

The Presbyterian Review.

Vol. X.—No. 36.

TORONTO, MARCH 15, 1894.

\$1.50 per Annum.

Studies in the Psalms.

A Song of Exile—Psalm CXXXVII.

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IN few psalms is the situation as unmistakable as here. The psalm is obviously a picture of the Jews during the exile in Babylon; and it is one of incomparable beauty and pathos.

I.—“Love of Country deepened by Absence,” verses 1 and 2.—There have been some countries which have been able to inspire their children with an unusual fervor of patriotism; and of none has this been more true than of Judea. It is, however, a well-known maxim that the objects of love exert their spell most strongly when they are lost. Accordingly, although the Jews, whilst in their own country loved it heartily, their patriotism increased to peculiar intensity when they were at a distance from it. They were in Babylon—a country totally unlike their own; without the hills, valleys and plains on which they had been wont to feast their eyes; but flat and monotonous, and intersected in every direction with canals, along whose banks lofty willows grew. Beside these “rivers of Babylon” they gathered, perhaps on the Sabbaths, because the Jews loved to worship beside running water, the gentle murmur conveying to the mind a sense of peace. Here at all events they were alone, and could commune with their own hearts and with one another. They sat on the ground—an attitude of dejection—and wept, when they remembered Zion. The temple singers were amongst them; but they were mute, and hung their harps on the willows, having no use for them, when their hearts were heavy with sorrow.

Such is the pathetic picture of the exile, and we see in it the secret of why Judea, though so small a country, played so great a part in the world. It attached its children to itself, and thus stamped them with a unique character. How is it that a nation, or a town, or a church, or a congregation is able thus to excite affection? Unless it is able to do so, it is vain to preach patriotism. We may urge the young to be attached to their home, or to their church, or to their native land; but, unless the home be venerable, and the church lovable, and the country an object worth living and dying for, this summons will be issued in vain. Judea had powerful spells to cast over its children; it was beautiful, it had great memories, it had great men; above all, it was the seat of God, and His law there enclosed every life in its educative influence. There is nothing to which those who have in their hands the forming of the minds of the young ought more earnestly to attend than that the public objects for which they desire to win young hearts should really be worthy of devotion.

II.—“The Love of Country Intensified by Bondage,” verses 3 and 4.—One thing which must have deepened the depression of the Hebrews was the magnificence of

Babylon and the pride of their masters. The huge temple of Bel towered over the whole region, making the temple of Jerusalem in their memories appear externally but a poor structure in comparison, though its internal glory shone all the more brightly by contrast; and the palace of the Babylonian king was alone greater in extent than the entire city of Jerusalem. The arrogance of their masters was in harmony with this material superiority; and the exiles were crushed beneath it, even when it was unspoken. It was, however, spoken also. This psalm tells how the passers-by demanded of them to take down their harps from the willows, and sing them specimens of the songs of Zion. Perhaps they ordered them to appear at their banquets, as the vessels of the temple were brought on such occasions, that the revellers might drink out of them. As their wine tasted more sweetly on account of this insult to the conquered God—as they supposed Him—so there would be merriment in hearing the strange music of the captives. But the exiles could not bring themselves to obey. How would it have sounded if they had sung a great psalm like the 46th,

God in the midst of her doth dwell;
Nothing shall her remove;
The Lord to her an helper will,
And that right early, prove;

or the 125th,

As round about Jerusalem
The mountains stand alway,
So the Lord His folk doth compass so,
From henceforth and for aye?

They felt that it would have been blasphemy to utter such sentiments in the hearing of their oppressors, who would inevitably ask them where their God had now gone.

Thus they were reduced to sullen and tearful silence. Yet our psalm is itself a proof that the songs of God's children can never be long hushed. Though sorrow may endure for a night, joy cometh in the morning; and the sweetest songs spring out of the darkest provinces. The old poets used to say that the nightingale sings with her breast resting against a thorn; and the music of the church would lose more than half its beauty were it not for affliction. Even in heaven itself the songs of the redeemed will derive their power from the memories of sin and sorrow overcome.

III.—“The Love of Country Absorbing Self-interest,” verses 5 and 6.—The gibes of the arrogant Babylonians made the tears of the exiles flow; but, when they had passed laughing away, the exiles, rising up and turning their faces towards their native land, kept the fire of patriotism burning more hotly than ever.

IV.—“The Reverse Side of Patriotism,” verses 7 and 9.—The last three verses of this beautiful psalm strike what to us is a very jarring note. But we have learned from Christ the better law, to bless our enemies, to do good to them that hate us, and to pray for them that despitefully use us and persecute us.—*Christian Leader.*