

THE POETRY OF THE PSALMS

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The poetry of the Psalms by Henry Van Dyke

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HENRY VAN DYKE

**THE POETRY
OF THE PSALMS**



THE POETRY OF
THE PSALMS
FOR READERS
OF THE ENGLISH
BIBLE
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HIS little book is intended as a brief and simple introduction to the study of the Psalms, in English, as poetry.

An Introduction

There are three ways in which we may study the Bible: as a revelation, as a document, and as literature.

Three Ways to Study the Bible

We may study it as the divinely inspired and perfect rule of faith and conduct. This is the point of view from which it appears most precious. For this is what we need most of all: the word of God to teach us what to believe and how to live.

We may study it as a collection of historical books, written under certain conditions, and reflecting, in their contents and in their language, the circumstances in which they were produced. This is the aspect in which criticism regards the Bible; and its intellectual interest, as well as its religious value, is greatly enhanced by a clear vision of the truth about it from this point of view.

We may study it also as literature. We may see in it a noble and impassioned interpretation of nature and life, uttered in language of beauty and sublimity, touched with the vivid colours of

I

Harmony of these three Ways human personality, and embodied in forms of enduring literary art.

None of these three ways of studying the Bible is hostile to the others. On the contrary, they are helpful to one another, because each of them gives us knowledge of a real factor in the marvellous influence of the Bible in the world.

True Love for the Bible is not Blind

The true lover of the Bible has an interest in all the elements of its life as an immortal book. He wishes to discern, and rightly to appreciate, the method of its history, the spirit of its philosophy, the significance of its fiction, the power of its eloquence, and the charm of its poetry. He wishes this all the more because he finds in it something which is not in any other book: a vision of God, a hope for man, and an inspiration to righteousness which are evidently divine. As the worshipper in the Temple would observe the art and structure of the carven beams of cedar and the lily-work on the tops of the pillars the more attentively because they beautified the house of his God, so the man who has a religious faith in the Bible will study more eagerly and carefully the literary forms of the book in which the Holy Spirit speaks forever.

The value of Poetry in the Psalms

We shall do wisely to consider and appreciate the poetical element in the Psalms. The comfort, help, and guidance that they bring to our spiritual life will not be diminished, but increased, by a perception of their exquisite form

and finish. If a king sent a golden cup full of cheering cordial to a weary man, he might well admire the twofold bounty of the royal gift. The beauty of the vessel would make the draught more grateful and refreshing. And if the cup were inexhaustible, if it filled itself anew as often as it touched the lips, then the very shape and adornment of it would become significant and precious. It would be an inestimable possession, a singing goblet, a treasure of life.

John Milton, whose faith in religion was as exalted as his mastery of the art of poetry was perfect, has expressed in a single sentence the spirit in which I would approach the poetic study of the Book of Psalms: "Not in their divine arguments alone, but in the very critical art of composition, the Psalms may be easily made to appear over all kinds of lyric poetry incomparable."

John
Milton
on the
Psalms

Draw-
backs to
the Study
of the
Psalms in
English



The Form
of Verse
is lost

I

LET us remember at the outset that a considerable part of the value of the Psalms as poetry will lie beyond the reach of this essay. We cannot precisely measure it, nor give it a full appreciation,

simply because we shall be dealing with the Psalms only as we have them in our English Bible. This is a real drawback; and it will be well to state clearly the two things that we lose in reading the Psalms in this way.

First, we lose the beauty and the charm of verse. This is a serious loss. Poetry and verse are not the same thing, but they are so intimately related that it is difficult to divide them. Indeed, according to certain definitions of poetry, it would seem almost impossible.

Suppose, for example, that we accept this definition: "Poetry is that variety of the Literature

of Emotion which is written in metrical form."* How, then, can we have poetry when the form is not metrical?

Yet who will deny that the Psalms as we have them in the English Bible are really and truly poetry?

The only way out of this difficulty that I can see is to distinguish between verse as the for-

* Principles
of Literary
Criticism. C. T.
Winchester,
Page 232.

mal element and rhythmical emotion as the essential element in poetry. In the original production of a poem, it seems to me, it is just to say that the embodiment in metrical language is a law of art which must be observed. But in the translation of a poem (which is a kind of reflection of it in a mirror) the verse may be lost without altogether losing the poem.

Relation
of Poetry
to Verse

Take an illustration from another art. A statue has the symmetry of solid form. You can look at it from all sides, and from every side you can see the balance and rhythm of the parts. In a photograph this solidity of form disappears. You see only a flat surface. But you still recognize it as the reflection of a statue.

The Psalms were undoubtedly written, in the original Hebrew, according to a system of versification, and perhaps to some extent with forms of rhyme.

Hebrew
Versifica-
tion

The older scholars, like Lowth and Herder, held that such a system existed, but could not be recovered. Later scholars, like Ewald, evolved a system of their own. Modern scholarship, represented by such authors as Professors Cheyne and Briggs, is reconstructing and explaining more accurately the Hebrew versification. But, for the present at least, the only thing that is clear is that this system must remain obscure to us. It cannot be reproduced in English. The metrical versions of the Psalms are the least

Metrical
Versions

satisfactory. The poet Cowley said of them, "They are so far from doing justice to David that methinks they revile him worse than Shimei." * We must learn to appreciate the poetry of the Psalms without the aid of those symmetries of form and sound in which they first appeared. This is a serious loss. Poetry without verse is still poetry, but it is like a bride without a bridal garment.

* The Works
of Mr. Abra-
ham Cowley,
3 vols. London,
1710. Preface
to Pindarique
Odes. Volume
I, page 184.

The Shad-
ing of the
Original
Language
is lost

The second thing that we lose in reading the Psalms in English is something even more important. It is the heavy tax on the wealth of its meaning, which all poetry must pay when it is imported from one country to another, through the medium of translation.

The
power of
Associa-
tion in
Words

The most subtle charm of poetry is its suggestiveness; and much of this comes from the magical power which words acquire over memory and imagination, from their associations. This intimate and personal charm must be left behind when a poem passes from one language to another. The accompaniment, the harmony of things remembered and beloved, which the very words of the song once awakened, is silent now. Nothing remains but the naked melody of thought. If this is pure and strong, it will gather new associations; as, indeed, the Psalms have already done in English, so that their familiar expressions have become charged with musi-