WALTER ADENEY

THE EXPOSITOR'S BIBLE: THE SONG OF SOLOMON AND THE LAMENTATIONS OF JEREMIAH

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The Expositor's Bible: The Song of Solomon and the Lamentations of Jeremiah

THE SONG OF SOLOMON

CHAPTER I
THE STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

The Song of Solomon is a puzzle to the commentator. Quite apart from the wilderness of mystical interpretations with which it has been overgrown in the course of the ages,[1] its literary form and motive are subjects of endless controversy. There are indications that it is a continuous poem; and yet it is characterised by startling kaleidoscopic changes that seem to break it up into incongruous fragments. If it is a single work the various sections of it succeed one another in the most abrupt manner, without any connecting links or explanatory clauses.

The simplest way out of the difficulty presented by the many curious turns and changes of the poem is to deny it any structural unity, and treat it as a string of independent lyrics. That is to cut the knot in a rather disappointing fashion. Nevertheless the suggestion to do so met with some favour when it was put forth at the close of the last century by Herder, a writer who seemed better able to enter into the spirit of Hebrew poetry than any of his contemporaries. While accepting the traditional view of the authorship of the book, this critic described its contents as "Solomon's songs of love, the oldest and sweetest of the East;" and Goethe in the world of letters, as well as biblical students, endorsed his judgment. Subsequently it fell into disfavour, and scholars who differed among themselves with respect to their own theories, agreed in rejecting this particular hypothesis. But quite recently it has reappeared in an altered form. The book, it is now suggested, is just a chance collection of folk songs from northern Palestine, an anthology of rustic love-poems. These songs are denied any connection with Solomon or the court. The references to royalty are accounted for by a custom said to be kept up among the Syrian peasants in the present day, according to which the week of wedding festivities is called "The king's week," because the newly-married pair then play the part of king and queen, and are playfully treated by their friends with the honours of a court. The bridegroom is supposed to be named Solomon in acknowledgment of his regal splendour – as an English villager might be so named for his conspicuous wisdom; while perhaps the bride is called the Shulammite, with an allusion to the famous beauty Abishag, the Shunammite of David's time.[2]

Such a theory as this is only admissible on condition that the unity of the poem has been disproved. But whether we can unravel it or not, there is much that goes to show that one thread runs through the whole book. The style is the same throughout, and it has no parallel in the whole of Hebrew literature. Everywhere we meet with the same rich, luxurious language, the same abundance of imagery, the same picturesque habit of alluding to a number of plants and animals by name, the same vivacity of movement, the same pleading tone, the same suffused glow as of the light of morning. Then there are more peculiar features that continually recur, such as the form of the dialogue, certain recognisable characters, the part of chorus taken by the daughters of Jerusalem, in particular the gentle, graceful portrait of the Shulammite, the consistency of which is well preserved. But the principal reason for believing in the unity of the work is to be found in an examination of its plot. The difficulty of making this out has encouraged the temptation to discredit its existence. But while there are various ideas about the details, there is enough in common to all the proposed schemes of the story to indicate the fact that the book is one composition.

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[1] To be considered later. See chap. iv.

[2] 1 Kings i. 3.

The question whether the work is a drama or an idyl has been discussed with much critical acumen. But is it not rather pedantic? The sharply divided orders of European poetry were not observed or even known in Israel. It was natural, therefore, that Hebrew imaginative work should partake of the characteristics of several orders, while too naïve to trouble itself with the rules of any one. The drama designed for acting was not cultivated by the ancient Jews. It was introduced as an exotic only as late as the Roman period, when Herod built the first theatre known to have existed in the Holy Land. Previous to his time we have no mention of the art of play-acting among the Jews. Nevertheless the dialogues in the Song of Solomon are certainly dramatic in character; and we cannot call the poem an idyl when it is rendered entirely in the form of speeches by different persons without any connecting narrative. The Book of Job is also dramatic in form, though, like Browning's dramatic poetry, not designed for acting; but in that work each of the several speakers is introduced by a sentence that indicates who he is, while in our poem no such indication is given. Here we only get evidence of a change of speakers in the form and contents of the utterances, and the transition from the masculine to the feminine gender and from the singular number to the plural. Even the chorus takes an active part in the movement of the dialogue, instead of simply commenting on the proceedings of the principal characters as in a Greek play. We seem to want a key to the story, and the absence of anything of the kind is the occasion of the bewildering variety of conjectures that confronts the reader. But the difficulty thus occasioned is no reason for denying that there is any continuity in the book, especially in view of numerous signs of unity that cannot be evaded.

Among those who accept the dramatic integrity of the poem there are two distinct lines of interpretation, each of them admitting some differences in the treatment of detail. According to one scheme Solomon is the only lover; according to the other, while the king is seeking to win the affections of the country maiden, he has been forestalled by a shepherd, fidelity to whom is shewn by the Shulammite in spite of the fascinations of the court.

There is no denying the rural simplicity of much of the scenery; evidently this is designed to be in contrast to the sensuous luxury and splendour of the court. Those who take Solomon to be the one lover throughout, not only admit this fact; they bring it into their version of the story so as to heighten the effect. The king is out holiday-making, perhaps on a hunting expedition, when he first meets the country maiden. In her childlike simplicity she takes him for a rustic swain; or perhaps, though she knows who he is, she sportively addresses him as she would address one of her village companions. Subsequently she shews no liking for the pomp of royalty. She cannot make herself at home with the women of the harem. She longs to be back in her mother's cottage among the woods and fields where she spent her child days. But she loves the king and he dotes on her. So she would take him with her away from the follies and temptations of the court down to her quiet country retreat. Under the influence of the Shulammite Solomon is induced to give up his unworthy habits and live a healthier, purer life. Her love is strong enough to retain the king wholly to herself. Thus the poem is said to describe a reformation in the character of Solomon. In particular it is thought to celebrate the triumph of true love over the degradation of polygamy.

It is impossible to find any time in the life of David's successor when this great conversion might have taken place; and the occurrence itself is highly improbable. Those however are not fatal objections to the proposed scheme, because the poem may be entirely ideal; it may even be written *at* the king. Historical considerations need not trouble us in dealing with an imaginative work such as this. It must be judged entirely on internal grounds. But when it is so judged it refuses to come into line with the interpretation suggested. Regarding the matter only from a literary point of view, we must confess that it is most improbable that Solomon would be introduced as a simple peasant without any hint of the reason of his appearing in this novel guise. Then we may detect a difference between the manner in which the king addresses the Shulammite and that in which, on the second hypothesis, the shepherd speaks to her. Solomon's compliments are frigid and stilted; they describe the object of his admiration in the most extravagant terms, but they exhibit no trace of feeling. The heart of the voluptuary is withered, the fires of passion have burnt themselves out and only the cold ashes remain, the sacred word "love" has been so long desecrated that it has ceased to convey any meaning. On the other hand, frequent practice has outstripped the clumsy wooing of inexperienced lovers and developed the art of courtship to a high degree. The royal bird-catcher knows how to lay his lines, though fortunately for once even his consummate skill fails. How different is the bearing of the true lover, a village lad who has won the maiden's heart! He has no need to resort to the vocabulary of flattery, because his own heart speaks. The English translations give an unwarrantable appearance of warmth to the king's language where he is represented as calling the Shulammite "My love."[3] The word in the Hebrew means no more than *my friend*. When Solomon first appears he addresses the Shulammite with this title, and then immediately tries to tempt her by promising her presents of jewelry. Take another instance. In the beginning of the fourth chapter Solomon enters on an elaborate series of compliments describing the beauty of the Shulammite, without a single word of affection. As she persists in withstanding his advances her persecutor becomes abashed. He shrinks from her pure, cold gaze, calls her terrible as an army with banners, prays her to turn away her eyes from him. On the theory that Solomon is the accepted lover, the beloved bridegroom, this position is quite unintelligible. Now turn to the language of the true lover: "Thou hast ravished my heart, my sister, my bride; thou hast ravished my heart with one look of thine eyes."[4]

A corresponding difference is to be detected in the bearing of the maiden towards the rivals. Towards the king she is cool and repellent; but no dream of poetry can equal the tenderness and sweetness of her musing on her absent lover or the warmth of love with which she speaks to him. These distinctions will be more apparent in detail as we proceed with the story of the poem. It may be noticed here, that this story is not at all consistent with the theory that Solomon is the only lover. According to that hypothesis we have the highly improbable situation of a separation of the newly married couple on their wedding day. Besides, as the climax is supposed to be reached at the middle of the book, there is no apparent motive for the second half. The modern novel, which has its wedding at the middle of its plot, or even at the very beginning, and then sets itself to develop the comedy or perhaps the tragedy of married life, is not at all parallel to this old love story. Time must be allowed for the development of matrimonial complications; but here the scenes are all in close connection.

If we are thus led to accept what has been called "the shepherd hypothesis" the value of the book will be considerably enhanced. This is more than a mere love poem; it is not to be classed with erotics, although a careless reading of some of its passages might incline us to place it in the same category with a purely sensuous style of poetry. We have here something more than Sappho's fire. If we are tempted to compare it with Herrick's *Hesperides* or Shakespeare's *Sonnets*, we must recognise an element that lifts it above the sighs of love-sick youths and maidens. Even on the "Solomon theory" pure love and simple living are exalted in opposition to the luxury and vices of the royal seraglio. A poem that sets forth the beauty of a simple country life as the scene of the true love of husband and wife in contrast to the degradation of a corrupt court is distinctly elevating in tone and influence, and the more so for the fact that it is not didactic in form. It is not only in kings' palaces and amid scenes of oriental voluptuousness that the influence of such ideas as are here presented is needed. Christian civilisation has not progressed beyond the condition in which the consideration of them may be resorted to as a wholesome corrective. But if we are to agree to the "shepherd hypothesis" as on the whole the more probable, another idea of highest importance emerges. It is not love, now, but fidelity, that claims our attention. The simple girl, protected only by her virtue, who is proof against all the fascinations of the most splendid court, and who prefers to be the wife of the poor man whom she loves, and to whom she has plighted troth, to accepting a queen's crown at the cost of deserting her humble lover, is the type and example of a loyalty which is the more admirable because it appears where we should little expect to find it. It has been said that such a story as is here depicted would be impossible in real life; that a girl once enticed into the harem of an oriental despot would never have a chance of escape. The eunuchs who guarded the doors would lose their heads if they allowed her to run away; the king would never give up the prey that had fallen into his trap; the shepherd lover who was mad enough to pursue his lost sweetheart into her captor's palace would never come out alive. Are we so sure of all these points? Most improbable things do happen. It is at least conceivable that even a cruel tyrant might be seized with a fit of generosity, and why should we regard Solomon as a cruel tyrant? His fame implies that there were noble traits in his character. But these questions are beside the mark. The situation is wholly ideal. Then the more improbable the events described would be in real life, the more impressive do the lessons they suggest become.

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[3] i. 9.

[4] iv. 9.

Who wrote the book? The only answer that can be given to this question is negative. Assuredly, Solomon could not have been the author of this lovely poem in praise of the love and fidelity of a country lass and her swain, and the simplicity of their rustic life. It would be difficult to find a man in all history who more conspicuously illustrated the exact opposites of these ideas. The exquisite eulogy of love – perhaps the finest in any literature – which occurs towards the end of the book, the passage beginning, "Set me as a seal upon thine heart," etc.,[5] is not the work of this master of a huge seraglio, with his "seven hundred wives" and his "three hundred concubines."[6] It is impossible to find the source of this poetry in the palace of the Israelite "Grand Monarch"; we might as soon light on a bank of wild flowers in a Paris dancing saloon. There is quite a library of Solomon literature, a very small part of which can be traced to the king whose name it bears, the greatness of this name having attracted attention and led to the ascription of various works to the royal author, whose wisdom was as proverbial as his splendour. It is difficult to resist the impression that in the present case there is some irony in the singular inappropriateness of the title.

The date of the poem can be conjectured with some degree of assurance, although the language does not help us much in the determination of this point. There are archaisms, and there are also terms that seem to indicate a late date – Aramaic words and possibly even words of Greek extraction. The few foreign terms may have crept in under the influence of revisers. On the other hand the style and contents of the book speak for the days of the Augustan age of Hebrew history. The notoriety of Solomon's court and memories of its magnificence and luxury seem to be fresh in the minds of people. These things are treated in detail and with an amount of freedom that supposes knowledge on the part of the readers as well as the writer. There is one expression that helps to fix the date with more definiteness. Tirzah is associated with Jerusalem as though the two cities were of equal importance. The king says: —

> "Thou art beautiful, O my love, as Tirzah,
> Comely as Jerusalem."[7]

Now this city was the northern capital for about fifty years after the death of Solomon – from the time of Jeroboam, who made it his royal residence,[8] till the reign of Omri, who abandoned the ill-omened place six years after his vanquished predecessor Zimri had burnt the palace over his own head.[9] The way in which the old capital is mentioned here implies that it is still to the north what Jerusalem is to the south. Thus we are brought to the half century after the death of the king whose name the book bears.

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[5] viii. 6, 7.

[6] 1 Kings xi. 3.

[7] vi. 4.

[8] 1 Kings xiv. 17.

The mention of Tirzah as the equal of Jerusalem is also an evidence of the northern origin of the poem; for it is not at all probable that a subject of the mutilated nation of the south would describe the beauty of the rebel headquarters by the side of that of his own idolised city, as something typical and perfect. But the poem throughout gives indications of its origin in the country parts of the north. Shunem, famous as the scene of Elisha's great miracle, seems to be the home of the heroine.[10] The poet turns to all points of the compass for images with which to enrich his pictures – Sharon on the western coast,[11] Gilead across the Jordan to the east,[12] Engedi by the wilderness of the Dead Sea,[13] as well as the northern districts. But the north is most frequently mentioned. Lebanon is named over and over again,[14] and Hermon is referred to as in the neighbourhood of the shepherd's home.[15] In fact the poem is saturated with the fragrant atmosphere of the northern mountains.

Now this has suggested a striking inference. Here we have a picture of Solomon and his court from the not too friendly hand of a citizen of the revolted provinces. The history in the Books of Kings is written from the standpoint of Judah; it is curious to learn how the people of the north thought of Solomon in all his glory. Thus considered the book acquires a secondary and political meaning. It appears as a scornful condemnation of the court at Jerusalem on the part of the poorer and more simple inhabitants of the kingdom of Jeroboam and his successors.[16] But it also stands for all time as a protest against luxury and vice, and as a testimony to the beauty and dignity of pure love, stanch fidelity, and quiet, wholesome, primitive country manners. It breathes the spirit that reappears in Goldsmith's *Deserted Village*, and inspires the muse of Wordsworth, as in the poem which contrasts the dove's simple notes with the nightingale's tumultuous song, saying of the homely bird,

"He sang of love with quiet blending;
Slow to begin, and never ending;
Of serious faith and inward glee;
That was the song – the song for me."

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[9] 1 Kings xvi. 18, 23, 24.

[10] vi. 13.

[11] ii. 1.

[12] iv. 1.

[13] i. 14.

[14] iii. 9; iv. 8, 15; vii. 4.

[15] iv. 8.

[16] See *Ency. Brit.*, Art. "Canticles," by Robertson Smith.

CHAPTER II
TRUE LOVE TESTED

Chapter i. – v. 1

The poem opens with a scene in Solomon's palace. A country maiden has just been introduced to the royal harem. The situation is painful enough in itself, for the poor, shy girl is experiencing the miserable loneliness of finding herself in an unsympathetic crowd. But that is not all. She is at once the object of general observation; every eye is turned towards her; and curiosity is only succeeded by ill-concealed disgust. Still the slavish women, presumably acting on command, set themselves to excite the new comer's admiration for their lord and master. First one speaks some bold amorous words,[17] and then the whole chorus follows.[18] All this is distressing and alarming to the captive, who calls on her absent lover to fetch her away from such an uncongenial scene; she longs to run after him; for it is the king who has brought her into his chambers, not her own will.[19] The women of the harem take no notice of this interruption, but finish their ode on the charms of Solomon. All the while they are staring at the rustic maiden, and she now becomes conscious of a growing contempt in their looks. What is she that the attractions of the king before which the dainty ladies of the court prostrate themselves should have no fascination for her? She notices the contrast between the swarthy hue of her sun-burnt countenance and the pale complexion of these pampered products of palace seclusion. She is so dark in comparison with them that she likens herself to the black goats-hair tents of the Arabs.[20] The explanation is that her brothers have made her work in their vineyards. Meanwhile she has not kept her own vineyard.[21] She has not guarded her beauty as these idle women, who have nothing else to do, have guarded theirs; but perhaps she has a sadder thought – she could not protect herself when out alone at her task in the country or she would never have been captured and carried on to the prison where she now sits disconsolate. Possibly the vineyard she has not kept is the lover whom she has lost.[22] Still she is a woman, and with a touch of piqued pride she reminds her critics that if she is dark – black compared with them – she is comely. They cannot deny that. It is the cause of all her misery; she owes her imprisonment to her beauty. She knows that their secret feeling is one of envy of her, the latest favourite. Then their affected contempt is groundless. But, indeed, she has no desire to stand as their rival. She would gladly make her escape. She speaks in a half soliloquy. Will not somebody tell her where he is whom her soul loveth? Where is her lost shepherd lad? Where is he feeding his flock? Where is he resting it at noon? Such questions only provoke mockery. Addressing the simple girl as the "fairest among women," the court ladies bid her find her lover for herself. Let her go back to her country life and feed her kids by the shepherds' tents. Doubtless if she is bold enough to court her swain in that way she will not miss seeing him.

Hitherto Solomon has not appeared. Now he comes on the scene, and proceeds to accost his new acquisition in highly complimentary language, with the ease of an expert in the art of courtship. At this point we encounter the most serious difficulty for the theory of a shepherd lover. To all appearances a dialogue between the king and the Shulammite here ensues.[23] But if this were the case, the country girl would be addressing Solomon in terms of the utmost endearment – conduct utterly incompatible with the "shepherd hypothesis." The only alternative is to suppose that the hard-pressed girl takes refuge from the importunity of her royal flatterer by turning aside to an imaginary, half dream-like conversation with her absent lover. This is not by any means a probable position, it must be allowed; it seems to put a strained interpretation on the text. Undoubtedly if the passage before us stood by itself, there would not be any difference of opinion about it; everybody would take it in its obvious meaning as a conversation between two lovers. But it does not stand by itself – unless, indeed, we are to give up the unity of the book. Therefore it must be interpreted so as not to contradict the whole course of the poem, which shews that another than Solomon is the true lover of the disconsolate maiden.

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[17] i. 2.

[18] i. 3.

[19] i. 4.

[20] i. 5.

[21] i. 6.

[22] See viii. 12.

[23] i. 9 – ii. 6.

The king begins with the familiar device by which rich men all the world over try to win the confidence of poor girls when there is no love on either side, – a device which has been only too successful in the case of many a weak Marguerite though her tempter has not always been a handsome Faust; but in the present case innocence is fortified by true love, and the trick is a failure. The king notices that this peasant girl has but simple plaited hair and homely ornaments. She shall have plaits of gold and studs of silver! Splendid as one of Pharaoh's chariot horses, she shall be decorated as magnificently as they are decorated! What is this to our stanch heroine? She treats it with absolute indifference, and begins to soliloquise, with a touch of scorn in her language. She has been loaded with scent after the manner of the luxurious court, and the king while seated feasting at his table has caught the odour of the rich perfumes. That is why he is now by her side. Does he think that she will serve as a new dainty for the great banquet, as a fresh fillip for the jaded appetite of the royal voluptuary? If so he is much mistaken. The king's promises have no attraction for her, and she turns for relief to dear memories of her true love. The thought of him is fragrant as the bundle of myrrh she carries in her bosom, as the henna-flowers that bloom in the vineyards of far-off Engedi.

Clearly Solomon has made a clumsy move. This shy bird is not of the common species with which he is familiar. He must aim higher if he would bring down his quarry. She is not to be classed with the wares of the matrimonial market that are only waiting to be assigned to the richest bidder. She cannot be bought even by the wealth of a king's treasury. But if there is a woman who can resist the charms of finery, is there one who can stand against the admiration of her personal beauty? A man of Solomon's experience would scarcely believe that such was to be found. Nevertheless now the sex he estimates too lightly is to be vindicated, while the king himself is to be taught a wholesome lesson. He may call her fair; he may praise her dove-like eyes.[24] His flattery is lost upon her. She only thinks of the beauty of her shepherd lad, and pictures to herself the green bank on which they used to sit, with the cedars and firs for the beams and roof of their trysting-place.[25] Her language carries us away from the gilded splendour and close, perfumed atmosphere of the royal palace to scenes such as Shakespeare presents in the forest of Arden and the haunts of Titania, and Milton in the Mask of *Comus*. Here is a Hebrew lady longing to escape from the clutches of one who for all his glory is not without some of the offensive traits of the monster Comus. She thinks of herself as a wild flower, like the crocus that grows on the plains of Sharon or the lily (literally the anemone) that is sprinkled so freely over the upland valleys.[26] The open country is the natural *habitat* of such a plant, not the stifling court. Solomon catches at her beautiful imagery. Compared with other maidens she is like a lily among thorns.[27]

And now these scenes of nature carry the persecuted girl away in a sort of reverie. If she is like the tender flower, her lover resembles the apple tree at the foot of which it nestles, a tree the shadow of which is delightful and its fruit sweet.[28] She remembers how he brought her to his banqueting house; that rustic bower was a very different place from the grand divan on which she had seen Solomon sitting at his table. No purple hangings like those of the king's palace there screened her from the sun. The only banner her shepherd could spread over her was love, his own love.[29] But what could be a more perfect shelter?

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[24] i. 15.

[25] i. 16, 17.

[26] ii. 1.

[27] ii. 2.

She is fainting. How she longs for her lover to comfort her! She has just compared him to an apple tree; now the refreshment she hungers for is the fruit of this tree; that is to say, his love.[30] Oh that he would put his arms round her and support her, as in the old happy days before she had been snatched away from him![31]

Next follows a verse which is repeated later, and so serves as a sort of refrain.[32] The Shulammite adjures the daughters of Jerusalem not to awaken love. This verse is misrendered in the Authorised Version, which inserts the pronoun "my" before "love" without any warrant in the Hebrew text. The poor girl has spoken of apples. But the court ladies must not misunderstand her. She wants none of their love apples,[33] no philtre, no charm to turn her affections away from her shepherd lover and pervert them to the importunate royal suitor. The opening words of the poem which celebrated the charms of Solomon had been aimed in that direction. The motive of the work seems to be the Shulammite's resistance to various attempts to move her from loyalty to her true love. It is natural, therefore, that an appeal to desist from all such attempts should come out emphatically.

The poem takes a new turn. In imagination the Shulammite hears the voice of her beloved. She pictures him standing at the foot of the lofty rock on which the harem is built, and crying, —

> "Oh, my dove, that art in the clefts of the rock, in the cover of the steep place,
> Let me see thy countenance, let me hear thy voice;
> For sweet is thy voice, and thy countenance is comely."[34]

He is like a troubadour singing to his imprisoned lady-love; and she, in her soliloquys, though not by any means a "high-born maiden," may call to mind the simile in Shelley's *Skylark*: —

> "Like a high-born maiden
> In a palace tower,
> Soothing her love-laden
> Soul in secret hour,
> With music sweet as love, which overflows her bower."

She remembers how her lover had come to her bounding over the hills "like a roe or a young hart,"[35] and peeping in at her lattice; and she repeats the song with which he had called her out – one of the sweetest songs of spring that ever was sung.[36] In our own green island we acknowledge that this is the most beautiful season of all the round year; but in Palestine it stands out in more strongly pronounced contrast to the three other seasons, and it is in itself exceedingly lovely. While summer and autumn are there parched with drought, barren and desolate, and while winter is often dreary with snow-storms and floods of rain, in spring the whole land is one lovely garden, ablaze with richest hues, hill and dale, wilderness and farmland vying in the luxuriance of their wild flowers, from the red anemone that fires the steep sides of the mountains to the purple and white cyclamen that nestles among the rocks at their feet. Much of the beauty of this poem is found in the fact that it is pervaded by the spirit of an eastern spring. This makes it possible to introduce a wealth of beautiful imagery which would not have been appropriate if any other season had been chosen. Even more lovely in March than England is in May, Palestine comes nearest to the appearance of our country in the former month; so that this poem, that is so completely bathed in the atmosphere of early spring, calls up echoes of the exquisite English garden pictures in Shelley's *Sensitive Plant* and Tennyson's *Maud*. But it is not only beauty of imagery that our poet gains by setting his work in this lovely season. His ideas are all in harmony with the period of the year he describes so charmingly. It is the time of youth and hope, of joy and love – especially of love, for,

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[28] ii. 3.

[29] ii. 4.

[30] ii. 5.

[31] ii. 6.

[32] ii. 7.

[33] See Gen. xxx. 14.

[34] ii. 14.

[35] ii. 9.

[36] ii. 11-13.

"In the spring a young man's fancy
Lightly turns to thoughts of love."

There is even a deeper association between the ideas of the poem and the season in which it is set. None of the freshness of spring is to be found about Solomon and his harem, but it is all present in the Shulammite and her shepherd; and spring scenes and thoughts powerfully aid the motive of the poem in accentuating the contrast between the tawdry magnificence of the court and the pure, simple beauty of the country life to which the heroine of the poem clings so faithfully.

The Shulammite answers her lover in an old ditty about "the little foxes that spoil the vineyards."[37] He would recognise that, and so discover her presence. We are reminded of the legend of Richard's page finding his master by singing a familiar ballad outside the walls of the castle in the Tyrol where the captive crusader was imprisoned. This is all imaginary. And yet the faithful girl knows in her heart that her beloved is hers and that she is his, although in sober reality he is now feeding his flocks in the far-off flowery fields of her old home.[38] There he must remain till the cool of the evening, till the shadows melt into the darkness of night, when she would fain he returned to her, coming over the rugged mountains "like a roe or a young hart."[39]

Now the Shulammite tells a painful dream.[40] She dreamed that she had lost her lover, and that she rose up at night and went out into the streets seeking him. At first she failed to find him. She asked the watchmen whom she met on their round, if they had seen him whom her soul loved. They could not help her quest. But a little while after leaving them she discovered the missing lover, and brought him safely into her mother's house.

After a repetition of the warning to the daughters of Jerusalem not to awaken love,[41] we are introduced to a new scene.[42] It is by one of the gates of Jerusalem, where the country maiden has been brought in order that she may be impressed by the gorgeous spectacle of Solomon returning from a royal progress. The king comes up from the wilderness in clouds of perfume, guarded by sixty men-at-arms, and borne in a magnificent palanquin of cedar-wood, with silver posts, a floor of gold, and purple cushions, wearing on his head the crown with which his mother had crowned him. Is the mention of the mother of Solomon intended to be specially significant? Remember – she was Bathsheba!The allusion to such a woman would not be likely to conciliate the pure young girl who was not in the least degree moved by this attempt to charm her with a scene of exceptional magnificence.

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[37] ii. 15.

[38] ii. 16.

[39] ii. 17.

[40] iii. 1-4.

[41] iii. 5.

[42] iii. 6-11.

Solomon now appears again, praising his captive in extravagant language of courtly flattery. He praises her dove-like eyes, her voluminous black hair, her rosy lips, her noble brow (not even disguised by her veil), her towering neck, her tender bosom – lovely as twin gazelles that feed among the lilies. Like her lover, who is necessarily away with his flock, Solomon will leave her till the cool of the evening, till the shadows melt into night; but he has no pastoral duties to attend to, and though the delicate balancing and assimilation of phrase and idea is gracefully manipulated, there is a change. The king will go to "mountains of myrrh" and "hills of frankincense,"[43] to make his person more fragrant, and so, as he hopes, more welcome.

If we adopt the "shepherd hypothesis" the next section of the poem must be assigned to the rustic lover.[44] It is difficult to believe that this peasant would be allowed to speak to a lady in the royal harem. We might suppose that here and perhaps also in the earlier scene the shepherd is represented as actually present at the foot of the rock on which the palace stands. Otherwise this also must be taken as an imaginary scene, or as a reminiscence of the dreamy girl. Although a thread of unity runs through the whole poem, Goethe was clearly correct in calling it "a medley." Scenes real and imaginary melting one into another cannot take their places in a regular drama. But when we grant full liberty to the imaginary element there is less necessity to ask what is subjective and what objective, what only fancied by the Shulammite and what intended to be taken as an actual occurrence. Strictly speaking, nothing is actual; the whole poem is a highly imaginative series of fancy pictures illustrating the development of its leading ideas.

Next – whether we take it as in imagination or in fact – the shepherd lover calls his bride to follow him from the most remote regions. His language is entirely different from that of the magnificent monarch. He does not waste his breath in formal compliments, high-flown imagery, wearisome lists of the charms of the girl he loves. That was the clumsy method of the king; clumsy, though reflecting the finished manners of the court, in comparison with the genuine outpourings of the heart of a country lad. The shepherd is eloquent with the inspiration of true love; his words throb and glow with genuine emotion; there is a fine, wholesome passion in them. The love of his bride has ravished his heart. How beautiful is her love! He is intoxicated with it more than with wine. How sweet are her words of tender affection, like milk and honey! She is so pure, there is something sisterly in her love with all its warmth. And she is so near to him that she is almost like part of himself, as his own sister. This holy and close relationship is in startling contrast to the only thing known as love in the royal harem. It is as much more lofty and noble as it is more strong and deep than the jaded emotions of the court. The sweet pure maiden is to the shepherd like a garden the gate of which is barred against trespassers, like a spring shut off from casual access, like a sealed fountain – sealed to all but one, and, happy man, he is that one. To him she belongs, to him alone. She is a garden, yes, a most fragrant garden, an orchard of pomegranates full of rich fruit, crowded with sweet-scented plants – henna and spikenard and saffron, calamus and cinnamon and all kinds of frankincense, myrrh and aloes and the best of spices. She is a fountain in the garden, sealed to all others, but not stinted towards the one she loves. To him she is as a well of living waters, like the full-fed streams that flow from Lebanon.

The maiden is supposed to hear the song of love. She replies in fearless words of welcome, bidding the north wind awake, and the south wind too, that the fragrance of which her lover has spoken so enthusiastically may flow out more richly than ever. For his sake she would be more sweet and loving. All she possesses is for him. Let him come and take possession of his own.[45]

What lover could turn aside from such a rapturous invitation? The shepherd takes his bride; he enters his garden, gathers his myrrh and spice, eats his honey and drinks his wine and milk, and calls on his friends to feast and drink with him.[46] This seems to point to the marriage of the couple and their wedding feast; a view of the passage which interpreters who regard Solomon as the lover throughout for the most part take, but one which has this fatal objection, that it leaves the second half of the poem without a motive. On the hypothesis of the shepherd lover it is still more difficult to suppose the wedding to have occurred at the point we have now reached, for the distraction of the royal courtship still proceeds in subsequent passages of the poem. It would seem, then, that we must regard this as quite an ideal scene. It may, however, be taken as a reminiscence of an earlier passage in the lives of the two lovers. It is not impossible that it refers to their wedding, and that they had been married before the action of the whole story began. In that case we should have to suppose that Solomon's officers had carried off a young bride to the royal harem. The intensity of the love and the bitterness of the separation apparent throughout the poem would be the more intelligible if this were the situation. It is to be remembered that Shakespeare ascribes the climax of the love and grief of Romeo and Juliet to a time after their marriage. But the difficulty of accepting this view lies in the improbability that so outrageous a crime would be attributed to Solomon, although it must be admitted that the guilty conduct of his father and mother had gone a long way in setting an example for the violation of the marriage tie. In dealing with vague and dreamy poetry such as that of the Song of Solomon, it is not possible to determine a point like this with precision; nor is it necessary to do so. The beauty and force of the passage now before us centre in the perfect mutual love of the two young hearts that here show themselves to be knit together as one, whether already actually married or not yet thus externally united.

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[43] iv. 6.

[44] iv. 8-15.

[45] iv. 16.

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[46] v. 1.

CHAPTER III
LOVE UNQUENCHABLE

Chapter v. 1-viii

We have seen how this strange poem mingles fact and fancy, memory and reverie, in what would be hopeless confusion if we could not detect a common prevailing sentiment and one aim towards which the whole is tending, with all its rapidly shifting scenes and all its perplexingly varying movements. The middle of the poem attains a perfect climax of love and rapture. Then we are suddenly transported to an entirely different scene. The Shulammite recites a second dream, which somewhat resembles her former dream, but is more vivid and intense, and ends very painfully.[47] The circumstances of it will agree most readily with the idea that she is already married to the shepherd. Again it is a dream of the loss of her lover, and of her search for him by night in the streets of Jerusalem. But in the present case he was first close to her, and then he deserted her most unaccountably; and when she went to look for him this time she failed to find him, and met with cruel ill-treatment. In her dream she fancies she hears the bridegroom knocking at her chamber door and calling upon her as his sister, his love, his dove, his undefiled, to open to him. He has just returned from tending his flock in the night, and his hair is wet with the dew. The bride coyly excuses herself, on the plea that she has laid aside her mantle and washed her feet; as though it would vex her to put her feet to the ground again. This is but the playful reluctance of love; for no sooner is her beloved really lost than she undertakes the greatest trouble in the search for him. When he puts in his hand to lift the latch, her heart is moved towards him, and she rises to open the door. On touching the lock she finds it covered with liquid myrrh. It has been ingeniously suggested that we have here a reference to the construction of an eastern lock, with a wooden pin dropped into the bolt, which is intended to be lifted by a key, but which may be raised by a man's finger if he is provided with some viscid substance, such as the ointment here mentioned, to adhere to the pin. The little detail shews that the lover or bridegroom had come with the deliberate intention of entering. How strange, then, that when the bride opens the door he is not to be seen! Why has he fled? The shock of this surprise quite overwhelms the poor girl, and she is on the point of fainting. She looks about for her vanished lover, and calls him by name; but there is no answer. She goes out to seek for him in the streets, and there the watchmen cuff and bruise her, and the sentry on the city walls rudely tear off her veil.

Returning from the distressing recollection of her dream to the present condition of affairs, the sorrowful Shulammite adjures the daughters of Jerusalem to tell her if they have found her love.[48] They respond by asking, what is her beloved more than any other beloved?[49] This mocking question of the harem women rouses the Shulammite, and affords an opportunity for descanting on the beauty of her love.[50] He is both fair and ruddy, the chiefest among ten thousand. For this is what he is like: a head splendid as finest gold; massive, curling, raven locks; eyes like doves by water brooks, and looking as though they had been washed in milk – an elaborate image in which the soft iris and the sparkling light on the pupils suggest the picture of the gentle birds brooding on the bank of a flashing stream, and the pure, healthy eyeballs a thought of the whiteness of milk; cheeks fragrant as spices; lips red as lilies (the blood-red anemones); a body like ivory, with blue veins as of sapphire; legs like marble columns on golden bases. The aspect of him is like great Lebanon, splendid as the far-famed cedars; and when he opens his lips his voice is ravishingly sweet. Yes, he is altogether lovely. Such is her beloved, her dearest one.

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[47] v. 2-7.

[48] v. 8.

[49] v. 9.

[50] v. 10-16.

The mocking ladies ask their victim where then has this paragon gone?[51] She would have them understand that he has not been so cruel as really to desert her. It was only in her dream that he treated her with such unaccountable fickleness. The plain fact is that he is away at his work on his far-off farm, feeding his flock, and perhaps gathering a posy of flowers for his bride.[52] He is far away, – that sad truth cannot be denied; and yet he is not really lost, for love laughs at time and distance; the poor lonely girl can say still that she is her beloved's and that he is hers.[53] The reappearance of this phrase suggests that it is intended to serve as a sort of refrain. Thus it comes in with admirable fitness to balance the other refrain to which reference has been made earlier.[54] In the first refrain the daughters of Jerusalem are besought not to attempt to awaken the Shulammite's love for Solomon; this is well balanced by the refrain in which she declares the constancy of the mutual love that exists between herself and the shepherd.

Now Solomon reappears on the scene, and resumes his laudation of the Shulammite's beauty.[55] But there is a marked change in his manner. This most recent capture is quite unlike the sort of girls with whom his harem was stocked from time to time. He had no reverence for any of them; they all considered themselves to be highly honoured by his favour, all adored him with slavish admiration, like that expressed by one of them in the first line of the poem. But he is positively afraid of the Shulammite. She is "terrible as an army with banners." He cannot bear to look at her eyes; he begs her to turn them away from him, for they have overcome him. What is the meaning of this new attitude on the part of the mighty monarch? There is something awful in the simple peasant girl. The purity, the constancy, the cold scorn with which she regards the king, are as humiliating as they are novel in his experience. Yet it is well for him that he is susceptible to their influence. He is greatly injured and corrupted by the manners of a luxurious oriental court. But he is not a seared profligate. The vision of goodness startles him; then there is a better nature in him, and its slumbering powers are partly roused by this unexpected apparition.

We have now reached a very important point in the poem. It is almost impossible to reconcile this with the theory that Solomon is the one and only lover referred to throughout. But on the "shepherd hypothesis" the position is most significant. The value of constancy in love is not only seen in the steadfast character of one who is sorely tempted to yield to other influences; it is also apparent in the effects on a spectator of so uncongenial a nature as king Solomon. Thus the poet brings out the great idea of his work most vividly. He could not have done so more forcibly than by choosing the court of Solomon for the scene of the trial, and shewing the startling effect of the noble virtue of constancy on the king himself.

Here we are face to face with one of the rescuing influences of life, which may be met in various forms. A true woman, an innocent child, a pure man, coming across the path of one who has permitted himself to slide down towards murky depths, arrests his attention with a painful shock of surprise. The result is a revelation to him, in the light of which he discovers, to his horror, how far he has fallen. It is a sort of incarnate conscience warning him of the still lower degradation towards which he is sinking. Perhaps it strikes him as a beacon light, shewing the path up to purity and peace; an angel from heaven sent to help him retrace his steps and return to his better self. Few men are so abandoned as never to be visited by some such gleam from higher regions. To many, alas, it comes but as the temporary rift in the clouds through which for one brief moment the blue sky becomes visible even on a wild and stormy day, soon to be lost in deeper darkness. Happy are they who obey its unexpected message.

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[51] vi. 1.

[52] vi. 2.

[53] vi. 3.

[54] Page 20.

[55] vi. 4-7.

The concluding words of the passage which opens with Solomon's praises of the Shulammite present another of the many difficulties with which the poem abounds. Mention is made of Solomon's sixty queens, his eighty concubines, his maidens without number; and then the Shulammite is contrasted with this vast seraglio as "My dove, my undefiled," who is "but one" – "the only one of her mother."[56] Who is speaking here? If this is a continuation of Solomon's speech, as the flow of the verses would suggest, it must mean that the king would set his newest acquisition quite apart from all the ladies of the harem, as his choice and treasured bride. Those who regard Solomon as the lover, think they see here what they call his conversion, that is to say, his turning away from polygamy to monogamy. History knows of no such conversion; and it is hardly likely that a poet of the northern kingdom would go out of his way to whitewash the matrimonial reputation of a sovereign from whom the house of Judah was descended. Besides, the occurrence here represented bears a very dubious character when we consider that all the existing denizens of the harem were to be put aside in favour of a new beauty. It would have been more like a genuine conversion if Solomon had gone back to the love of his youth, and confined his affections to his neglected first wife.

On the shepherd hypothesis it is most natural to attribute the passage to the shepherd himself. But since it is difficult to imagine him present at this scene between Solomon and the Shulammite, it seems that we must fall back on the idealising character of the poem. In this figurative way the true lover expresses his contempt for the monstrous harem at the palace. He is content with his one ewe lamb; nay, she is more to him than all Solomon's bevy of beauties; even these ladies of the court are now constrained to praise the noble qualities of his bride.

Solomon's expression of awe for the terrible purity and constancy of the Shulammite is repeated,[57] and then she tells the story of her capture.[58] She had gone down to the nut garden to look at the fresh green on the plants, and to see whether the vines were budding and the pomegranates putting forth their lovely scarlet blossoms, when suddenly, and all unawares, she was pounced upon by the king's people and whisked away in one of his chariots. It is a vivid scene, and, like other scenes in this poem, the background of it is the lovely aspect of nature in early spring.

The Shulammite now seems to be attempting a retreat, and the ladies of the court bid her return; they would see the performance of a favourite dance, known as "The Dance of Mahanaim."[59] Thereupon we have a description of the performer, as she was seen during the convolutions of the dance, dressed in a transparent garment of red gauze, – perhaps such as is represented in Pompeian frescoes, – so that her person could be compared to pale wheat surrounded by crimson anemones.[60] It is quite against the tenor of her conduct to suppose that the modest country girl would degrade herself by ministering to the amusement of a corrupt court in this shameless manner. It is more reasonable to conclude that the entertainment was given by a professional dancer from among the women of the harem. We have a hint that this is the case in the title applied to the performer, in addressing whom Solomon exclaims, "O prince's daughter,"[61]] an expression never used for the poor Shulammite, and one from which we should gather that she was a captive princess who had been trained as a court dancer. The glimpse of the manners of the palace helps to strengthen the contrast of the innocent, simple country life in which the Shulammite delights.

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[56] vi. 8, 9.

[57] vi. 10.

[58] Vers. 11, 12.

[59] vi. 13. This is obscured in the Authorised Version.

[60] vii. 1-9.

[61] vii 1.

It has been suggested, with some degree of probability, that the Shulammite is supposed to make her escape while the attention of the king and his court is diverted by this entrancing spectacle. It is to be observed, at all events, that from this point onwards to the end of the poem, neither Solomon nor the daughters of Jerusalem take any part in the dialogue, while the scene appears to be shifted to the Shulammite's home in the country, where she and the shepherd are now seen together in happy companionship. The bridegroom has come to fetch his bride. Again she owns that she is his, and delights in the glad thought that his heart goes out to her.[62] She bids him come with her into the field, and lodge in the villages. They will get them early into the vineyards and see whether the vines are blooming, and whether the pomegranates are in blossom.[63] It is still early spring. It was early spring when she was snatched away. Unless she had been a whole year at the palace, – an impossible situation with the king continuing his ineffectual courtship for so long a time, – we have no movement of time. But the series of events from the day when the Shulammite was seized in her nut garden, till she found herself back again in her home in the north country, after the trying episode of her temporary residence in the royal palace, must have occupied some weeks. And yet the conclusion of the story is set in precisely the same stage of spring, the time when people look for the first buds and blossoms, as the opening scenes. It has been proposed to confine the whole action to the northern district, where Solomon might have had a country house adjoining his vineyard.[64] The presence of the "daughters of Jerusalem," and allusions to the streets of the city, its watchmen, and the guard upon the walls, are against this notion. It is better to conclude that we have here another instance of the idealism of the poem. Since early spring is the season that harmonises most perfectly with the spirit of the whole work, the author does not trouble himself with adapting its scenes in a realistic manner to the rapidly changing aspects of nature.

The shepherd has addressed the Shulammite as his sister;[65] she now reciprocates the title by expressing her longing that he had been as her brother.[66] This singular mode of courtship between two lovers who are so passionately devoted to one another that we might call them the Hebrew Romeo and Juliet, is not without significance. Its recurrence, now on the lips of the bride, helps to sharpen still more the contrast between what passes for love in the royal harem, and the true emotion experienced by a pair of innocent young people, unsullied by the corruptions of the court – illustrating, as it does at once, its sweet intimacy and its perfect purity.

The proud bride would now lead her swain to her mother's house.[67] There is no mention of her father; apparently he is not living. But the fond way in which this simple girl speaks of her mother reveals another lovely trait in her character. She has witnessed the wearisome magnificence of Solomon's palace. It was impossible to associate the idea of home with such a place. We never hear the daughters of Jerusalem, those poor degraded women of the harem, speaking of their mothers. But to the Shulammite no spot on earth is so dear as her mother's cottage. There her lover shall have spiced wine and pomegranate juice – simple home-made country beverages.[68] Repeating one of the early refrains of the poem, the happy bride is not afraid to say that there too her husband shall support her in his strong embrace.[69] She then repeats another refrain, and for the last time – surely one would say now, quite superfluously – she adjures the daughters of Jerusalem not to awaken any love for Solomon in her, but to leave love to its spontaneous course.[70]

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[62] vii. 10.

[63] vii. 11-13.

[64] viii. 11.

[65] viii. 1.

[66] viii. 1.

[67] viii. 2.

[68] viii. 2.

[69] viii. 3.

[70] viii. 4.

Now the bridegroom is seen coming up from the wilderness with his bride leaning upon him, and telling how he first made love to her when he found her asleep under an apple tree in the garden of the cottage where she was born.[71] As they converse together we reach the richest gem of the poem, the Shulammite's impassioned eulogy of love.[72] She bids her husband set her as a seal upon his heart in the inner sanctuary of his being, and as a seal upon his arm – always owning her, always true to her in the outer world. She is to be his closely, his openly, his for ever. She has proved her constancy to him; now she claims his constancy to her. The foundation of this claim rests on the very nature of love. The one essential characteristic here dwelt upon is strength – "Love is strong as death." Who can resist grim death? who escape its iron clutches? Who can resist mighty love, or evade its power? The illustration is startling in the apparent incompatibility of the two things drawn together for comparison. But it is a stern and terrible aspect of love to which our attention is now directed. This is apparent as the Shulammite proceeds to speak of jealousy which is "hard as the grave." If love is treated falsely, it can flash out in a flame of wrath ten times more furious than the raging of hatred – "a most vehement flame of the Lord." This is the only place in which the name of God appears throughout the whole poem. It may be said that even here it only comes in according to a familiar Hebrew idiom, as metaphor for what is very great. But the Shulammite has good reason for claiming God to be on her side in the protection of her love from cruel wrong and outrage. Love as she knows it is both unquenchable and unpurchasable. She has tested and proved these two attributes in her own experience. At the court of Solomon every effort was made to destroy her love for the shepherd, and all possible means were employed for buying her love for the king. Both utterly failed. All the floods of scorn which the harem ladies poured over her love for the country lad could not quench it; all the wealth of a kingdom could not buy it for Solomon. Where true love exists, no opposition can destroy it; where it is not, no money can purchase it. As for the second idea – the purchasing of love – the Shulammite flings it away with the utmost contempt. Yet this was the too common means employed by a king such as Solomon for replenishing the stock of his harem. Then the monarch was only pursuing a shadow; he was but playing at love-making; he was absolutely ignorant of the reality.

The vigour, one might say the rigour, of this passage distinguishes it from nearly all other poetry devoted to the praises of love. That poetry is usually soft and tender; sometimes it is feeble and sugary. And yet it must be remembered that even the classical Aphrodite could be terribly angry. There is nothing morbid or sentimental in the Shulammite's ideas. She has discovered and proved by experience that love is a mighty force, capable of heroic endurance, and able, when wronged, to avenge itself with serious effect.

Towards the conclusion of the poem fresh speakers appear in the persons of the Shulammite's brothers, who defend themselves from the charge of negligence in having permitted their little sister to be snatched away from their keeping, explaining how they have done their best to guard her. Or perhaps they mean that they will be more careful in protecting a younger sister. They will build battlements about her. The Shulammite takes up the metaphor. She is safe now, as a wall well embattled; at last she has found peace in the love of her husband. Solomon may have a vineyard in her neighbourhood, and draw great wealth from it with which to buy the wares in which he delights.[73] It is nothing to her. She has her own vineyard. This reference to the Shulammite's vineyard recalls the mention of it at the beginning of the poem, and suggests the idea that in both cases the image represents the shepherd lover. In the first instance she had not kept her vineyard,[74] for she had lost her lover. Now she has him, and she is satisfied.[75] He calls to her in the garden, longing to hear her voice there,[76] and she replies, bidding him hasten and come to her as she has described him coming before, —

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[71] viii. 5.

[72] viii. 6, 7.

[73] viii. 11.

[74] i. 6.

[75] viii. 12.

"Like to a roe or a young hart
Upon the mountains of spices."[77]

And so the poem sinks to rest in the happy picture of the union of the two young lovers.

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[76] viii. 13.

[77] viii. 14.

CHAPTER IV
MYSTICAL INTERPRETATIONS

Thus far we have been considering the bare, literal sense of the text. It cannot be denied that, if only to lead up to the metaphorical significance of the words employed, those words must be approached through their primary physical meanings. This is essential even to the understanding of pure allegory such as that of *The Faerie Queen* and *The Pilgrim's Progress*; we must understand the adventures of the Red Cross Knight and the course of Christian's journey before we can learn the moral of Spenser's and Bunyan's elaborate allegories. Similarly it is absolutely necessary for us to have some idea of the movement of the Song of Solomon as a piece of literature, in its external form, even if we are persuaded that beneath this sensuous exterior it contains the most profound ideas, before we can discover any such ideas. In other words, if it is to be considered as a mass of symbolism the symbols must be understood in themselves before their significance can be drawn out of them.

But now we are confronted with the question whether the book has any other meaning than that which meets the eye. The answers to this question are given on three distinct lines: – First, we have the *allegorical* schemes of interpretation, according to which the poem is not to be taken literally at all, but is to be regarded as a purely metaphorical representation of national or Church history, philosophical ideas, or spiritual experiences. In the second place, we meet with various forms of double interpretation, described as *typical* or *mystical*, in which a primary meaning is allowed to the book as a sort of drama or idyl, or as a collection of Jewish love-songs, while a secondary signification of an ideal or spiritual character is added. Distinct as these lines of interpretation are in themselves, they tend to blend in practice, because even when two meanings are admitted the symbolical signification is considered to be of so much greater importance than the literal that it virtually occupies the whole field. In the third place there is the *purely literal* interpretation, that which denies the existence of any symbolical or mystical intention in the poem.

Allegorical interpretations of the Song of Solomon are found among the Jews early in the Christian era. The Aramaic Targum, probably originating about the sixth century A.D., takes the first half of the poem as a symbolical picture of the history of Israel previous to the captivity, and the second as a prophetic picture of the subsequent fortunes of the nation. The recurrence of the expression "the congregation of Israel" in this paraphrase wherever the Shulammite appears, and other similar adaptations, entirely destroy the fine poetic flavour of the work, and convert it into a dreary, dry-as-dust composition.

Symbolical interpretations were very popular among Christian Fathers – though not with universal approval, as the protest of Theodore of Mopsuestia testifies. The great Alexandrian Origen is the founder and patron of this method of interpreting the Song of Solomon in the Church. Jerome was of opinion that Origen "surpassed himself" in his commentary on the poem – a commentary to which he devoted ten volumes. According to his view, it was originally an epithalamium celebrating the marriage of Solomon with Pharaoh's daughter; but it has secondary mystical meanings descriptive of the relation of the Redeemer to the Church or the individual soul. Thus "the little foxes that spoil the grapes" are evil thoughts in the individual, or heretics in the Church. Gregory the Great contributes a commentary of no lasting interest. Very different is the work of the great mediæval monk St. Bernard of Clairvaux, who threw himself into it with all the passion and rapture of his enthusiastic soul, and in the course of eighty-six homilies only reached the beginning of the third chapter in this to him inexhaustible mine of spiritual wealth, when he died, handing on the task to his faithful disciple Gilbert Porretanus, who continued it on the same portentous scale, and also died before he had finished the fifth chapter. Even while reading the old monkish Latin in this late age we cannot fail to feel the glowing devotion that inspires it. Bernard is addressing his monks, to whom he says he need not give the milk for babes, and whom he exhorts to prepare their throats not for this milk but for bread. As a schoolman he cannot escape from metaphysical subtleties – he takes the kiss of the bridegroom as a symbol of the incarnation. But throughout there burns the perfect rapture of love to Jesus Christ which inspires his well-known hymns. Here we are at the secret of the extraordinary popularity of mystical interpretations of the Song of Solomon. It has seemed to many in all ages of the Christian Church to afford the best expression for the deepest spiritual relations of Christ and His people. Nevertheless, the mystical method has been widely disputed since the time of the Reformation. Luther complains of the "many wild and monstrous interpretations" that are attached to the Song of Solomon, though even he understands it as symbolical of Solomon and his state. Still, not a few of the most popular hymns of our own day are saturated with ideas and phrases gathered from this book, and fresh expositions of what are considered to be its spiritual lessons may still be met with.

It is not easy to discover any justification for the rabbinical explanation of the Song of Solomon as a representation of successive events in the history of Israel, an explanation which Jewish scholars have abandoned in favour of simple literalism. But the mystical view, according to which the poem sets forth spiritual ideas, has pleas urged in its favour that demand some consideration. We are reminded of the analogy of Oriental literature, which delights in parable to an extent unknown in the West. Works of a kindred nature are produced in which an allegorical signification is plainly intended. Thus the Hindoo Gilagovinda celebrates the loves of Chrishna and Radha in verses that bear a remarkable resemblance to the Song of Solomon. Arabian poets sing of the love of Joseph for Zuleikha, which mystics take as the love of God towards the soul that longs for union with Him. There is a Turkish mystical commentary on the Song of Hafiz.

The bible itself furnishes us with suggestive analogies. Throughout the Old Testament the idea of a marriage union between God and His people occurs repeatedly, and the most frequent metaphor for religious apostasy is drawn from the crime of adultery.[78] This symbolism is especially prominent in the writings of Jeremiah[79] and Hosea.[80] The forty-fifth psalm is an epithalamium commonly read with a Messianic signification. John the Baptist describes the coming Messiah as the Bridegroom,[81] and Jesus Christ accepts the title for Himself.[82] Our Lord illustrates the blessedness of the Kingdom of Heaven in a parable of a wedding feast.[83] With St. Paul the union of husband and wife is an earthly copy of the union of Christ and his Church.[84] The marriage of the Lamb is a prominent feature in the Book of the Revelation.[85]

Further, it may be maintained that the experience of Christians has demonstrated the aptness of the expression of the deepest spiritual truths in the imagery of the Song of Solomon. Sad hearts disappointed in their earthly hopes have found in the religious reading of this poem as a picture of their relation to their Saviour the satisfaction for which they have hungered, and which the world could never give them. Devout Christians have read in it the very echo of their own emotions. Samuel Rutherford's *Letters*, for example, are in perfect harmony with the religious interpretation of the Song of Solomon; and these letters stand in the first rank of devotional works. There is certainly some force in the argument that a key which seems to fit the lock so well must have been designed to do so.

On the other hand, the objections to a mystical, religious interpretation are very strong. In the first place, we can quite account for its appearance apart from any justification of it in the original intention of the author. Allegory was in the air at the time when, as far as we know, secondary meanings were first attached to the ideas of the Song of Solomon. They sprang from Alexandria, the home of allegory. Origen, who was the first Christian writer to work out a mystical explanation of this book, treated other books of the Old Testament in exactly the same way; but we never dream of following him in his fantastical interpretations of those works. There is no indication that the poem was understood allegorically or mystically as early as the first century of the Christian era. Philo is the prince of allegorists; but while he explains the narratives of the Pentateuch according to his favourite method, he never applies that method to this very tempting book, and never even mentions the work or makes any reference to its contents. The Song of Solomon is not once mentioned or even alluded to in the slightest way by any writer of the New Testament. Since it is never noticed by Christ or the Apostles, of course we cannot appeal to their authority for reading it mystically; and yet it was undoubtedly known to them as one of the books in the canon of the sacred Scriptures to which they were in the habit of appealing repeatedly. Consider the grave significance of this fact. All secondary interpretations of which we know anything, and, as far as we can tell, all that ever existed, had their origin in post-apostolic times. If we would justify this method by authority it is to the Fathers that we must go, not to Christ and or his apostles, not to the sacred Scriptures. It is a noteworthy fact, too, that the word *Eros*, the Greek name for the love of man and woman, as distinguished from *Agape*, which stands for love in the widest sense of the word, is first applied to our Lord by Ignatius. Here we have the faint beginning of the stream of erotic religious fancies which sometimes manifests itself most objectionably in subsequent Church history. There is not a trace of it in the New Testament.

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[78] *E.g.* Exod. xxxiv. 15, 16; Numb. xv. 39; Psalm lxxiii. 27; Ezek. xvi. 23, etc.

[79] *E.g.* Jer. iii. 1-11.

[80] Hosea ii. 2.; iii. 3.

[81] John iii. 29.

[82] Mark. ii. 19.

[83] Matt. xxii. 1-14.

[84] Eph. v. 22-33.

[85] Rev. xxi. 9.

If the choice spiritual ideas which some people think they see in the Song of Solomon are not imported by the reader, but form part of the genuine contents of the book, how comes it that this fact was not recognised by one of the inspired writers of the New Testament? or, if privately recognised, that it was never utilised? In the hands of the mystical interpreter this work is about the most valuable part of the Old Testament. He finds it to be an inexhaustible mine of the most precious treasures. Why, then, was such a remunerative lode never worked by the first authorities in Christian teaching? It may be replied that we cannon prove much from a bare negative. The apostles may have had their own perfectly sufficient reasons for leaving to the Church of later ages the discovery of this valuable spiritual store. Possibly the converts of their day were not ripe for the comprehension of the mysteries here expounded. Be that as it may, clearly the onus *probandi* rests with those people of a later age who introduce a method of interpretation for which no sanction can be found in Scripture.

Now the analogies that have been referred to are not sufficient to establish any proof. In the case of the other poems mentioned above there are distinct indications of symbolical intentions. Thus in the *Gitagovinda* the hero is a divinity whose incarnations are acknowledged in Hindoo mythology; and the concluding verse of that poem points the moral by a direct assertion of the religious meaning of the whole composition. This is not the case with the Song of Solomon. We must not be misled by the chapter-headings in our English Bibles, which of course are not to be found in the original Hebrew text. From the first line to the last there is not the slightest hint in the poem itself that it was intended to be read in any mystical sense. This is contrary to the analogy of all allegories. The parable may be difficult to interpret, but at all events it must suggest that it is a parable; otherwise it defeats its own object. If the writer never drops any hint that he has wrapped up spiritual ideas in the sensuous imagery of his poetry, what right has he to expect that anybody will find them there, so long as his poem admits of a perfectly adequate explanation in a literal sense? We need not be so dense as to require the allegorist to say to us in so many words: "This is a parable." But we may justly expect him to furnish us with some hint that his utterance is of such a character. Æsop's fables carry their lessons on the surface of them, so that we can often anticipate the concluding morals that are attached to them. When Tennyson announced that the *Idyls of the King* constituted an allegory most people were taken by surprise; and yet the analogy of *The Faerie Queen*, and the lofty ethical ideas with which the poems are inspired, might have prepared us for the revelation. But we have no similar indications in the case of the Song of Solomon. If somebody were to propound a new theory of *The Vicar of Wakefield*, which should turn that exquisite tale into a parable of the Fall, it would not be enough for him to exercise his ingenuity in pointing out resemblances between the eighteenth-century romance and the ancient narrative of the serpent's doings in the Garden of Eden. Since he could not shew that Goldsmith had the slightest intention of teaching anything of the kind, his exploit could be regarded as nothing but a piece of literary trifling.

The Biblical analogies already cited, in which the marriage relation between God or Christ and the Church or the soul are referred to, will not bear the strain that is put upon them when they are brought forward in order to justify a mystical interpretation of the Song of Solomon. At best they simply account for the emergence of this view of the book at a later time, or indicate that such a notion might be maintained if there were good reasons for adopting it. They cannot prove that in the present case it should be adopted. Moreover, they differ from it on two important points. *First*, in harmony with all genuine allegories and metaphors, they carry their own evidence of a symbolical meaning, which as we have seen the Song of Solomon fails to do. *Second*, they are not elaborate compositions of a dramatic or idyllic character in which the passion of love is vividly illustrated. Regarded in its entirety, the Song of Solomon is quite without parallel in Scripture. It may be replied that we cannot disprove the allegorical intention of the book. But this is not the question. That intention requires to be proved; and until it is proved, or at least until some very good reasons are urged for adopting it, no statement of bare possibilities counts for anything.

But we may push the case further. There is a positive improbability of the highest order that the spiritual ideas read into the Song of Solomon by some of its Christian admirers should have been originally there. This would involve the most tremendous anachronism in all literature. The Song of Solomon is dated among the earlier works of the Old Testament. But the religious ideas now associated with it represent what is regarded as the fruit of the most advanced saintliness ever attained in the Christian Church. Here we have a flat contradiction to the growth of revelation manifested throughout the whole course of Scripture history. We might as well ascribe the Sistine Madonna to the fresco-painters of the catacombs; or, what is more to the point, our Lord's discourse with his disciples at the paschal meal to Solomon or some other Jew of his age.

No doubt the devoted follower of the mystical method will not be troubled by considerations such as these. To him the supposed fitness of the poem to convey his religious ideas is the one sufficient proof of an original design that it should serve that end. So long as the question is approached in this way, the absence of clear evidence only delights the prejudiced commentator with the opportunity it affords for the exercise of his ingenuity. To a certain school of readers the very obscurity of a book is its fascination. The less obvious a meaning is, the more eagerly do they set themselves to expound and defend it. We could leave them to what might be considered a very harmless diversion if it were not for other considerations. But we cannot forget that it is just this ingenious way of interpreting the Bible in accordance with preconceived opinions that has encouraged the quotation of the Sacred Volume in favour of absolutely contradictory propositions, an abuse which in its turn has provoked an inevitable reaction leading to contempt for the Bible as an obscure book which speaks with no certain voice.

Still, it may be contended, the analogy between the words of this poem and the spiritual experience of Christians is in itself an indication of intentional connection. Swedenborg has shewn that there are correspondences between the natural and the spiritual, and this truth is illustrated by the metaphorical references to marriage in the Bible which have been adduced for comparison with the Song of Solomon. But their very existence shows that analogies between religious experience and the love story of the Shulammite may be traced out by the reader without any design on the part of the author to present them. If they are natural they are universal, and any love song will serve our purpose. On this principle, if the Song of Solomon admits of mystical adaptation, so do Mrs. Browning's *Sonnets from the Portuguese*.

We have no alternative, then, but to conclude that the mystical interpretation of this work is based on a delusion. Moreover, it must be added that the delusion is a mischievous one. No doubt to many it has been as meat and drink. They have found in their reading of the Song of Solomon real spiritual refreshment, or they believe they have found it. But there is another side. The poem has been used to minister to a morbid, sentimental type of religion. More than any other influence, the mystical interpretation of this book has imported an effeminate element into the notion of the love of Christ, not one trace of which can be detected in the New Testament. The Catholic legend of the marriage of St. Catherine is somewhat redeemed by the high ascetic tone that pervades it; and yet it indicates a decline from the standpoint of the apostles. Not a few unquestionable revelations of immorality in convents have shed a ghastly light on the abuse of erotic religious fervour. Among Protestants it cannot be said that the most wholesome hymns are those which are composed on the model of the Song of Solomon. In some cases the religious use of this book is perfectly nauseous, indicating nothing less than a disease of religion. When – as sometimes happens – frightful excesses of sensuality follow close on seasons of what has been regarded as the revival of religion, the common explanation of these horrors is that in some mysterious way spiritual emotion lies very near to sensual appetite, so that an excitement of the one tends to rouse the other. A more revolting hypothesis, or one more insulting to religion, cannot be imagined. The truth is, the two regions are separate as the poles. The explanation of the phenomena of their apparent conjunction is to be found in quite another direction. It is that their victims have substituted for religion a sensuous excitement which is as little religious as the elation that follows indulgence in alcoholism. There is no more deadly temptation of the devil than that which hoodwinks deluded fanatics into making this terrible mistake. But it can scarcely be denied that the mystical reading of the Song of Solomon by unspiritual persons, or even by any persons who are not completely fortified against the danger, may tend in this fatal direction.

CHAPTER V
CANONICITY

It is scarcely to be expected that the view of the Song of Solomon expounded in the foregoing pages will meet with acceptance from every reader. A person who has been accustomed to resort to this book in search of the deepest spiritual ideas cannot but regard the denial of their presence with aversion. While, however, it is distressing to be compelled to give pain to a devout soul, it may be necessary. If there is weight in the considerations that have been engaging our attention, we cannot shut our eyes to them simply because they may be disappointing. The mystical interpreter will be shocked at what he takes for irreverence. But, on the other hand, he should be on his guard against falling into this very fault from the opposite side. Reverence for truth is a primary Christian duty. The iconoclast is certain to be charged with irreverence by the devotee of the popular idol which he feels it his duty to destroy; and yet, if his action is inspired by loyalty to truth, reverence for what he deems highest and best may be its mainspring.

If the Song of Solomon were not one of the books of the Bible, questions such as these would never arise. It is its place in the sacred canon that induces people to resent the consequences of the application of criticism to it. It is simply owing to its being a part of the Bible that it has come to be treated mystically at all. Undoubtedly this is why it was allegorised by the Jews. But, then, the secondary signification thus acquired reacted upon it, and served as a sort of buoy to float it over the rocks of awkward questions. The result was that in the end the book attained to an exceptionally high position in the estimation of the rabbis. Thus the great Rabbi Akiba says: "The course of the ages cannot vie with the day on which the Song of Songs was given to Israel. All the *Kethubim* (*i. e.*, the *Hagiographa*) are holy, but the Song of Songs is a holy of holies."

Such being the case, it is manifest that the rejection of the mystical signification of its contents must revive the question of the canonicity of the book. We have not, however, to deal with the problem of its original insertion in the canon. We find it there. Some doubts as to its right to the place it holds seem to have been raised among the Jews during the first century of the Christian era; but these doubts were effectually borne down. As far as we know, the Song of Solomon has always been a portion of the Hebrew Scriptures from the obscure time when the collection of those Scriptures was completed. It stands as the first of the five *Megilloth*, or sacred rolls – the others being Ruth, Lamentations, Esther, and Ecclesiastes. We are not now engaged in the difficult task of constructing a new canon. The only possibility is that of the expulsion of a book already in the old canon. But the attempt to disturb in any way such a volume as the Old Testament, with all its incomparable associations, is not one to be undertaken lightly or without adequate reason.

In order to justify this radical measure it would not be enough to shew that the specific religious meanings that some have attached to the Song of Solomon do not really belong to it. If it is said that the secular tone it acquires under the hands of criticism shews it to be unworthy of a place in the sacred Scriptures, this assertion goes upon an unwarrantable assumption. We have no reason to maintain that all the books of the Old Testament must be of equal value. The Book of Esther does not reach a very high level of moral or religious worth; the pessimism of Ecclesiastes is not inspiring; even the Book of Proverbs contains maxims that cannot be elevated to a first place in ethics. If we could discover no distinctively enlightening or uplifting influence in the Song of Solomon, this would not be a sufficient reason for raising a cry against it; because if it were simply neutral in character, like nitrogen in the atmosphere, it would do no harm, and we could safely let it be. The one justification for a radical treatment of the question would be the discovery that the book was false in doctrine or deleterious in character. As to doctrine, it does not trench on that region at all. It would be as incongruous to associate it with the grave charge of heresy as to bring a similar accusation against the

Essays of Elia or Keats's poetry. And if the view expressed in these pages is at all correct, it certainly cannot be said that the moral tendency of the book is injurious; the very reverse must be affirmed.

Since there is no reason to believe that the Song of Solomon had received any allegorical interpretation before the commencement of the Christian era, we must conclude that it was not on the ground of some such interpretation that it was originally admitted into the Hebrew collection of Scripture. It was placed in the canon before it was allegorised. It was only allegorised because it had been placed in the canon. Then why was it set there? The natural conclusion to arrive at under these circumstances is that the scribes who ventured to put it first among the sacred *Megilloth* saw that there was a distinctive value in it. Perhaps; however, it is too much to say this of them. The word "Solomon" being attached to the book would seem to justify its inclusion with other literature which had received the hall-mark of that great name. Still we can learn to appreciate it on its own merits, and in so doing perceive that there is something in it to justify its right to a niche in the glorious temple of scripture.

Assuredly it was much to make clear in the days of royal polygamy among the Jews that this gross imitation of the court life of heathen monarchies was a despicable and degrading thing, and to set over against it an attractive picture of true love and simple manners. The prophets of Israel were continually protesting against a growing dissoluteness of morals: the Song of Solomon is a vivid illustration of the spirit of their protest. If the two nations had been content with the rustic delight so beautifully portrayed in this book, they might not have fallen into ruin as they did under the influence of the corruptions of an effete civilisation. If their people had cherished the graces of purity and constancy that shine so conspicuously in the character of the Shulammite they might not have needed to pass through the purging fires of the captivity.

But while this can be said of the book as it first appeared among the Jews, a similar estimate of its function in later ages may also be made. An ideal representation of fidelity in love under the greatest provocation to surrender at discretion has a message for every age. We need not shrink from reading it in the pages of the Bible. Our Lord teaches us that next to the duty of love to God comes that of love to one's neighbour. But a man's nearest neighbour is his wife. Therefore after his God his wife has the first claim upon him. But the whole conception of matrimonial duty rests on the idea of constancy in the love of man and woman.

If this book had been read in its literal signification and its wholesome lesson absorbed by Christendom in the Middle Ages, the gloomy cloud of asceticism that then hung over the Church would have been somewhat lightened, not to give place to the outburst of licentiousness that accompanied the *Renaissance*, but rather to allow of the better establishment of the Christian home. The absurd legends that follow the names of St. Anthony and St. Dunstan would have lost their motive. Hildebrand would have had no occasion to hurl his thunderbolt. The Church was making the huge mistake of teaching that the remedy for dissoluteness was unnatural celibacy. This book taught the lesson – truer to nature, truer to experience, truer to the God who made us – that it was to be found in the redemption of love.

Can it be denied that the same lesson is needed in our own day? The realism that has made itself a master of a large part of popular literature reveals a state of society that perpetuates the manners of the court of Solomon, though under a thin veil of decorum. The remedy for the awful dissoluteness of large portions of society can only be found in the cultivation of such lofty ideas on the relation of the sexes that this abomination shall be scouted with horror. It is neither necessary, nor right, nor possible to contradict nature. What has to be shewn is that man's true nature is not bestial, that satyrs and fauns are not men, but degraded caricatures of men. We cannot crush the strongest passion of human nature. The moral of the Song of Solomon is that there is no occasion to attempt to crush it, because the right thing is to elevate it by lofty ideals of love and constancy.

This subject also deserves attention on its positive side. The literature of all ages is a testimony to the fact that nothing in the world is so interesting as love. What is so old as love-making? and what so fresh? At least ninety-nine novels out of a hundred have a love-story for plot; and the hundredth is always regarded as an eccentric experiment. The pedant may plant his heel on the perennial flower; but it will spring up again as vigorous as ever. This is the poetry of the most commonplace existence. When it visits a dingy soul the desert blossoms as the rose. Life may be hard, and its drudgery a grinding yoke; but with love "all tasks are sweet." "And Jacob served seven years for Rachel; and they seemed unto him but a few days, for the love he had to her."[86] That experience of the patriarch is typical of the magic power of true love in every age, in every clime. To the lover it is always "the time of the singing of birds." Who shall tell the value of the boon that God has given so freely to mankind, to sweeten the lot of the toiler and shed music into his heart? But this boon requires to be jealously guarded and sheltered from abuse, or its honey will be turned into gall. It is for the toiler – the shepherd whose locks are wet with the dew that has fallen upon him while guarding his flock by night, the maiden who has been working in the vineyard; it is beyond the reach of the pleasure-seeking monarch and the indolent ladies of his court. This boon is for the pure in heart; it is utterly denied to the sensual and dissolute. Finally, it is reserved for the loyal and true as the peculiar reward of constancy.

But while a poem that contains these principles must be allowed to have an important mission in the world, it does not follow that it is suitable for public or indiscriminate reading. The fact that the key to it is not easily discovered is a warning that it is liable to be misunderstood. When it is read superficially, without any comprehension of its drift and motive, it may be perverted to mischievous ends. The antique Oriental pictures with which it abounds, though natural to the circumstances of its origin, are not in harmony with the more reserved manners of our own conditions of society. As all the books of the Bible are not of the same character, so also they are not all to be used in the same way.

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[86] Gen. xxix. 20.

THE LAMENTATIONS OF JEREMIAH

CHAPTER I

HEBREW ELEGIES

The book which is known by the title "The Lamentations of Jeremiah" is a collection of five separate poems, very similar in style, and all treating of the same subject – the desolation of Jerusalem and the sufferings of the Jews after the overthrow of their city by Nebuchadnezzar. In our English Bible it is placed among the prophetical works of the Old Testament, standing next to the acknowledged writings of the man whose name it bears. This arrangement follows the order in the Septuagint, from which it was accepted by Josephus and the Christian Fathers. And yet the natural place for such a book would seem to be in association with the Psalms and other poetical compositions of a kindred character. So thought the Rabbis who compiled the Jewish canon. In the Hebrew Bible the Book of Lamentations is assigned to the third collection, that designated *Hagiographa*, not to the part known as the *Prophets*.

In form as well as in substance this book is a remarkable specimen of a specific order of poetry. The difficulty of recovering the original pronunciation of the language has left our conception of Hebrew metres in a state of obscurity. It has been generally supposed that the rhythm was more of sight than of sound, but that it consisted essentially in neither, depending mainly on the balance of ideas. The metre, it has been stated, might strike the eye in the external aspect of the sentences; it was designed much more to charm the mind by the harmony and music of the thoughts. But while these general principles are still acknowledged, some further progress has been made in the examination of the structure of the verses, with the result that both more regularity of law and more variety of metre have been discovered. The elegy in particular is found to be shaped on special lines of its own. It has been pointed out that a peculiar metre is reserved for poems of mournful reflection.

The first feature of this metre to be noted is the unusual length of the line. In Hebrew poetry, according to the generally accepted pronunciation, the lines vary from about six syllables to about twelve. In the elegy the line most frequently runs to the extreme limit, and so acquires a slow, solemn movement.

A second feature of elegiac poetry is the breaking of the lengthy line into two unequal parts – the first part being about as long as a whole line in an average Hebrew lyric, and the second much shorter, reading like another line abbreviated, and seeming to suggest that the weary thought is waking up and hurrying to its conclusion. Sometimes this short section is a thin echo of the fuller conception that precedes, sometimes the completion of that conception. In the English version, of course, the effect is frequently lost; still occasionally it is very marked, even after passing through this foreign medium. Take, for example, the lines,

> "Her princes are become like harts – that find no pasture,
> And they are gone without strength – before the pursuer;"[87]

or again the very long line,

> "It is of the Lord's mercies that we are not consumed – because His compassions fail not."[88]

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[87] i. 6.

[88] iii. 22.

Now although this is only a structural feature it points to inferences of deeper significance. It shews that the Hebrew poets paid special attention to the elegy as a species of verse to be treated apart, and therefore that they attached a peculiar significance to the ideas and feelings it expresses. The ease with which the transition to the elegiac form of verse is made whenever an occasion for using it occurs is a hint that this must have been familiar to the Jews. Possibly it was in common use at funerals in the dirge. We meet with an early specimen of this verse in Amos, when, just after announcing that he is about to utter a *lamentation* over the house of Israel, the herdsman of Tekoa breaks into elegiacs with the words,

"The virgin daughter of Israel is fallen – she shall no more rise:
She is cast down upon her land – there is none to raise her up."[89]

Similarly constructed elegiac pieces are scattered over the Old Testament scriptures from the eighth century B.C. onwards. Several illustrations of this peculiar kind of metre are to be found in the Psalms. It is employed ironically with terrible effect in the Book of Isaiah, where the mock lament over the death of the king of Babylon is constructed in the form of a true elegy. When the prophet made a sudden transition from his normal style to sombre funereal measures his purpose would be at once recognised, for his words would sound like the tolling bell and the muffled drums that announce the march of death; and yet it would be known that this solemn pomp was not really a demonstration of mourning or a symbol of respect, but only the pageantry of scorn and hatred and vengeance. The sarcasm would strike home with the more force since it fell on men's ears in the heavy, lingering lines of the elegy, as the exultant patriot exclaimed,

"How hath the oppressor ceased – the golden city ceased!
The Lord hath broken the staff of the wicked – the sceptre of the rulers," etc.[90]

A special characteristic of the five elegies that make up the Book of Lamentations is their alphabetical arrangement. Each elegy consists of twenty-two verses, the same number as that of the letters in the Hebrew alphabet. All but the last are acrostics, the initial letter of each verse following the order of the alphabet. In the third elegy every line in the verse begins with the same letter. According to another way of reckoning, this poem consists of sixty-six verses arranged in triplets, each of which not only follows the order of the alphabet with its first letter, but also has this initial letter repeated at the beginning of each of its three verses. Alphabetical acrostics are not unknown elsewhere in the Old Testament; there are several instances of them in the Psalms.[91] The method is generally thought to have been adopted as an expedient to assist the memory. Clearly it is a somewhat artificial arrangement, cramping the imagination of the poet; and it is regarded by some as a sign of literary decadence. Whatever view we may take of it from the standpoint of purely artistic criticism, we can derive one important conclusion concerning the mental attitude of the writer from a consideration of the elaborate structure of the verse. Although this poetry is evidently inspired by deep emotion – emotion so profound that it cannot even be restrained by the stiffest vesture – still the author is quite self-possessed: he is not at all over-mastered by his feelings; what he says is the outcome of deliberation and reflection.

Passing from the form to the substance of the elegy, our attention is arrested on the threshold of the more serious enquiry by another link of connection between the two. In accordance with a custom of which we have other instances in the Hebrew Bible, the first word in the text is taken as the title of the book. The haphazard name is more appropriate in this case than it sometimes proves to be, for the first word of the first chapter – the original Hebrew for which is the Jewish title of the book – is "How." Now this is a characteristic word for the commencement of an elegy. Three out of the five elegies in Lamentations begin with it; so does the mock elegy in Isaiah. Moreover, it is not only suggestive of the form of a certain kind of poetry; it is a hint of the spirit in which that poetry is conceived; it strikes the key-note for all that follows. Therefore it may not be superfluous for us to consider the significance of this little word in the present connection.

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[89] Amos v. 2.

[90] Isa. xiv. 4 *ff.*

[91] *E.g.*, Psalms ix., x., xxv., xxxiv., xxxvii., cxix., cxlv.

In the first place, it is a sort of note of exclamation prefixed to the sentence it introduces. Thus it infuses an emotional element into the statements which follow it. The word is a relic of the most primitive form of language. Judging from the sounds produced by animals and the cries of little children, we should conclude that the first approach to speech would be a simple expression of excitement – a scream of pain, a shout of delight, a yell of rage, a shriek of surprise. Next to the mere venting of feeling comes the utterance of desire – a request, either for the possession of some coveted boon, or for deliverance from something objectionable. Thus the dog barks for his bone, or barks again to be freed from his chain; and the child cries for a toy, or for protection from a terror. If this is correct it will be only at the third stage of speech that we shall reach statements of fact pure and simple. Conversely, it may be argued that as the progress of cultivation develops the perceptive and reasoning faculties and corresponding forms of speech, the primitive emotional and volitional types of language must recede. Our phlegmatic English temperament predisposes us to take this view. It is not easy for us to sympathise with the expressiveness of an excitable Oriental people. What to them is perfectly natural and not at all inconsistent with true manliness strikes us as a childish weakness. Is not this a trifle insular? The emotions constitute as essential a part of human nature as the observing and reasoning faculties, and it cannot be proved that to stifle them beneath a calm exterior is more right and proper than to give them a certain adequate expression. That this expression may be found even among ourselves is apparent from the singular fact that the English, who are the most prosaic people in their conduct, have given the world more good poetry than any other nation of modern times; a fact which, perhaps, may be explained on the principle that the highest poetry is not the rank outgrowth of irregulated passions, but the cultivated fruit of deep-rooted ideas. Still these ideas must be warmed with feeling before they will germinate. Much more, when we are not merely interested in poetic literature, when we are in earnest about practical actions, an artificial restraint of the emotions must be mischievous. No doubt the unimpassioned style has its mission – in allaying a panic, for example. But it will not inspire men to attempt a forlorn hope. Society will never be saved by hysterics; but neither will it ever be saved by statistics. It may be that the exclamation *how* is a feeble survival of the savage *howl*. Nevertheless the emotional expression, when regulated as the taming of the sound suggests, will always play a very real part in the life of mankind, even at the most highly developed stage of civilisation.

In the second place, it is to be observed that this word introduces a tone of vagueness into the sentences which it opens. A description beginning as these elegies begin would not serve the purpose of an inventory of the ruins of Jerusalem such as an insurance society would demand in the present day. The facts are viewed through an atmosphere of feeling, so that their chronological order is confused and their details melt one into another. That is not to say that they are robbed of all value. Pure impressionism may reveal truths which no hard, exact picture can render clear to us. These elegies make us see the desolation of Jerusalem more vividly than the most accurate photographs of the scenes referred to could have done, because they help us to enter into the passion of the event.

With this idea of vagueness, however, there is joined a sense of vastness. The note of exclamation is also a note of admiration. The language is indefinite in part for the very reason that the scene beggars description. The cynical spirit which would reduce all life to the level of a Dutch landscape is here excluded by the overwhelming mass of the troubles bewailed. The cataract of sorrow awes us with the greatness of its volume and the thunder of its fall.

From suggestions thus rising out of a consideration of the opening word of the elegy we may be led on to a perception of similar traits in the body of this poetry. It is emotional in character; it is vague in description; and it sets before us visions of vast woe.

But now it is quite clear that poetry such as this must be something else than the wild expression of grief. It is a product of reflection. The acute stage of suffering is over. The writer is musing upon a sad past; or if at times he is reflecting on a present state of distress, still he is regarding this as the result of more violent scenes, in the midst of which the last thing a man would think of doing would be to sit down and compose a poem. This reflective poetry will give us emotion, still warm, but shot with thought.

The reflectiveness of the elegy does not take the direction of philosophy. It does not speculate on the mystery of suffering. It does not ask such obstinate questions, or engage in such vexatious dialectics, as circle about the problem of evil in the Book of Job. Leaving those difficult matters to the theologians who care to wrestle with them, the elegist is satisfied to dwell on his theme in a quiet, meditative mood, and to permit his ideas to flow on spontaneously as in a reverie. Thus it happens that, artificial as is the form of his verse, the underlying thought seems to be natural and unforced. In this way he represents to us the afterglow of sunset which follows the day of storm and terror.

The afterglow is beautiful – that is what the elegy makes evident. It paints the beauty of sorrow. It is able to do so only because it contemplates the scene indirectly, as portrayed in the mirror of thought. An immediate vision of pain is itself wholly painful. If the agony is intense, and if no relief can be offered, we instinctively turn aside from the sickening sight. Only a brutalised people could find amusement in the ghastly spectacle of the Roman amphitheatre. It is cited as a proof of Domitian's diabolical cruelty that the emperor would have dying slaves brought before him in order that he might watch the facial expression of their last agonies. Such scenes are not fit subjects for art. The famous group of the *Laocoon* is considered by many to have passed the boundaries of legitimate representation in the terror and torment of its subject; and *Ecce Homos* and pictures of the crucifixion can only be defended from a similar condemnation when the profound spiritual significance of the subjects is made to dominate the bare torture. Faced squarely, in the glare of day, pain and death are grim ogres, the ugliness of which no amount of sentiment can disguise. You can no more find poetry in a present Inferno than flowers in the red vomit of a live volcano. Men who have seen war tell us they have discovered nothing attractive in its dreadful scenes of blood and anguish and fury. What could be more revolting to contemplate than the sack of a city, – fire and sword in every street, public buildings razed to the ground, honoured monuments defaced, homes ravaged, children torn from the arms of their parents, young girls dragged away to a horrible fate, lust, robbery, slaughter rampant without shame or restraint, the wild beast in the conquerors let loose, and a whole army, suddenly freed from all rules of discipline, behaving like a swarm of demons just escaped from hell. To think of cultivating art or poetry in the presence of such scenes would be as absurd as to attempt a musical entertainment among the shrieks of lost souls.

The case assumes another aspect when we pass from the region of personal observation to that of reflection. There is no beauty in the sight of a captured castle immediately after the siege which ended in its fall, its battlements shattered, its walls seamed with cracks, here and there a breach, rough and ragged, and strewn with stones and dust. And yet, by slow degrees and in imperceptible ways, time and nature will transform the scene until moss-grown walls and ivy-covered towers acquire a new beauty only seen among ruins. Nature heals and time softens, and between them they throw a mantle of grace over the scars of what were once ugly, gaping wounds. Pain as it recedes into memory is transmuted into pathos; and pathos always fascinates us with some approach to beauty. If it is true that

"Poets learn in sorrow what they teach in song,"

must it not be also the fact that sorrow while inspiring song is itself glorified thereby? To use suffering merely as the food of æstheticism would be to degrade it immeasurably. We should rather put the case the other way. Poetry saves sorrow from becoming sordid by revealing its beauty, and in epic heroism even its sublimity. It helps us to perceive how much more depth there is in life than was apparent under the glare and glamour of prosperity. Some of us may recollect how shallow and shadowy our own lives were felt to be in the simple days before we had tasted the bitter cup. There was a hunger then for some deeper experience which seemed to lie beyond our reach. While we naturally shrank from entering the *via dolorosa*, we were dimly conscious that the pilgrims who trod its rough stones had discovered a secret that remained hidden from us, and we coveted their attainment, although we did not envy the bitter experience by which it had been acquired. This feeling may have been due in part to the foolish sentimentality that is sometimes indulged in by extreme youth; but that is not the whole explanation of it, for when our path conducts us from the flat, monotonous plain of ease and comfort into a region of chasms and torrents, we do indeed discover an unsuspected depth in life. Now it is the mission of the poetry of sorrow to interpret this discovery to us. At least it should enable us to read the lessons of experience in the purest light. It is not the task of the poet to supply a categorical answer to the riddle of the universe; stupendous as that task would be, it must be regarded as quite a prosaic one. Poetry will not fit exact answers to set questions, for poetry is not science; but poetry will open deaf ears and anoint blind eyes to receive the voices and visions that haunt the depths of experience. Thus it leads on to —

"that blessed mood,
In which the burden of the mystery,
In which the heavy and the weary weight
Of all this unintelligible world
Is lightened."

It may not be obvious to the reader of an elegy that this function is discharged by such a poem, for elegiac poetry seems to aim at nothing more than the thoughtful expression of grief. Certainly it is neither didactic nor metaphysical. Nevertheless in weaving a wreath of imagination round the sufferings it bewails it cannot but clothe them with a rich significance. It would seem to be the mission of the five inspired elegies contained in the Book of Lamentations thus to interpret the sorrows of the Jews, and through them the sorrows of mankind.

CHAPTER II
THE ORIGIN OF THE POEMS

As we pass out of Jerusalem by the Damascus Gate, and follow the main north road, our attention is immediately arrested by a low hill of grey rock sprinkled with wild flowers, which is now attracting peculiar notice because it has been recently identified with the "Golgotha" on which our Lord was crucified. In the face of this hill a dark recess – faintly suggestive of the eye-socket, if we may suppose the title "Place of a skull" to have arisen from a fancied resemblance to a goat's skull – is popularly known as "Jeremiah's grotto," and held by current tradition to be the retreat where the prophet composed the five elegies that constitute our Book of Lamentations. Clambering with difficulty over the loose stones that mark the passage of winter torrents, and reaching the floor of the cave, we are at once struck by the suspicious aptness of the "sacred site." In a solitude singularly retired, considering the proximity of a great centre of population, the spectator commands a full view of the whole city, its embattled walls immediately confronting him, with clustered roofs and domes in the rear. What place could have been more suitable for a poetic lament over the ruins of fallen Jerusalem? Moreover, when we take into account the dread associations derived from the later history of the Crucifixion, what could be more fitting than that the mourning patriot's tears for the woes of his city should have been shed so near to the very spot where her rejected Saviour was to suffer? But unfortunately history cannot be constructed on the lines of harmonious sentiments. When we endeavour to trace the legend that attributes the Lamentations to Jeremiah back to its source we lose the stream some centuries before we arrive at the time of the great prophet. No doubt for ages the tradition was undisputed; it is found both in Jewish and in Christian literature – in the Talmud and in the Fathers. Jerome popularised it in the Church by transferring it to the Vulgate, and before this Josephus set it down as an accepted fact. It is pretty evident that each of these parallel currents of opinion may have been derived from the Septuagint, which introduces the book with the sentence, "And it came to pass, after Israel had been carried away captive, and Jerusalem had become desolate, that Jeremiah sat weeping, and lamented with this lamentation over Jerusalem, and said," etc. Here our upward progress in tracking the tradition is stayed; no more ancient authority is to be found. Yet we are still three hundred years from the time of Jeremiah! Of course it is only reasonable to suppose that the translators of the Greek version did not make their addition to the Hebrew text at random, or without what they deemed sufficient grounds. Possibly they were following some documentary authority, or, at least, some venerable tradition. Of this we know nothing. Meanwhile, it must be observed that no such statement exists in the Hebrew Bible; and it would never have been omitted if it had been there originally.

One other witness has been adduced, but only to furnish testimony of an obscure and ambiguous character. In 2 Chron. xxxv. 25 we read, "And Jeremiah lamented for Josiah; and all the singing men and singing women spake of Josiah in their lamentations, unto this day; and they made them an ordinance in Israel; and, behold, they are written in the lamentations." Josephus, and Jerome after him, appear to assume that the chronicler is here referring to our Book of Lamentations. That is very questionable; for the words describe an elegy on Josiah, and our book contains no such elegy. Can we suppose that the chronicler assumed that inasmuch as Jeremiah was believed to have written a lament for the mourners to chant in commemoration of Josiah, this would be one of the poems preserved in the collection of Jerusalem elegies familiar to readers of his day? Be that as it may, the chronicler wrote in the Grecian period, and therefore his statements come some long time after the date of the prophet.

In this dearth of external testimony we turn to the book itself for indications of origin and authorship. The poems make no claim to have been the utterances of Jeremiah; they do not supply us with their author's name. Therefore there can be no question of genuineness, no room for an ugly charge of "forgery," or a delicate ascription of "pseudonymity," The case is not comparable to that of 2 Peter, or even to that of Ecclesiastes – the one of which directly claims apostolic authority, and the other a "literary" association with the name of Solomon. It is rather to be paralleled with the case of the Epistle to the Hebrews, a purely anonymous work. Still there is much which seems to point to Jeremiah as the author of these intensely pathetic elegies. They are not like MacPherson's *Ossian*; nobody can question their antiquity. If they were not quite contemporaneous with the scenes they describe so graphically they cannot have originated much later; for they are like the low wailings with which the storm sinks to rest, reminding us how recently the thunder was rolling and the besom of destruction sweeping over the land. Among the prophets of Israel Jeremiah was the voice crying in the wilderness of national ruin; it is natural to suppose that he too was the poet who poured out sad thoughts of memory in song at a later time when sorrow had leisure for reflection. His prophecies would lead us to conclude that no Jew of those dark days could have experienced keener pangs of grief at the incomparable woes of his nation. He was the very incarnation of patriotic mourning. Who then would be more likely to have produced the national lament? Here we seem to meet again none other than the man who exclaimed, "Oh that I could comfort myself against sorrow! my heart is faint within me"[92] and again, "Oh that my head were waters, and mine eyes a fountain of tears, that I might weep day and night for the slain of the daughter of my people."[93] Many points of resemblance between the known writings of Jeremiah and these poems may be detected. Thus Jeremiah's "Virgin daughter" of God's people reappears as the "Virgin daughter of Judah." In both the writer is oppressed with fear as well as grief; in both he especially denounces clerical vices, the sins of the two rival lines of religious leaders, the priests and the prophets; in both he appeals to God for retribution. There is a remarkable likeness in tone and temper throughout between the two series of writings. It would be possible to adduce many purely verbal marks of similarity; the commentator on Lamentations most frequently illustrates the meaning of a word by referring to a parallel usage in Jeremiah.

On the other hand, several facts raise difficulties in the way of our accepting of the hypothesis of a common authorship. The verbal argument is precarious at best; it can only be fully appreciated by the specialist, and if accepted by the general reader, it must be taken on faith. Of course this last point is no valid objection to the real worth of the argument in itself; it cannot be maintained that nothing is true which may not be reduced to the level of the meanest intelligence, or the "differential calculus" would be a baseless fable. But when the specialists disagree, even the uninitiated have some excuse for holding the case to be not proved for either side; and it is thus with the resemblances and the differences between Jeremiah and Lamentations, long lists of phrases used in common being balanced with equally long lists of peculiarities found in one only of the two books in question. The strongest objection to the theory that Jeremiah was the author of the Lamentations, however, is one that can be more readily grasped. These poems are most elaborately artistic in form, not to say artificial. Now the objection which is roused by that fact is not simply due to the loose and less shapely construction of the prophecies; for it may justly be urged that the literary designs entertained by the prophet in the leisure of his later years may have led him to cultivate a style which would have been quite unsuitable for his practical preaching or for the political pamphlets he used to fling off in the heat of conflict. It originates in deeper psychological contradictions. Is it possible that the man who had shed bitterest tears, as from his very heart, in the dismal reality of misery, could play with his troubles in fanciful acrostics? Can we imagine a leading actor in the tragedy turning the events through which he had passed into materials for æsthetic treatment? Can we credit this of so intense a soul as Jeremiah? The composition of *In Memoriam* may be cited as an instance of the production of highly artistic poetry under the influence of keen personal sorrow. But the case is not parallel; for Tennyson was a passive mourner over the loss of a friend under circumstances with which he had no connection, while Jeremiah had contended strenuously for years on the field of action. Could a man with such a history have set himself to work up its most doleful experiences into the embroidery of a peculiarly artificial form of versification? That is the gravest difficulty. Other objections of minor weight follow. In the third elegy Jeremiah would seem to be giving more prominence to his own personality than we should have expected of the brave, unselfish prophet. In the fourth the writer appears to associate himself with those Jews who were disappointed in expecting deliverance from an Egyptian alliance, when he complains —

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[92] Jer. viii. 18.

[93] Jer. ix. 1.

"Our eyes do yet fail in looking for our vain help:
In watching we have watched for a nation that could not save."[94]

Would Jeremiah, who bade the Jews bow to the scourge of Jehovah's chastisement and look for no earthly deliverer, thus confess participation in the worldly policy which he, in common with all the true prophets, had denounced as faithless and disobedient? Then, while sharing Jeremiah's condemnation of the priests and prophets, the writer appears to have only commiseration for the fate of the poor weak king Zedekiah.[95] This is very different from Jeremiah's treatment of him.[96]

It is not a serious objection that our poet says of Zion,

"Yea, her prophets find no vision from the Lord,"[97]

while we know that Jeremiah had visions after the destruction of Jerusalem,[98] because the general condition may still have been one characterised by the silencing of the many prophets with whose oracles the Jews had been accustomed to solace themselves in view of threatened calamities; nor that he exclaims,

"Shall the priest and the prophet be slain in the sanctuary of the Lord?"[99]

although Jeremiah makes no mention of this twofold assassination, because we have no justification for the assumption that he recorded every horror of the great tragedy; nor, again, that the author is evidently familiar with the Book of Deuteronomy, and refers frequently to the "Song of Moses" in particular, for this is just what we might have expected of Jeremiah; and yet these and other similar but even less conclusive points have been brought forward as difficulties. Perhaps it is a more perplexing in view of the traditional hypothesis, that the poet appears to have made use of the writings of Ezekiel. Thus the allusion to the prophets who have "seen visions … of vanity and foolishness,"[100] points to the fuller description of these men in the writings of the prophet of the exile, where the completeness of the picture shews that the priority is with Ezekiel.[101] Similarly the "perfection of beauty" ascribed to the daughter of Jerusalem in the second elegy[102] reminds us of the similar phrase that occurs more than once in Ezekiel.[103] Still, that prophet wrote before the time to which the Lamentations introduce us, and it cannot be affirmed that Jeremiah could not have seen his writings, or would not have condescended to echo a phrase from them. A difficulty of a broader character must be felt in the fact that the poems themselves give us no hint of Jeremiah. The appearance of the five elegies in the *Hagiographa* without any introductory notice is a grave objection to the theory of a Jeremiah authorship. If so famous a prophet had composed them, would not this have been recorded? Even in the Septuagint, where they are associated with Jeremiah, they are not translated by the same hand as the version of the prophet's acknowledged works. It may be that none of the objections which have been adduced against the later tradition can be called final; nor when regarded in their total force do they absolutely forbid the possibility that Jeremiah was the author of the Lamentations. But then the question is not so much one of possibility as one of probability. We must remember that we are dealing with anonymous poems that make no claim upon any particular author, and that we have no pleas whatever, special or more general, on which to defend the guesses of a much later and quite uncritical age, when people cultivated a habit of attaching every shred of literature that had come down from their ancestors to some famous name.

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[94] iv. 17.

[95] iv. 20.

[96] Jer. lii. 2, 3.

[97] ii. 9.

[98] *E.g.* Jer. xlii. 7.

[99] ii. 20.

[100] ii. 14.

[101] *E.g.* Ezek. xii. 24, xiii. 6, 7, xxii. 28.

[102] Lam. ii. 15.

[103] Ezek. xxvii. 3, xxviii. 12.

Failing Jeremiah, it is not possible to hit upon any other known person with the least assurance. Some have followed Bunsen in his conjecture that Baruch the scribe may have been the author of the poems. Others have suggested a member of the family of Shaphan, in which Jeremiah found his most loyal friends.[104]

It is much questioned whether the five elegies are the work of one man. The second, the third, and the fourth follow a slightly different alphabetical arrangement from that which is employed in the first – in reversing the order of two letters,[105] while the internal structure of the verses in the third shews another variation – the threefold repetition of the acrostic. Then the personality of the poet emerges more distinctly in the third elegy as the centre of interest – a marked contrast to the method of the other poems. Lastly, the fifth differs from its predecessors in several respects. Its lines are shorter; it is not an acrostic; it is chiefly devoted to the insults heaped upon the Jews by their enemies; and it seems to belong to a later time, for while the four previous poems treat of the siege of Jerusalem and its accompanying troubles, this one is concerned with the subsequent state of servitude, and reflects on the ruin of the nation across some interval of time. Thus the poet cries —

"Wherefore doest thou forget us for ever,
And forsake us *so long time*?"[106]

A recent attempt to assign the last two elegies to the age of the Maccabees has entirely broken down. The points of agreement with that age which have been adduced will fit the Babylonian period equally well, and the most significant marks of the later time are entirely absent. Is it conceivable that a description of the persecution by Antiochus Epiphanes would contain no hint of the martyr fidelity of the devout Jews to their law which was so gloriously maintained under the Maccabees? The fourth and fifth elegies are as completely silent on this subject as the earlier elegies.

The evidence that points to any diversity of authorship is very feeble. The fifth elegy may have been written years later than the rest of the book, and yet it may have come from the same source, for the example of Tennyson shews that the gift of poetry is not always confined to but a brief interval in the poet life. The other distinctions are not nearly so marked as some that may be observed in the recognised poems of a single author – for example, the amazing differences between the smooth style of *The Idylls of the King* and the quaint dialect of *The Northern Farmer*. Though some differences of vocabulary have been discovered, the resemblances between all the five poems are much more striking. In motive and spirit and feeling they are perfectly agreed. While therefore in our ignorance of the origin of the Lamentations, and in recognition of the variations that have been indicated, we cannot deny that they may have been collected from the utterances of two or even three inspired souls, neither are we by any means forced to assent to this opinion; and under these circumstances it will be justifiable as well as convenient to refer to the authorship of Lamentations in terms expressive of a single individual. One thing is fairly certain. The author was a contemporary, an eye-witness of the frightful calamities he bewailed. With all their artificiality of structure these elegies are the outpourings of a heart moved by a near vision of the scenes of the Babylonian invasion. The swift, vivid pictures of the siege and its accompanying miseries force upon our minds the conclusion that the poet must have moved in the thick of the events he narrates so graphically, although, unlike Jeremiah, he does not seem to have been a leading actor in them. Children cry to their mothers for bread, and faint with hunger at every street corner; the ghastly rumour goes forth that a mother has boiled her baby; elders sit on the ground in silence; young maidens hang their heads despairing; princes tremble in their helplessness; the enemy break through the walls, carry havoc into the city, insolently trample the sacred courts of the temple; even the priest and the prophet do not escape in the indiscriminate carnage; wounded people are seen, with blood upon their garments, wandering aimlessly like blind men; the temple is destroyed, its rich gold bedimmed with smoke, and the city herself left waste and desolate, while the exultant victors pour ridicule over the misery of their prey. A later generation would have blurred the outline of these scenes, regarding them through the shifting mists of rumour, with more or less indistinctness. Besides, the motive for the composition of such elegies would vanish with the lapse of time. Still some few years must be allowed for the patriot's brooding over the scenes he had witnessed, until the memory of them had mellowed sufficiently for them to become the subjects of song. The fifth elegy, at all events, implies a considerable interval. Jerusalem was destroyed in the year B.C. 587; therefore we may safely date the poems from about B.C. 550 onwards —*i. e.*, at some time during the second half of the sixth century. What is of more moment for us to know is that we have here no falsetto notes, such as we may sometimes detect in Virgil's exquisite descriptions of the siege of Troy, for the poet has witnessed the fiery ordeal the recollection of which now inspires his song. Thus out of the unequalled woes of Jerusalem destroyed he has provided for all ages the typical, divinely inspired expression of sorrow – primarily the expression of sorrow – and then associated with this some pregnant hints both of its dark relationship to sin and of its higher connection with the purposes of God.

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[104] See Jer. xxvi. 24, xxix. 3*ff*, xl. 5.

[105] ע and פּ.

[106] v. 20.

CHAPTER III
THE THEME

No more pathetic subject ever inspired a poet than that which became the theme of the Lamentations. Wave after wave of invasion had swept over Jerusalem, until at length the miserable city had been reduced to a heap of ruins. After the decisive defeat of the Egyptians at the great battle of Carchemish during the reign of Jehoiakim, Nebuchadnezzar broke into Jerusalem and carried off some of the sacred vessels from the temple, leaving a disorganised country at the mercy of the wild tribes of Bedouin from beyond the Jordan. Three months after the accession of Jehoiakin, the son of Jehoiakim, the Chaldæans again visited the city, pillaged the temple and the royal palace, and sent the first band of captives, consisting of the very élite of the citizens, with Ezekiel among them, into captivity at Babylon. This was only the beginning of troubles. Zedekiah, who was set up as a mere vassal king, intrigued with Pharaoh Hophra, a piece of folly which called down upon himself and his people the savage vengeance of Nebuchadnezzar. Jerusalem now suffered all the horrors of a siege, which lasted for a year and a half. Famine and pestilence preyed upon the inhabitants; and yet the Jews were holding out with a stubborn resistance, when the invaders effected an entrance by night, and were encamped in the temple court before the astonished king was aware of their presence. Zedekiah then imitated the secrecy of his enemies. With a band of followers he crept out of one of the eastern gates, and fled down the defile towards the Jordan; but he was overtaken near Jericho, and conveyed a prisoner to Riblah; his sons were killed in his very presence, his eyes were burnt out, and the wretched man sent in chains to Babylon. The outrages perpetrated against the citizens at Jerusalem as well as the sufferings of the fugitives were such as are only possible in barbarous warfare. Finally the city was razed to the ground and her famous temple burnt.

The Lamentations bewail the fall of a city. In this respect they are unlike the normal type of elegiac poetry. As a rule, the elegy is personal in character and individualistic, mourning the untimely death of some one beloved friend of the writer. It is the revelation of a private grief, although with a poet's privilege its author calls upon his readers to share his sorrow. In the classic model of this order of verse Milton justifies the intrusion of his distress upon the peace of nature by exclaiming —

"For Lycidas is dead, dead ere his prime,
Young Lycidas, and hath not left his peer.
Who would not sing for Lycidas?"

And Shelley, while treating his theme in an ethereal, fantastic way, still represents Alastor, the Spirit of Solitude, in the person of one who has just died, when he cries —

"But thou art fled,
Like some frail exhalation which the dawn
Robes in its golden beams, – ah! thou hast fled!
The brave, the gentle, and the beautiful,
The child of grace and genius."

Gray's well-known elegy, it is true, is not confined to the fate of a single individual; the churchyard suggests the pathetic reflections of the poet on the imaginary lives and characters of many past inhabitants of the village. Nevertheless these cross the stage one by one; the village itself has not been destroyed, like Goldsmith's "Sweet Auburn." Jeremiah's lamentation on the death of Josiah must have been a personal elegy; so was the scornful lament over the king of Babylon in Isaiah. But now we have a different kind of subject in the Book of Lamentations. Here it is the fate of Jerusalem, the fate of the city itself as well as that of its citizens, that is deplored. To rouse the imagination and awaken the sympathy of the reader Zion is personified, and thus the poetry is assimilated in form to the normal elegy. Still it is important for us to take note of this distinguishing trait of the Lamentations; they bewail the ruin of a city.

Poetry inspired with this intention must acquire a certain breadth not found in more personal effusions. Too much indulgence in private grief cannot but produce a narrowing effect upon the mind. Intense pain is as selfish as intense pleasure. We may mourn our dead until we have no room left in our sympathies for the great ocean of troubles among the living that surges round the little island of our personal interests.

This misfortune is escaped in the Lamentations. Close as is the poet's relations with the home of his childhood, there is still some approach to altruism in his lament over the desolation of Jerusalem viewed as a whole, rather than over the death of his immediate friends alone. There is a largeness, too, in it. We find it difficult to recover the ancient feeling for the city. Our more important towns are so huge and shapeless that the inhabitants fail to grasp the unity, the wholeness of the wilderness of streets and houses; and yet they so effectually overshadow the smaller towns that these places do not venture to assume much civic pride. Besides, one general tendency of modern life is individualistic. Even the more recent attempts to rouse interest in comprehensive social questions are conceived in a spirit of sympathy for the individual rights and needs of the people, and do not spring from any great concern for the prosperity of the corporation as such. No doubt this is an indication of a movement in a right direction. The old civic idea was too abstract; it sacrificed the citizens to the city, beautifying the public buildings in the most costly manner, while the people were crowded in miserable dens to rot and die unseen and unpitied. We substitute sanitation for splendour. This is more sensible, more practical, more humane, if it is more prosaic; for life is something else than poetry. Still it may be worth while asking whether in aiming at a useful, homely object it is so essential to abandon the old ideal altogether, because it cannot be denied that the price we pay is seen in a certain dinginess and commonness of living. Is it necessary that philanthropy should always remain Philistine?

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