

HEBREW POETRY.

BY REV. ALLEN KING, SCOTSTOWN, QUE.

For the Review.

The greater part of the Old Testament is poetical in its composition. Although only Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Canticles, Ecclesiastes, are classed as poetical.

The style is very unlike that which is called poetry in other languages. It does not consist in metre like the versification of the Greeks and other ancient nations, much less like modern poetry. It is not unlike blank-verse, which is merely brevity and selectness of expression, and the aim is to impress the sentiment by means of repetition, comparison, or contrast, and to excite the emotions and strengthen the memory. Take for example the cxix Psalm which is alphabetic and contains twenty two sections of eight verses, and all the verses of each section begin with a distinct letter of the Hebrew Alphabet. This seems to have been designed as a help to the memory.

Bible poetry is of four kinds—

1st Lyric, or effusions of pious sentiments such as the Psalms. Take Ps. xxvii. iv :

One thing have I desired of the Lord,
That will I seek after;
That I may dwell in the house of the Lord
All the days of my life,
To behold the beauty of the Lord,
And to enquire in His Temple.

Laterally One thing I ask from Yahweh
It will I seek after—
My dwelling in the house of Yahweh
All the days of my life,
To behold the beauty of Yahweh
And to enquire in His Temple.

2nd Epic, or sentiments expressed in the form of narrative: for example Job, though Job properly classified, is a dramatic poem. Take Job. v. 6 :

Although affliction cometh not forth of the dust,
Neither doth trouble spring out of the ground,

Lat. : For affliction comes not forth from the dust,
And trouble springs not from the ground.

3rd Didactic or doctrinal, as in the Proverbs and Lamentations. Take Prov. vi. 2 :

Thou art snared in the words of thy mouth,
Lat. : -Thou art taken in the words of thy mouth.

4th Pastoral or Idyls, such as the Canticles.

There is a 5th class called Prophetic poetry, such as we find in Joel, Isaiah, Habakkuk, Ezekiel, Haggai, Zechariah. But in reality we find in these books from the highest Lyric to the humblest didactic.

II.

The earliest specimen of Hebrew poetry which strikingly exhibits rhythm is in Gen. iv. 23 :

Adah and Zillah hear my voice,
Ye wives of Lamech give ear to my speech:
For I have slain a man to my wounding
And a lad to my hurt.

No writings in the world abound so much in bold and animated poetic figures as the books of the Bible.

To be a poetic people, nature and their country well favored the Hebrews.

It is very true that natural objects are common to the poets of all ages and countries:—Light and darkness; tree and flower; the forest, the cultivated field; the valley and mountain; the perennial stream and the rushing torrent; and other animated objects of nature suggests to poets many beautiful figures. But the difference between poets, generally arise from particular circumstances, of their country and religion. Those of Judaea or the Bible poets were more highly favored than others which help to account for their sublime poetry. During the summer little or no rain falls throughout all Judaea. While the heat continued the country was intolerably parched; want of water was a great distress; and a plentiful shower falling or a rivulet breaking forth altered the whole face of nature, and introduced much higher ideas of life and happiness than the like cause can suggest to us. Hence to represent distress, the Psalms and other books of the Bible have frequent allusions. Take Ps. lxxiii. 1 :

To a dry and thirsty land,
Where no water is.

And so to describe a change from distress to prosperity their metaphors are founded on the falling of

showers and the bursting forth of springs in the desert
Take Isa. xxxv. 1, 6, 7 :

The wilderness and the solitary place
Shall be glad,
And the desert shall rejoice and blossom
As the rose.
For in the wilderness shall waters break out,
And streams in the desert.
And the parched ground shall become a pool,
And the thirsty land springs of water:
In the habitation of dragons, there
Shall be grass
With rushes and reeds.

And as Judaea was a hilly country it was on that account exposed to frequent inundations by the rushing of torrents which came down suddenly from the mountains and carried everything before them; and then it was that Jordan, their only great river, overflowed its banks. Hence the frequent allusions to the noise and to the rushing of many waters. Take Ps. xlii. 7 :

Deep calleth unto deep at the noise
Of thy waterpouts;
All thy waves and thy billows
Are gone over me.

The Scriptures also abound with poetic images suggested from the violence of the elements and those concussions of nature with which Judaea is familiar. Earthquakes were not infrequent, and the tempests of hail, thunder, and lightning accompanied with whirl winds and darkness, far exceed anything of the same kind in more temperate regions. Take Isa. xxiv. 20 :

The earth reeling to and fro
Like a drunkard.

And in those circumstances of terror with which an appearance of the Almighty is described as in Ps. xviii. 11, 13, 15 :

His pavilion round about Him was darkness.
When hailstones and coals of fire were His voice.
And when at His rebuke the channels of the waters
Are to be seen,
And the foundations of the hills discovered.

And Isa xvii. 13 :

The nations shall rush like the
Rushings of many waters;
But God shall rebuke them,
And they shall fly far off,
And they shall be chased like the
Chaff of the mountain before the wind,
And like the down of the thistle before
The whirlwind.

But the poetical figure beyond all others which elevates the style of Scripture and gives it a peculiar boldness and sublimity is, Personification, or the making the elements of nature appear full of mind and sentiment. Take :

Hab. iii. 5 :
Before Him went the pestilence, and
Burning coals went forth at His feet.

Ps. lxxvii. 16 :
The waters saw Thee, O God,
And were afraid.

Hab. iii. 10 :
The mountains saw Thee, and they trembled.
The overflowing of the waters passed by :
The deep uttered his voice and lifted up
his hands on high.

The lxxx Ps. ; and Isa. xiv. 9-23, surpass for personified imagery all human and revealed productions.

Hebrew poetry was expressly written to be accompanied, with music sung by choirs or bands of singers and musicians who answered alternately to each other. When for instance one band began the hymn: The Lord reigneth, Let the earth rejoice. Then the chorus or some chorus took up the corresponding versicle:

Let the multitude of the isles be glad thereof.
or again. Clouds and darkness are round about Him.
The other replied Judgment and righteousness are the habitation
of His throne.

But the sublime aim of Hebrew poetry was to bring the Divine and human into a personal relationship; and through prophetic ascriptions adore the Redeemer who was to come into the world. And as these prophetic hymns now in our hands look back to Calvary even as they looked forward to Calvary, they are to be used in ascriptions of praise to Christ, and in preference to all human compositions, but not to the rejection of holy hymns and paraphrases.