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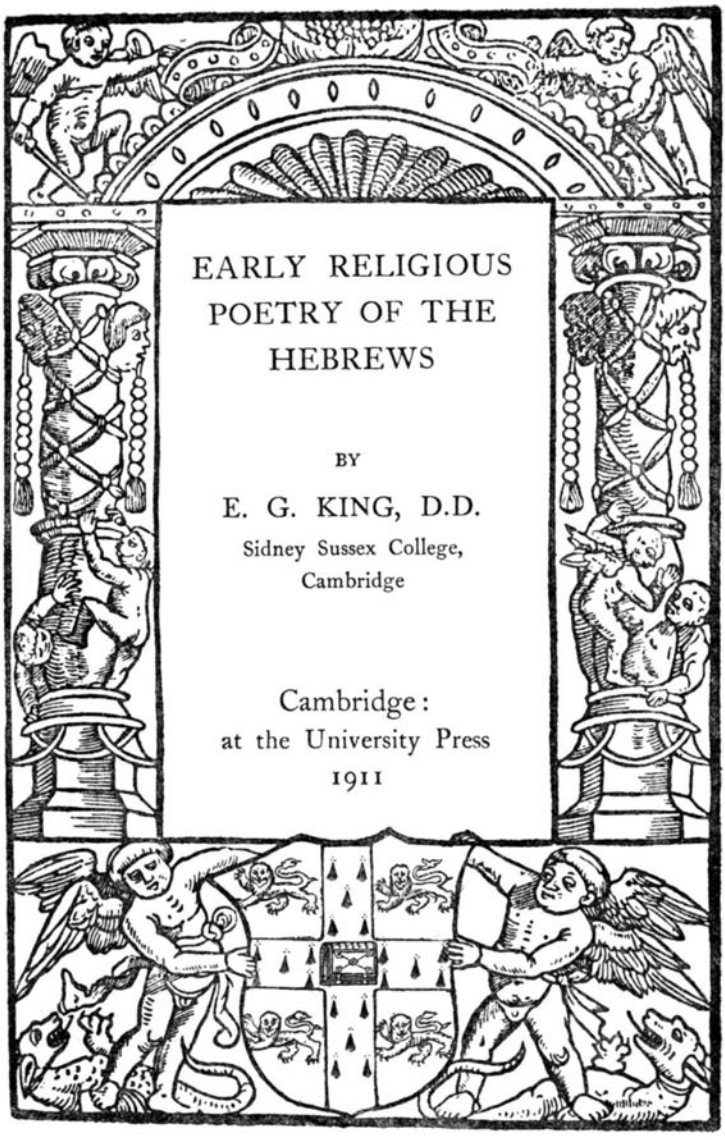
EARLY RELIGIOUS POETRY OF THE HEBREWS



EARLY RELIGIOUS POETRY OF THE HEBREWS

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INTRODUCTION

THE title "*Early Religious Poetry of the Hebrews*" needs a further definition. It is intended to embrace the Poetry of Old Testament times as distinguished from the Poetry of the Synagogue. This will fix our period. But what are we to understand by *Religious Poetry*?

The Poet is the man whose whole being is in touch with those voices of God that we call "Nature." He may, or he may not, be a religious man. In other words, he may, or he may not, recognise the Source of those voices. The Prophet, on the other hand, is the man whose whole being is in touch with the voices of God in Humanity. He must be, more or less, a poet, in the sense in which we have defined the word, but his chief sphere will be the poetry of life. His message will necessarily be conditioned by the age in which he lives. He has his treasure in an "earthen vessel" and "he prophesies in part."

This that is true of individuals is also true of nations. Each nation has its peculiar gift, and Israel is the Prophet of Humanity. When, therefore, we speak of the *Religious Poetry* of Israel we include the

whole outcome of that probation whereby the Suffering Nation was fitted to prepare the world for God. Thus, for example, there is little that is "*religious*" in the Song of Deborah or even in David's lamentation for Saul and Jonathan, but, from our point of view, all such poems must be included, marking, as they do, a stage in Israel's life.

We now turn to the outward form whereby Hebrew poetry is distinguished. I have no desire to repeat at length what has been so often written on *parallelism* as a feature of Hebrew poetry. And yet a word must be said. Parallelism may take the unsatisfying form of identity when it becomes a mere echo; though this too may be effective, e.g. Is. xv. 1:

In a níght 'tis destróyed, Ar-Móab is rúined.
In a níght 'tis destróyed, Kir-Móab is rúined.

More frequently the words are varied while the thought remains the same, e.g. Prov. iii. 9:

Honour the Lord with thy wealth,
And with chiefest of all thine increase.

At other times the parallelism adds to the thought either by way of development or antithesis.

Or again, the parallelism may be alternate when it suggests the strophe, e.g. Ps. lxx. 5:

(*a*) As for mé—the póor-one, the needy!—
(*b*) Speed tó me, O Gód.
(a_1) My Hélper, Delivérer, Thóu!
(b_1) O Jáhve delày not.

The "riddle" of Samson (Judg. xiv. 14, 18):

(*a*) Oút of the féeder came fóod
(*b*) And oút of the fiérce there came swéetness

is answered by completing the parallelism thus:

(b_1) Whát is there swéeter than hóney?
(a_1) And whát can be fiércer than líon?

It is just this symmetry of thought that satisfies not the ear alone but also the mind, and gives such dignity and grace to Hebrew poetry. Kautzsch (*Die Poesie und die poetischen Bücher des A. T.* p. 6 f.) well points out the analogy between rhyme and parallelism by quoting from *Faust*, Part II, the words of Helena which, in Latham's translation, run thus:

"Manifold marvels do I see and hear.
Amazement smites me, much I fain would ask.
Yet would I be enlightened why the speech
Of this man rang so strange, so strange yet pleasing.
It seemed as did one tone unto another
Fit itself, fell one word upon the ear,
And straight another came to dally with it."

[See the whole passage.]

If, in the last line but one, we substitute *sentence* for *word* we have, as Kautzsch says, the secret of parallelism.

"That which the Prince of Poets here reveals as to the nature of *Rhyme*, that it is the outcome of

a certain inner compulsion, applies also to the *Parallelism of Members* in Hebrew Poetry. Thus, of it too we may say :

> Scarce has a *sentence* fallen on the ear
> When straight another comes to fondle it."

He also quotes Herder as saying : "Does not all rhythm, dance and harmony, yes every charm both of shape and sound, depend upon symmetry? The two members strengthen, raise, confirm one another in their teaching or joy. In didactic poetry one saying confirms the other. It is as though the father spoke to his sons and the mother repeated it."

With this rhyme of thought the Hebrew poet did not need the rhyme of words, though the Hebrew language with its pronominal affixes would have easily lent itself to rhyme. Indeed, at times it comes unsought (e.g. Ps. vi., liv. 3 f.; Job x. 9—18, &c.). It could not be otherwise. But it is an entire mistake to suppose that rhyme was ever consciously sought by any Hebrew poet of Old Testament times.

The same may be said of *metre* if, by that term, we denote the measured beat of long and short syllables. The metre that is most common in Hebrew poetry is that of three accented syllables in parallelism. This we indicate by (3 + 3). Some writers on Hebrew poetry have called these verses *hexameters*, but such a term leads us to count syllables instead of accents. I shall therefore avoid it. No doubt there are

instances in which the (3 + 3) metre might, with a little careful reading, be scanned as hexameter, but this is not due to the measure of the syllables but to the stress of the accent.

Thus, if we take the line Prov. xxiv. 30 and read it strictly by the accents, passing as lightly as possible over all other syllables, it would run as follows :

al-ṣ'dḗh ish-'atzḗl 'avárti | v'al-kérem adám ḥ'sar-lḗv.

I should translate this :

I pássed by the fiéld of a slúggard | by a víne that belónged to a fóol.

The passage continues as follows :

And ló! 'twas grown óver with rúbbish | and the fénce of its stónes was thrown dówn.

The difficult word for "*rubbish*" gave rise to a gloss "*nettles had covered its face.*"

From this point the metre becomes irregular and we see that the text has been influenced by a quotation from Prov. vi. 10 :

As for mé I láid it to heárt ; | I sáw and recéived instrúction.
A little sleep, a little slumber,
A little folding of hands for repose ;
Then cómes along stríding thy póverty | and thy néed as a mán with a shiéld.

It would be easy to find verses that would scan, e.g. Ps. liv. 3 :

Elohím b'shim'ká hoshīḗyni
Ubigvúrath'ká t'dīnḗyni.

Nor would it be difficult to find hexameters and pentameters, e.g. in the Balaam poems: but, for my part, I agree with Mr Cobb, who, after carefully examining the regular and irregular forms, writes as follows:

"What shall we say to these things? Surely we cannot continue to say that English verse is parallel with Hebrew. Nothing like this was ever written in English in the name of poetry unless by Walt Whitman....If all the poetry of the Hebrew Bible were stored in our memories, we could point to nothing more metrically regular than are some of the Psalms which have been before us, and to nothing less regular than are others of those Psalms. But it would be a mistake to suppose that the two classes are equal in extent; the irregular poems greatly predominate" (*Systems of Hebrew Metre*, p. 30).

It is highly probable that Hebrew "metre" consisted, not in long and short syllables but in the rhythmical beat of the accent. It is in this sense that I shall use the word metre as applied to Hebrew in the following pages. In dealing with the irregularities of Hebrew metre the question naturally arises as to the correctness of the text. But the knowledge of Hebrew verse is not yet sufficiently advanced to justify us in correcting the text in favour of any metrical theory unless we can support

the change on independent grounds. In the chapters which follow we shall have occasion, from time to time, to offer a few suggestions on this subject.

The following facts greatly increase the difficulty of determining the laws of Hebrew verse.

(1) We cannot be sure that the Masoretic vowels and accents represent the ancient pronunciation of the language.

Strictly speaking, each word has one accent which is either *ultimate* or *penultimate*; but, in poetry, some of the longer words may have a subsidiary accent which falls on an earlier syllable, e.g. *lĕgár-gĕrothéka*, Prov. i. 9.

Where two words are joined together by a hyphen called *Maqqef* the former loses its accent: but the Masoretic use of *Maqqef* cannot be trusted in Hebrew poetry; it is often omitted when it ought to be used and used when it ought to be omitted.

(2) The duplicate texts that have come down to us (e.g. Ps. xiv. with Ps. liii.; Ps. xl. 13—17 with Ps. lxx.; Ps. lx. 5—12 with Ps. cviii.; Ps. lxxi. 1—3 with Ps. xxxi. 1 ff.; Ps. cviii. 1—5 with Ps. lvii. 7—11; 2 Sam. xxii. with Ps. xviii.) shew that the Divine Names constantly changed and that, in many other respects, the text was not accurately preserved.

Those who are familiar with the changes that have taken place in popular Hymns will easily

understand that the Hebrew Psalter would be specially liable to change.

Though rhyme is only an accident in Hebrew poetry, *assonance* and *paronomasia* play an important part, and since it is impossible to reproduce the effect in a translation, it will be necessary here to give some examples in the original. The pitiful cry of the final *î* (pronounced like a long *e* as in *me*) is frequent in lamentation. Thus the lament of David over Absalom is far more pathetic in the original, which we may transliterate as follows:

B'nî Abshālŏm, b'nî b'nî Abshālŏm!
Mî yittên mūthî, ănî tachtēka,
Abshalŏm b'nî b'nî!

The same effect is very frequent in the Book of Job. We have also an instance in the Song of Lamech (Gen. iv. 23), clearly shewing that the Song, at all events in its original form, was no triumph-song but an elegy. Thus:

Ādā v'Tzillā shemā'an qolî
Nĕshê-Lemek ha'ăzēna imrathî
Kî îsch haragti lĕphitzî
V'yéled l'chabūrathî.

We may also (with Kautzsch) note the mocking sound *ēnu* in Judg. xvi. 24, where the Philistines, rejoicing over the fall of Samson, say "Our God hath given into our hand our enemy, that laid waste our

land, and that multiplied our slain." In the original thus:

Nathan elohēnu beyadēnu eth-oyĕvēnu
V'eth machariv artzēnu
Va'asher hirbā eth-ch'lalēnu.

We can scarcely suppose that these words were actually used by the Philistines. The recurring *ēnu* suggests the peevish cry of children; and, indeed, the words must have been intended to mock the speakers.

The language of Jeremiah expresses at times the very depths of sorrow. Thus Jer. viii. 18:

Mablígithí 'ăláy yâgón | 'ălâi libí davâi.

Read slowly and note the *spondee* effect of the last three words.

We may translate thus:

Would I cómfort mysélf against sórrow | my heárt—in mé—is fáint.

The heart and courage that should support him is itself a source of weakness; for, as he goes on to say:

Hárvest is pást—Súmmer is énded—And wé are unsáved!

Assonance and *paronomasia* often render translation quite inadequate, e.g. Gen. ix. 27:

Yaft Elohîm l'*Yéfeth* | v'yishkôn b'a'hălī-Shem.

"God shall enlarge Japheth and he shall dwell in the tents of Shem" (E.V.).

Here we have not merely the play upon the name *Japheth* but also, I think, a double meaning given to the name *Shem*, which may signify "renown" (Num. xvi. 2).

Sometimes in addition to *assonance* we have the root-meaning of a verb brought out, as when Isaiah (vii. 9) says:

Im lo tha'amīnu ki lo thēamēnu.
"If ye will not believe, surely ye shall not be established" (E.V.).

Here the verb *aman* "to believe" is used in two *voices* with a deep inner meaning which we might paraphrase

"If ye will not *stay yourselves* (on God), ye shall not be *stayed up*."

In my translations I have done my best to imitate the rhythm of the Hebrew, but I must ask the reader kindly to bear in mind the fact that the terseness of Hebrew renders translation difficult, especially in the short lines of verse. In a little book, like the present, notes on the translation would, for the most part, be out of place; I fear, therefore, that I may, at times, appear to be unduly dogmatic. This must be pardoned from the necessity of the case.

I have translated the Tetragrammaton by *Jáhve* simply because *Jehovah* is an impossible form and *Jáhve* has passed into common use. I have also assumed the popular pronunciation with *penultimate*

accent, although, if such a name existed, its accent ought to be *ultimate*. In the same way I have adopted the English pronunciation of many proper names, e.g. *Déborah* instead of the Hebrew *Dĕbōráh*. Since Hebrew poetry does not depend upon long and short syllables but upon the beat of the accent, I must ask the reader strictly to observe the accents which I have marked in my translations.

E. G. K.

18 *January*, 1911.

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