint and a comparison of Isaiah xlii. 21. I have thought it well however in this conference, if I may call it so, on a much-prized psalm, to give way to the Received Text by retaining the first part of its third verse, as I have already yielded to the Revised Version by adopting its version of the difficult and, as I think, corrupt words in ver. 2 b.

¹ Isa. l. 11.

² Ps. cxli. 4.

our psalmist calls it), and some light idolatrous phrase would be on every tongue. Therefore,—

*“Let me not pour out their drink-offerings of blood,
Nor take their (idols’) names upon my lips.”*¹

Observe that this fine psalm is free from imprecations. The speaker gazes in sadness at the poor deluded heathen, and passes by. They have their “portion” in the life of the senses, as the next psalm says;² but Israel’s “portion” is not chiefly the “pleasant places” in which *the lines have fallen unto him* (ver. 6), but moral friendship with his God. “*Jehovah is mine appointed portion and cup*” (ver. 5); or, as another poet says,³ “*Whom have I in heaven (but Thee)?*” meaning that heaven is but “a closer walk with God.” Our psalmist continues, “*Thou art continually my lot.*” “Continually” implies that spiritual blessings are not like “treasures upon earth.” “While he has any being,” the saint will need no other treasure but his God. But the word suggests more than this. There is a larger and a lesser interpretation of the fine word “continually.” If at the end of the psalm the poet should be found to have risen to the conception of “eternal life,” it will be not unreasonable to see an allusion to this already. But the two next verses certainly refer in the main to time present.

*“I bless Jehovah, who hath given me counsel,
Yea, in the nights my longings prompt me thereto.
I have set Jehovah before me continually:
For with him at my right hand I cannot be moved.”*

Wise counsel was indeed the great need of the Israelites who returned from Babylon. Sad would have been their fate, if God had not raised up Ezra as a reformer, and the psalmists as purifiers and fosterers of the spiritual life!

¹ From the first the lawgivers foresaw the dangers of intercourse with the heathen (see Exod. xxiii. 13).

² Ps. xvii. 14.

³ Ps. lxxiii. 25.

And what was true of the Church might also be said of each of its members, in so far as they recognised their share in the common work. The comfort of each true believer, as well as of the Church was that expressed by our psalmist in the first part of ver. 7, and by another in the beautiful words, "Thou wilt guide me with thy counsel" (or, "according to thy purpose").¹ In other words, regenerate Israel rejoices in the presence of the Holy Spirit. For this best of gifts the speaker who represents his people blesses Jehovah by day and by night. "Whither can I go from thy spirit?" says another psalmist; "when I awake, I am still with thee."² How beautiful! The thought of God is his pillow, and when he rises from his couch, it is to utter the praises of which his heart is full. His eyes are ever towards Jehovah, and he fears not what the future may bring. Trouble itself is a sweet and strengthening wine, because the cup has been filled by the King of love.

How different is the mysticism of psalms like xvi., xvii., and lxxiii. from much that passes by this word of various acceptations! Where but in the Bible can we find an absorption in God which does not prevent a true and tender interest in the cares and sorrows of humanity? There is a morbid and artificial corruption of Bible-mysticism which has done violence to our best natural feelings, and even lighted the flames of religious persecution. But the psalmists whom, from their grasp of the mystery of the life in God, we call "mystic" do not debar themselves from simple, natural pleasures, nor do they close their eyes to the "pleasant places" of their "delightful land." They have got beyond that most pathetic sigh of a wounded spirit, in which the psalmist appeals to God for clemency as a "stranger" and a "sojourner."³ But

¹ Ps. lxxiii. 24.

² Ps. cxxxix. 7, 18.

³ Ps. xxxix. 12. We can hardly accept the interpretation of this passage

they would cheerfully give up all for God and His law; the Jewish Church is being prepared for the great persecution of the following period. The psalmist knew that he dwelt in God, and God in him, that as a member of the true Israel he was safe in life and in death. Let us, spiritual Israelites, take a lesson from his faith. Only if we can say to our God, "Thou art my Lord, I have no good beyond thee," can we join with perfect confidence in the prayer, "Preserve me, O God: for in thee do I put my trust." Perfect trust belongs only to him who has surrendered himself wholly to God. How perfect our psalmist's trust is, may be seen from the fact that he does not repeat this prayer. So clear is his believing insight into God's purposes, that his one prayer passes directly into prophecy and into glad rejoicing at an assured inheritance. And why should not our spiritual standard be equally high? Why should we, living in the full light of the Gospel, be outdone by Jewish saints?

For consider. This 16th Psalm is not merely the record of a personal mood, and to be realized only in those exceptional moments when we happen to be in a like mood ourselves. It is a Church-psalm, and describes a state open to every true Jewish Churchman, in so far as he is a Churchman. What was it that made a Jewish Churchman, do you ask? The same which makes each of us a Christian Churchman,—the possession of or the being possessed by the Holy Spirit. The difference between a Jewish and a Christian Churchman is this—that the one had not, and the other has, a clear and consistent idea of the character of his Divine Guest. "God, having of old times spoken unto the fathers in the prophets by divers portions and in divers manners, hath at the end of these days spoken unto

given in Heb. xi. 13-16. The psalmist's tone precludes the idea that he looks forward to "a better country, that is, an heavenly." Would that it were otherwise!

us in his Son, . . . the effulgence of his glory, and the very image of his substance." So says the nameless author of the Epistle to the Hebrews, and the words cast a bright light on the difference between the dispensations. Both were dispensations of the Spirit; but there was a want of uniformity, a want of consistency, a want of clearness in the one which made it painfully difficult to maintain the highest level of spiritual religion. But to us a vision has been granted of One whom the Holy Spirit so filled, that an apostle speaks with equal readiness of the Spirit of God and the Spirit of Christ. The life of Christ is to us the highest embodiment of the Divine Spirit. Why should it be hard to "set God always before us," and to find our sole happiness in Him, when we have such a sweet and affecting picture of the character of God in the Gospel history, and when the Father has sent us such a perfect expositor of the things of Jesus in the Paraclete or Comforter? Few Jewish Churchmen probably had the constant sense of the Spirit abiding upon them; but the meanest Christian Churchman is privileged to have this sense, if so be that he has really believed in Christ, and been "sealed with that Holy Spirit of promise, which is the earnest of our inheritance." Truly may we say, "The lines are fallen unto me in pleasant places; yea, I have a goodly heritage": for to have within us the Spirit of God and of Christ, and to love and trust and rejoice in God, is the secret which transforms this earth into the vestibule of heaven.

II.

"In the forum of a ruined Roman city in what is now Algeria is a pavement-slab, with an unfinished inscription rudely scratched, and still so fresh that it might have been scratched only a night or two before the overthrow of the city. Within an ornamental bower are the words, 'To

hunt, to bathe, to play, to laugh—that is to live.’” We know the stern but kind judgment which the God in history pronounced on this corrupt type of society. But this low ideal of life was not peculiar to the Romanized subjects of the seven-hilled city. The want of a belief in a second and happier life, open not merely to special favourites of the gods, but to all who followed after righteousness, drove many men at all times into a position practically the same as that of the degenerate Romans. In the autobiographic Book of Ecclesiastes we see an Israelitish thinker succumbing to a sensualistic theory; only at intervals and at the end of the book does a break in the clouds perhaps reveal a loftier view of the aims of life. On the other hand, in the beautiful Book of Wisdom, another Jewish sage, residing at Alexandria, after describing at length the theory and the practice of those who made pleasure their god, expresses his own utter abhorrence of both; and before him the authors of Psalms xvi., xvii., and lxxiii. successfully resist the temptations of sensualism, and burst into the noblest utterances of their own perfect contentment with the true chief good, that is, God. Listen to these words from Psalm xvii. :

*“ Deliver my soul from the wicked by thy sword ;
From men of the world, whose portion is in life,
And whose craving thou fillest with thy treasure.
As for me, I shall behold thy face in righteousness :
Let me be satisfied, when I awake, with thine image !”*

Do you not seem to hear the ring of one of St. John’s favourite phrases—“the world”? “Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world.” Psalmist and apostle alike teach that the true life is the life in God, and that the soul’s true home is not a place, call it earth or call it heaven, but the light which no earthly eye can see of Jehovah’s countenance. This is the sweet mysticism of the psalmists, based upon the mystery into which they have been divinely initiated of the “path of life” (ver. 11). To

understand this, it is not enough to be an accomplished critic of words and sentences; a man must have a real affinity to the mind of the psalmists. "He that is spiritual," as St. Paul says, "judgeth all things."¹ For the doctrine of immortality there may be divers logical arguments; but the scholar of the psalmists does not reach it by any of them. It is to him an almost inevitable inference from the facts of his spiritual experience. (I say nothing at present of the great historical fact which completes his assurance.) Living as he does by prayer, and with a sense of the invisible things which grows every day in strength and purity, he cannot imagine that his intimacy with God will come to an abrupt end. His delight is to carry on God's work in the world, even it be only by the silent testimony of a godly life; and will he for his recompense be cast out into "the land where all things are forgotten"?² There was a time when even psalmists feared this.³ But how could a saint who so loved God as to say, "Whom have I in heaven but thee?" acquiesce in the thought that God's love to him would be terminated by his death? And why should the lot of those heroic saints of whom tradition told that God had taken them to Himself be an altogether exceptional privilege? And so in Psalms xlix. 15, lxxiii. 23, 24, we seem to overhear whispered anticipations of something not less glorious for each believer than was granted of old to Enoch and Elijah. True happiness to the psalmists is not merely the round of vanities so unblushingly set forth in that Algerian inscription, nor can the "path of life" issue in a delusive *mirage*. Thou, O God, being the saint's "ruler and guide," he can "so pass through things temporal" as "finally not to lose the things eternal." Or rather, there is no sharp antithesis between

¹ 1 Cor. ii. 15.

² Ps. lxxxviii. 12 (Prayer-Book Version).

³ Ps. xxx. 8, 9; lxxxviii. 5 (both in B.V.)

this world and the next. Heaven is where God is felt to be. The only distinction which Psalms xvi. and xvii. recognise is life with and life without God.

St. Peter, as reported in the Acts, calls the author of Psalm xvi. a prophet. The psalmists are in fact half-prophets. All prayer is based upon a revelation, and the highest kind of prayer leads on to fresh revelations. Not of course mechanical revelations, if the phrase may be used without offence; the revelations in which a modern exegesis can acquiesce must be and are at once natural and supernatural. The teachers of the Jewish Church-nation re-founded—or, if you will, founded—by Ezra, came to believe as they did by a gradual development, under the Spirit's influence, of germs already in their minds. And some modern interpreters find it a much less strain upon their faith to believe that the "mystic psalms" teach immortality, if these psalms are assigned to the age of Ezra, than when they felt compelled by an uncriticised tradition to refer at any rate Psalms xvi. and xvii. to the rude age of David. The deepening of personal religion which went on during and after the Captivity made it (as one is now permitted to think) natural to the strongest believers to accept the Holy Spirit's highest teaching. Tennyson speaks of "faintly" trusting the "larger hope." The larger hope of those times was personal immortality. It may well be that some Jewish Churchmen could trust it but faintly. But this was not the case with the greater, the mystic psalmists.

"Therefore my heart is glad, and my glory rejoiceth,

My flesh also dwelleth confidently ;

For thou wilt not leave my soul to Sheól (or, Hades),

*Neither wilt thou suffer thy godly one to see the pit."*¹

Does this merely mean that the believer's God will

¹ Ps. xvi. 9, 10 (quoting from R.V., and adopting three marginal renderings). On the rendering "the pit," see Dean Perowne's very moderately expressed note.

deliver him out of his distress, and not suffer him to go down to the grave in the midst of his days? I cannot think it. The psalmist does not pray as in Psalm xiii., "Lighten mine eyes, that I sleep not in death." His tone is calm and his style is smooth. There is in his work none of the abruptness and excitement characteristic of some gloomy persecution psalms.¹ The only trouble he mentions is the continual presence of a gross heathenism, but God preserves him from being cast down even by this. Yes; there are worse troubles than death. To see millions of our fellow creatures subject to moral death is far worse to a Christian than to be called away when his work on earth is done. Read the letters of the heralds of the Cross in heathen lands. "Oh! it is a stifling atmosphere, this," says a zealous French missionary in Africa.² "To battle with unmixed heathenism is more painful than our friends at home can imagine. It would be quite unbearable without Him 'in whose presence is fulness of joys.'" You see, he draws comfort from the 16th Psalm. Does he fear death? No; as little as another earnest French believer³ who said, "I cannot be afraid of death, for I have talked so much with God." The psalmist, be sure, would have said the same thing. The habit of prayer makes it unnatural not to believe in immortality. To say,—

"O God, thou art my God, early do I seek thee;

*My soul thirsteth for thee, my flesh longeth after thee,"*⁴

would be impossible, after the problem of the future life had once been raised, if God did not answer the prayer by shedding abroad in the heart the consciousness of eternal

¹ This remark does not apply to Ps. xvii. If Pss. xvi. and xvii. were written in the same period, we must suppose that the heathen, whose presence is felt indeed in Ps. xvi., but not as a cause of disquietude, had begun again to trouble faithful Israel. Circumstances changed as frequently in the days of post-exile Israel as in the life of the great poet-king David.

² M. Coillard.

³ Mme. de Broglie, a friend of Erskine of Linlathen.

⁴ Ps. lxiii. 1.

life. Let us read the tenth verse again, substituting however the phrase "loving one" for "godly one."

*"For thou wilt not leave (or, abandon) my soul to Hades;
Neither wilt thou suffer thy loving one to see the pit."*

Now, what does "thy loving one" mean? That depends on what "love" or "lovingkindness" means in the Psalms. You could not guess, even from the Revised Version, how often this word occurs, the translators having too commonly put "mercy" instead of "lovingkindness." It has three kindred meanings: "first, the covenant-love of Jehovah to those who know and serve Him; next, the covenant-love of a servant of Jehovah to his God; and, lastly, the love of Jehovah's servants among themselves" (*i.e.* brotherly love). By calling himself God's "loving one" the psalmist implies an argument—virtually the same argument which I have put into words already. The fact that the God of love has entered into a covenant, both with Israel and with each Israelite, has made it possible for a child of man, weak and sinful as he is, to know the everlasting God. Now "God is not a God of the dead, but a God of the living." That being so, God's love to man and man's love to God form a bridge by which the human spirit can cross the river of Death unharmed. Not only the true Israel (that is, the Church), but the true Israelite (that is, the believing Churchman), is made—to use New Testament language—"partaker of the Divine nature."¹ "Because I live," says the Son of God, "ye shall live also."

Do you ask, further, as to the nature of this eternal life? Our Lord Himself tells us, "This is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent."² The psalmist indeed could not have uttered the last part of this definition. His eyes were holden, so that he could not see the historical form of the fulfilment of prophecy. What he says, he says of himself;

¹ 2 Pet. i. 4.

² John xvii. 3.

God's "loving one" (or, "godly one") is, of course, the psalmist, as in Psalm iv. 3.¹ But of this he is well aware, that only those who know God spiritually can be in covenant with Him.

"For with thee is the fountain of life :

In thy light can we see light.

*O continue thy lovingkindness unto them that know thee,
And thy righteousness to the upright in heart."*²

Now it is in the nature of knowledge to grow. The bonds of sense prevent the knowledge of God from expanding to the uttermost; therefore even God's "loving one" must die. Calmly does the psalmist look forward to his dissolution; for to die is to depart and be in the fullest sense with God. Some students have been uncertain whether he expects to pass through an intermediate state, or anticipates an immediate admission to the Divine presence after death. The story of Enoch and Elijah would suggest the latter view to him; the later prophecies, especially that in Daniel xii., the former. The question is, Did the authors of Psalms xvi. and xvii. know those prophecies as well as those striking narratives? For my own part, I cannot doubt that they did; for at the end of Psalm xvii. I read these remarkable words,—

"Let me be satisfied, when I awake, with thine image !"

Does not this at once remind us of Isaiah xxvi. 19,³ "Awake and sing, ye that dwell in dust," and of Daniel xii. 2, "Many of those that sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake"? Now, if we hold that these psalms belong to the post-Exile period, how can we be surprised to find in one of them an allusion to the resurrection? And since they are twin-psalms, the Christian instinct must be right

¹ Where A.V. and R.V. both render "him that is godly."

² Ps. xxxvi. 9, 10.

³ See Mr. G. A. Smith's striking treatment of this passage, and of the prophetic intuition of immortality, in the *Expositor's Bible*.

in interpreting them both as referring to the same great belief. An intermediate state must therefore also be presupposed—not a joyless Hades, in which the voice of prayer and praise is hushed, but a true though faint copy of the mansion prepared in heaven. Our Lord, who nourished His own spiritual life upon the psalms, beautifully expresses the psalmists' meaning, when He says in the parable that "the beggar was carried by the angels into Abraham's bosom."

That the psalmists' expressions are vague, I know. They had a firm but not a very definite faith in a future life. We cannot wonder that many of the Jews hesitated to admit such sweet and comforting ideas. The Sadducees, as the Gospels tell us, expressly denied the doctrine of the resurrection, and were rebuked by our Lord for their want of insight. They were the agnostics of their time; at least, they wished to minimize the element of mystery in revealed religion. It was Jesus, the "Author and Perfecter of our faith," who saved His Church from the variations and vacillations of Judaism by the great fact of the resurrection. Say what you will of the difference between prediction and poetry; it remains true that the noblest passages of the psalms belong to Jesus Christ in a higher sense than to any Jewish or Christian saint, simply because He and He alone is the perfect Israelite, the fulfilment of the ideals of the elder, and the pattern for the imitation of the younger Church. Sweet it is to find something in which we can agree with the most uncritical interpreters, *viz.* the view that the best parts of the psalms are true anticipations of Christ, "that in all things," as St. Paul says, "he may have the pre-eminence."

The fewest words are the best in summing up a psalm like this. I would only ask, Have we in some measure caught that faith and hope which glowed so brightly in the psalmist? Unless we can conscientiously apply vers. 9-11 in some

degree to ourselves, there is no inward compulsion upon us to apply it in a secondary and mystic sense to Christ. It would be something no doubt merely to have discovered an improved form of the argument for Christianity from the Christian elements in the Old Testament. But the 16th Psalm ought to enable us to do more than this. The holy psalmist talked with God. Can we in like manner talk with God, and with the Saviour who died to bring us near to God? Noble as the prayers of the Psalter are, we ought not to rest in them, but to follow in the path which the psalmists trod. "Let me hear what the Lord God will say *concerning me*," says the Prayer-Book Version of Psalm lxxxv. 8.¹ "Speak Thou to me, O Lord, not Moses, nor the prophets," says the devout author of the *Imitation*. The habit of spiritual converse with God gives us an insight into His purposes, and enables us who are united to Christ by faith to apply to ourselves St. Peter's comment upon ver. 9: "Whom God raised up, having loosed the pangs of death: because it was not possible that he should be holden of it."²

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¹ The Septuagint inserts the words *ἐν ἐμοί*.

² Acts ii. 24.
