

The letter which we propose to give in our present number, is principally devoted to a sketch of the former traditions of the Karens:—

"Before I proceed to relate any particulars regarding the progress of the gospel among the Karen tribes in Pegu, it will be better to give your readers some account of the position which these people occupy among the Burmese, as very few, I fear, know how widely these races differ, or the astonishing facts concerning the Karens, which seem to stamp them as a people set apart by God to prepare the way for the advancement of his kingdom in that land.

"From the sources of the Irrawaddy and Salween rivers, in spurs of the Himalaya range, to Bassein and the most southern corner of the Tenasserim provinces, the Karens are found in almost every district of what was once the Burman empire,—sometimes very thinly scattered, sometimes, and especially among the mountains, in tribes of considerable strength. They are also found in Siam, though very little is known of their position in that country; and I have lately read the report of an American Protestant missionary in China, stating that far in the interior he had discovered a race of men bearing great resemblance to the Karens in physical features and customs, and especially in their religion. Their existence on the banks of the great rivers, and in chains of mountains all running southward from the borders of Thibet, would indicate (what is generally supposed to be the case) that they originally came from that country; and hence it is thought by some who have studied the question, that those seeds of truth contained in their traditions, and which are evidently of biblical origin, reached them in remote ages from Nestorian missionaries, who are known to have found their way deep into Central Asia, and to have been the means of converting to their faith almost whole nations, of whose existence scarcely a tradition survives.

"Deep is the mystery involving the past history of the Karens, but that which makes it to the Christian a problem of the highest interest is their religion. It is entirely traditional; they have no written language, no priests, no temples; they have no government among them even, which might have lent its support to the existence of their simple faith; and yet that faith has survived for unknown ages among a poor, ignorant, and oppressed people, who know not whence they received it, and is as superior to that of the most enlightened heathen nations of the past, as night is from day; for the majesty and holiness which it ascribes to God, and the purity of the morality which it prescribes to men, make it second to no religion which has ever been taught on earth except that of Jesus Christ.

"From a very interesting little volume, called 'The Karen Apostle,' I extract the following translations of a few of the traditions preserved among them, which will give your readers some insight into their faith:—

"God is unchangeable, eternal."

"He was in the beginning of the world."

"God is perfect in every meritorious attribute."

"O my children and grandchildren! The earth is the treading-place of the feet of God, and heaven is the place where he sits; he sees all things, and we are manifest to him. God is not far off; he is among us. He has only separated himself from us by a single thickness of white; children, it is because men are not upright that they do not see God. The face of God is said to shine continually, like the rays of the sun; and the wicked dare not look straight at him."

"God created heaven and earth; he created the sun, the moon, the stars."

"He created, again, man. And of what did he create man? He created man at first from the earth."

"He created a woman. How did he create a woman? He took a rib out of the man and created a woman."

"He created, again, life. How did he create life? Father God said, in respect to my son and daughter, I love them; I will give them my great life. He took a little of his life, breathed into the nostrils of the two persons, and they came to life, and were real human beings."

"The traditions describe minutely, and correctly as to the main points, the temptation and fall of our first parents, as also the curse which is brought upon their race:—

"O children and grandchildren! because in the beginning man ate the fruit of the tree of death, poison descends to us, and we all die."

"With the exception of the fourth commandment, the whole of the moral law is contained in their traditions, and these have, moreover, the following precepts, which emphatically stamp their faith with divine origin:—

"O children and grandchildren! do not be fond of quarrelling and disputing, but love each other. God in heaven looks down upon us, and if we do not love each other it is the same as if we did not love God."

"O children and grandchildren! if a person injure you, let him do what he wishes, and bear all the sufferings he brings upon you with humility. If an enemy persecute you love him with the heart."

"O children and grandchildren! the road that leads to heaven is a track scarcely discernible, but the road that goes to hell is very great."

"The above are a few of the many traditions of the Karens, contained in the little work alluded to, which prove how pure must have been the foundation from which their faith originally flowed; it is all the more singular, therefore, that describing God as a being of infinite holiness, justice, and love, and man as a sinner, doomed to wrath unless he can please God, these traditions should stop short, as it were, with the utterance of truths so momentous, and fail to declare the only truth wanting to harmonise them, the grandest truth in all revelation,—that 'In this was manifested the love of God toward us, because that God sent his only beloved Son into the world that we might live through him!'

"But who shall dispute the wisdom of the Most High in his dealings with men? With a little less of the truth than their traditions contain, the poor Karens might have sunk to the lowest level of humanity, ages ago, and lost all traces of it; with a little more, they might have made such progress as to attract the jealousy of their Burmese oppressors, and with it, before they were strong enough for successful resistance, a persecution which might have crushed them as a people for ever.

"Father God' (as they too love to call him) gave them just that amount of light which his infinite wisdom deemed sufficient to preserve them from the idolatry abounding everywhere in the land, and having scattered them throughout its length and breadth, maintained them there as witnesses for himself, till the time should come when they were to be employed as his evangelists, to prepare the way for the preaching of the cross, not only to their poor despised brethren, but to their once haughty and cruel oppressors.

"Some of their traditions relate that in ancient times the Karens enjoyed the favour of God, but lost it on account of their wickedness when the books of