

THE POWER OF BIBLE POETRY

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THE persistence of the power of appeal of the Old Testament is perhaps the most striking single phenomenon in all the history of literature: here are works which were written considerably more than two thousand years ago, in a language of a wholly different race and genius from ours, and in the region of the world whose only other familiar contribution to our reading is the *Arabian Nights*; yet this ancient and Oriental book, after passing through the ordeal of translation into a Western and modern language, has become the one book which is or has been familiar to all classes of English-speaking people, and has grown into the bone and sinew not only of our literature, but of our language also. Behind such a phenomenon as this is the great fact of inspiration, a fact which in such a study in literature as I propose here it is safer not to try to define. The limits between religious and literary inspiration lie in a broad region where the two run inextricably together; and within that region every one who is interested in an exact delimitation must run his line for himself. Here I shall simply assume that it is a power which in all its manifestations is inexplicable, and confine myself to certain questions which plainly lie within the field of literature and within the capacities of criticism.

The special problem which I shall examine is the persistence of power of which I have just spoken. To simplify the discussion I shall confine myself to the poetry, which though not the key to the whole literature of the Old Testament in any such sense as is the prophecy, is yet more instant and universal in its appeal to modern readers. Moreover, in the poetry we shall find concentrated the elements and influences which seem to me

to throw most light on the permanent power of the book, — the concreteness of the language, the strong rhythm and music of the style, and the underlying intensity of feeling. Each of these contributes to the power of all parts of our English Bible, but to no part of it more obviously or with richer result than to the poetry.

This poetry as we have it consists of the Psalms, Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, the Song of Solomon, the oracles of the prophets, and a certain number of earlier poems scattered through the books of history. Here, however, even more than with the rest of Biblical literature, we must remember that we have only a portion of all the poetry of Israel, and perhaps only a small portion. Whole classes of it must have disappeared. The literature was collected during and after the Exile by men who were passionately and wholly devoted to preserving the religion of Jehovah from the attacks of the heathen, and to making it a living force for righteousness among the remnant of their own nation. They were concerned with the revelations of God to man, not with the imaginations of men's hearts; and for them no writing was of value which did not bear on the history of God's chosen people and on the revelation of his will. That there must have been other poetry than what we have admits of no doubt; there must have been other songs of victory than that of Deborah, other dirges than those of David on Saul and Jonathan and on Abner, other poems than those on the sluggard and the drunkard which are preserved in Proverbs, other love and wedding songs than those of the Song of Solomon. What is left merely shows how large and rich was the art of poetry among the people of Israel from the

earliest times. During the distresses of the Exile and the succeeding centuries, when the Jews were tossed from one conqueror to another, and harried and spoiled in the unceasing wars for the control of Palestine, all but their most essential writings must have disappeared. We must remember, therefore, in any discussion of the poetry of the Old Testament, that we have only a portion of the Hebrew literature, and that rigidly selected for a direct and practical religious purpose.

When we turn to a consideration of this poetry as we read it in our English Bible the characteristic of it which is most striking is its unflinching hold on our feelings and imagination: whether it be the idyllic peace and beauty of Psalm xxiii, or the happy confidence of most of the "Songs of Degrees," the overpowering splendor of Psalm lxxviii or civ, or in Job the poignant suffering of Job's cries to his God or the heaven-sweeping imagery of the later chapters, — always and at every time of reading the words have a fresh completeness of meaning. For the whole range of ideas and emotion reached by these poems they are the most satisfying and stirring expression in the language, and they have been so to men so widely separated in temperament and education as Milton and Bunyan, or, within our own time, as Ruskin and Abraham Lincoln. Assuming, as I said above, the fact of inspiration, and looking at the matter merely from the side of the expressive power of language, how can words be so put together as to move so many kinds of people, over such long stretches of history?

One certain source of this marvelous power lies in the character of the Hebrew language. For our present purpose we may confine ourselves to the character of the vocabulary: it had no words for anything but the concrete objects of the external world and for the simplest and most primitive emotions. All the words of the old Hebrew vocabulary went back immediately to things of sense, and in consequence even their every-day lan-

guage was figurative in a way which we can hardly imagine. The verb *to be jealous* was a regular form of the verb *to glow*; the noun *truth* was derived from the verb meaning *to prop, to build, or to make firm*; the word for *self* was also the word for *bone*. Renan has summed up this characteristic of the language in the following passage: "Anger is expressed in Hebrew in a throng of ways, each picturesque, and each borrowed from physiological facts. Now the metaphor is taken from the rapid and animated breathing which accompanies the passion, now from heat or from boiling, now from the act of a noisy breaking, now from shivering. *Discouragement* and *despair* are expressed by the melting of the heart, *fear* by the loosening of the reins. *Pride* is portrayed by the holding high of the head, with the figure straight and stiff. *Patience* is a long breathing, *impatience* short breathing, *desire* is thirst or paleness. *Pardon* is expressed by a throng of metaphors borrowed from the idea of covering, of hiding, or coating over the fault. In Job God sews up sins in a sack, seals it, then throws it behind him: all to signify that he forgets them. Other more or less abstract ideas have found their symbol in the Semitic languages in a like manner. The idea of *truth* is drawn from solidity, or stability; that of *beauty* from splendor, that of *good* from straightness, that of *evil* from swerving or the curved line, or from stench. *To create* is primitively to mould, *to decide* is to cut, *to think* is to speak. *Bone* signifies the substance, the essence of a thing, and serves in Hebrew for our pronoun *self*. What distinguishes the Semitic languages from the Aryan is that this primitive union of sensation and idea persists, — so that in each word one still hears the echo of the primitive sensations which determined the choice of the first makers of the language."

Now this limitation of the Hebrew language to words which expressed immediate sensation goes a long way toward explaining this problem we are

studying when we consider it in the light of one of the accepted doctrines of modern psychology, the theory commonly known as the James-Lange theory of the emotions. According to this theory emotion is inseparable from sensation, or rather emotion consists of a mass or complex of bodily sensations. Professor James sums up this doctrine in the following questions: "What kind of an emotion of fear would be left if the feeling neither of quickened heart beats nor of shallow breathing, neither of trembling lips nor of weakened limbs, neither of goose-flesh nor of visceral stirrings, were present, it is quite impossible for me to think. Can one fancy the state of rage and picture no ebullition of the chest, no flushing of the face, no dilation of the nostrils, no clenching of the teeth, no impulse to vigorous action, but in their stead limp muscles, calm breathing, and a placid face? The present writer for one, certainly cannot. . . . In like manner of grief: what would it be without its tears, its sobs, its suffocation of the heart, its pangs in the breast-bone? A feelingless cognition that certain circumstances are deplorable, and nothing more. Every passion tells the same story. A purely disembodied human emotion is a nonentity."

This theory and the Hebrew language fit together like the two parts of a puzzle, for the Hebrew poetry constantly expressed emotion by naming the sensations of which the emotion consists. Here is an expression of helpless despair:—

Save me, O God; for the waters are come in unto my soul.

I sink in deep mire, where there is no standing: I am come into deep waters, where the floods overflow me.

I am weary of my crying: my throat is dried: mine eyes fail while I wait for my God.

Notice the number of sensations which are specifically named: "my throat is dried," "mine eyes fail," and the sensation of sinking in deep mire, with all its implication of spasmodic, helpless struggling. Another example may be found in the familiar passage in

Job; and here again notice how many actual sensations are named:—

Now a thing was secretly brought to me, and mine ear received a little thereof.

In thoughts from the visions of the night, when deep sleep falleth on men,

Fear came upon me, and trembling, which made all my bones to shake.

Then a spirit passed before my face; the hair of my flesh stood up:

It stood still, but I could not discern the form thereof: an image was before mine eyes, there was silence, and I heard a voice, saying,

Shall mortal man be more just than God? shall a man be more pure than his Maker?

The shaking of the bones, the hair of the flesh standing up, the sense of an object indistinctly present, the silence, all go together to make the most vivid description in our literature of the terror that flies by night; and here again, as in the Psalms, the emotion is set forth by means of the concrete sensations of which it consists. For one more example, let me quote another passage from the Psalms, the first few verses of what is known in the *Book of Common Prayer* as the Venite: here the emotion of joyful worship is expressed by the bodily acts in which it is expressed:—

O come, let us sing unto the Lord: let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation.

Let us come before his presence with thanksgiving, and make a joyful noise unto him with psalms.

For the Lord is a great God, and a great King above all gods.

O come, let us worship and bow down: let us kneel before the Lord our Maker.

In this case the emotion is more spiritual than in the others, yet it is still phrased chiefly in terms of bodily sensation, the singing, the joyful noise, the bowing down and kneeling.

Sometimes, as in part in the last example, the emotion, instead of being expressed by the bodily sensation that constitutes it, is indirectly portrayed by naming the concrete objects which produce these sensations by immediate and reflex action.

Thou visitest the earth, and waterest it: thou greatly enrichest it with the river of God, which is full of water: thou preparest them corn, when thou hast so provided for it.

Thou waterest the ridges thereof abundantly; thou settlest the furrows thereof: thou makest it soft with showers: thou blessest the springing thereof.

Thou crownest the year with thy goodness; and thy paths drop fatness.

They drop upon the pastures of the wilderness: and the little hills rejoice on every side.

The pastures are clothed with flocks; the valleys also are covered over with corn; they shout for joy, they also sing.

This passage stirs in one, vividly and powerfully, all the physical sensations of a warm day in spring, when one walks in the fields with head erect and lungs filled with the warm, rich air, and one's nostrils open to the manifold rich odors of the earth and of the growing things of the spring. The deep-lying emotion of content and happiness is thus expressed, not by naming the sensations, but by naming the objects which inevitably produce them.

Comparatively simple cases like these will show, I think, how the principle works out: that the naming of two or three specific sensations or of certain concrete objects arouses a large and complex mental state which taken all together is the emotion of fear, of reverence, of joy. And seeing this truth clearly for the simpler cases one can understand how it explains the less palpable and more complex cases, and how the concrete imagery of such a passage as the following has the power to express feelings and thoughts which lie still deeper: —

Bless the Lord, O my soul. O Lord my God, thou art very great; thou art clothed with honour and majesty.

Who coverest thyself with light as with a garment: who stretchest out the heavens like a curtain:

Who layeth the beams of his chambers in the waters: who maketh the clouds his chariot: who walketh upon the wings of the wind:

Who maketh his angels spirits; his ministers a flaming fire:

Who laid the foundations of the earth, that it should not be removed for ever.

Thou coveredst it with the deep as with a garment: the waters stood above the mountains.

In such a case the means employed are the same, but the emotions to be expressed being larger and more diffused one cannot follow out the mechanism so definitely. But the unsurpassed vividness of the Hebrew poetry and its unailing hold on our imagination may be ascribed to this fact, that it always expressed emotions directly and concretely by the sensations of which they are composed, instead of describing them by words which are abstract and therefore pale.

We can go even further, and find in this special characteristic of the Hebrew language the permanence of appeal of these ancient poems. After all, the great body of our sensations and feelings does not change from generation to generation. The horror of despair at sinking in deep mire, the dread at the creeping mysteries of the night, or the delight in uttering forth our joy in song, all are the same thing for us to-day that they were for these ancient Hebrews two thousand years ago and for their ancestors a thousand years before them. We moderns have built up a superstructure of abstract reasoning which they did not have; but all the great mass of our consciousness is the same that it has been for ages and, so far as we can see, as it will be for ages to come. The sight of the stars in the great field of heaven lifts us out of ourselves in the same way that it has moved our ancestors for innumerable generations. Thus a literature which is able to express itself through these inalterable sensations has a permanence of power which is impossible for a literature which is phrased largely in abstractions and inferences from these sensations. In this primitive simplicity of the Hebrew language, therefore, we can find some of the reasons for the permanent power of the Bible poetry.

This characteristic has been transferred unblurred and unfaded to the English of our King James Version; and

here again one can in part point to the cause of the preservation of the virtue. The English language of King James's time, as I have pointed out in an earlier essay in this magazine,¹ was far nearer the unbroken concreteness and simplicity of the Hebrew than is our English of to-day. The learned and abstract words which make so large a part of our ordinary vocabulary hardly began to be taken over from the Latin until after our version was completed. And in the first half of the sixteenth century all writing in English was in consequence figurative to an extent which would be florid and affected for men of our time. Even the statutes of Parliament in Henry VIII's reign are enlivened with graphic imagery and racy idiom. Accordingly, a translation from the Hebrew made at that time almost of necessity retained this immediate and living hold on the feelings. Any one who has read modern translations of the poetry of the Old Testament will recognize how insidiously our modern habit of using general words has paled the glowing colors of the King James Version.

Emotion and feeling, however, have other modes of expression than through the connotation of words of sensation; their most typical and highest expression is through music. Every one knows that music can give form to moods far too impalpable and evanescent for articulate language. Even the man who has no ear for music knows what it is to have his very flesh stirred and his feet set moving by the playing of a military band; and to music-lovers the full rhythms and harmonies of a great orchestra reach feelings which lie so deep in the soul that no words can find them. Herein lies the other side of the power of literature; since it stands for the spoken word it can borrow some of this power of music to express disembodied emotion.

In the written word this power of music consists in part of rhythm and in part of the qualities and succession of the sepa-

¹ In November, 1904.

rate sounds. For the striking rhythm of the poetry of the English Bible we can find a cause in the chief principle which governed the Hebrew poetry, — the principle of parallel structure. In the Hebrew poetry the line was the unit, and the second line balanced the first, completing or supplementing its meaning. "Praise God in his sanctuary; praise him in the firmament of his power;" "A soft answer turneth away wrath: but grievous words stir up anger." This principle could be applied to produce considerable variety. The second member might be synonymous with the first, or it might be in antithesis, as in the examples I have just quoted; or it might add something to complete the thought: "By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept, when we remembered Zion." Or it might be the application of a figure: "A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in pictures of silver;" "As the door turneth upon his hinges, so doth the slothful upon his bed." Sometimes, again, the first member of one takes its thought from a word in the last member of the line before: —

I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help.

My help cometh from the Lord, which made heaven and earth.

There might be more than two lines to complete the verse: the normal form of the colloquies in Job consists in a balance of couplets: —

My brethren have dealt deceitfully as a brook, and as the stream of brooks they pass away;

Which are blackish by reason of the ice, and wherein the snow is hid.

What time they wax warm, they vanish: when it is hot, they are consumed out of their place.

The paths of their way are turned aside: they go to nothing, and perish.

But whatever the variety of form, the unvarying element in this Hebrew poetry is the constant balance of lines of about the same length.

This principle, however, was not re-discovered until a century after our translation was made. Therefore the men who made our translation did not know that they were translating poetry, and they made no attempt to arrange the lines in a different form from the prose of the rest of the book. The result has been in the English to produce a kind of writing which is unique in our literature, since it is neither regular prose nor regular poetry, but shares the power of both. It has the strong balance and regularity which results from this underlying parallel structure of the Hebrew, and at the same time all the freedom and naturalness of prose. When in reading the historical books you come across a poem you feel the difference in effect; suddenly, without your realizing why, the style seems as it were to take on energy and movement. Here is an example from Joshua: —

Then spake Joshua to the Lord in the day when the Lord delivered up the Amorites before the children of Israel, and he said in the sight of Israel, Sun, stand thou still upon Gibeon; and thou, Moon, in the valley of Ajalon.

And the sun stood still, and the moon stayed, until the people had avenged themselves upon their enemies. Is not this written in the book of Jasher? So the sun stood still in the midst of heaven, and hasted not to go down about a whole day.

Here the strong balance of the lines of the poem strengthens the rhythm, so that as the poem stands imbedded in the prose it seems almost excited in utterance.

On the other hand, since in the English this strong balance and rhythm is always united to entire freedom, this poetry is quite clear of any suggestion of artificiality or sophistication. For us to-day verse and poetry are a mode of utterance apart from the speech of everyday life. They are art, and art carries always for us the implication of an attention to form which makes impossible an entirely unstudied spontaneity. Even blank verse, the freest of all our forms of poetry, is lacking in the naturalness of

prose. Consider this passage from the fourth act of *Richard II*: —

Many a time hath banish'd Norfolk fought
For Jesu Christ in glorious Christian field,
Streaming the ensign of the Christian cross
Against black pagans, Turks, and Saracens:
And toil'd with works of war, retired himself,
To Italy; and there, at Venice, gave
His body to that pleasant country's earth,
And his pure soul unto his captain Christ,
Under whose colors he had fought so long.

This is as simple as it can be; there are only two adjectives which are not a necessary part of the meaning, and no other attempt to adorn or beautify the facts than comes from the verse itself. Yet as compared with the earnest solemnity of the Psalms or of Job it is the writing of a man who is playing at life; it is the efflorescence of feeling rather than an irrepressible and inevitable expression of it. Even the great soliloquies in *Hamlet* produce something of the same effect; for all their searching into the foundations of the human soul they are still play-acting, a noble blossoming out of the imagination in a noble time if you like, but still flowers from a "garden of pleasant delights," — to modify the title of one of the Elizabethan poetry books. Milton's noble sonnet *On the Late Massacre in Piemont* is an exception; and there are a few great poems of our own day, such as Tennyson's *Crossing the Bar*, and Mr. Kipling's *Recessional* and *The White Man's Burden*, which sum up in burning phrase the feeling of a nation and a race. But even these, beside the poetry of the Old Testament, only emphasize the fact that the poet is for us a man apart, a seer looking on at life and penetrating its mysteries by the flash of genius; whereas these psalms are part of the bone and sinew of the Jewish life. In them there are no rules of art between us and the soul of the nation. Certainly in the form in which we read this Old Testament poetry in our Authorised Version we have the combination of the heightened beat of the rhythm, which expressed strength of emotion, and which is the peculiar virtue

of poetry; and we have it with an entire freedom and naturalness which prevents our attention ever straying from the message to the form in which it is couched. It is from this unique form, I think, that this poetry of the Old Testament gives the impression of being a universal and un-studied expression of the deepest feeling. Thus it seems to me that this very fact that our translators made no attempt to reproduce the exact form of the verse in English has added to its power; and I am inclined to suspect that the modern fashion of printing the poetry of the Old Testament in broken lines is quite as much of a hindrance as a help to the reader who wishes to get the full feeling which it contains. One hears grumbling to-day at the difficulty imposed on our reading of the Bible by the division into verses. We may well remember that when the Bible was known thoroughly and universally, it was always so read.

Even this strong balance and rhythm of the Hebrew poetry, however, does not account for all its persistence of power in the English. We must take into account also the fact that it is throbbing with the earnestness of the great men who in the stress of the Reformation, when England was struggling free from the Church of Rome, wrought out their translations of the Scriptures. The free translation and circulation of the Bible was a matter of life and death to the men who took part in it; for it will be remembered that it was not until the very end of Elizabeth's reign, and even the beginning of James's, before the struggle against the Church of Rome ended in an assured victory for the forces of Protestantism. All through the eighty years in which the Authorised Version was coming to its final form men were stirred to the depths of their souls by questions of religion which turned ultimately on the free possession and interpretation of the Bible. Moreover, this was a period in which all writing was musical, and all writers seem to have had the magical power of adding to the meaning of the

words the rich and flowing melody which clothed them with the deeper and pervasive meaning of the emotions. It is hard to find a book written in the sixteenth century which shows any relation to the bare and jolting style of so many of our books to-day. To the original translators and to the revisers who followed them we owe the transfer of the strong and moving rhythm of the Hebrew into English, and the enriching of it with the varied but subdued music which gives our Bible its capacity of expressing the deep thoughts of the soul.

One source of this rich music we must not neglect, the Latin of the Vulgate. All the men who made our version were intimately acquainted with it: Tindale and Coverdale, who were priests of the old church, must have known it as our fathers knew their English Bible. Now whoever knows this Latin Bible will agree that its most notable qualities to us are its strong rhythm and its rich sonorousness of tone, qualities which more than all others express earnestness and reverence of feeling. The Latin in which it is written is very different from the rhetorical language of Cæsar and Cicero; it is less finished, and even an amateur in Latin can feel that its syntax is broken down and contaminated by that of the Hebrew and Greek. But it has more than its share of the solidity of classical Latin and a momentum that is strengthened by the simpler structure taken over from the Hebrew. And at the same time it has a richness of coloring which I suppose has never been surpassed. Here is a short Psalm, the 133d, "Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!" which will show the marvelous power of this language to clothe its words with ringing music. Notice how rich the style is in the open vowels, and the liquid consonants, on which the voice insensibly dwells:—

Eccc, quam bonum et quam jucundum habitare fratres in unum:

Sicut unguentum in capite, quod descendit in barbam, barbam Aaron.

Quod descendit in oram vestimenti ejus :
Sicut ros Hermon, qui descendit in montem
Sion,

Quoniam illic mandavit Dominus benedictionem
et vitam usque in sæculum.

Now when one realizes that Tindale and his successors had these splendid organ tones ringing in their ears whenever they thought of a text of the Bible one cannot help, I think, feeling that its richness communicated itself to their work. The deepest and strongest feelings of men which are expressed in the Bible and give it its preëminence in our literature, are the feelings of awe in the presence of the omnipotent God, the feelings which men naturally express in worship. Music is an inseparable part of worship; and we may well hold that this music of the Biblical style which it derived in part from the Vulgate gives it much of its power of expressing these feelings. Thus we may feel that we have in our English some part of the passionate earnestness of St. Jerome, ringing down through the centuries to deepen and enrich the meaning of our Bible. Here again we must recognize our debt to the great Englishmen of the sixteenth century, who not only brought over the splendid thought of the Hebrew into equally splendid English, but who, writing with an unconscious sense for the beauty and expressiveness of style, clothed their words with a music which expresses feelings too deep and too diffused for articulate expression.

Now let us go behind these essential questions of style which concern the translation, and search for the intensity and elevation of feeling in the original writers which made this marvelous style a necessity of expression for the translators. Here explanation can make only a short step; for we are in a realm where the only ultimate explanation we can give is the fact of inspiration; and that is only another way of saying that we are in the presence of forces above and beyond our present human understanding. We can see a little further into the power of this poetry, however, if we take into

account the times in which it was probably written and consider the experiences which called it forth. I will speak here only of the Psalter and of Job.

It is now generally held by scholars of the modern school that the Psalter is the hymn-book of the second temple; and most scholars who accept the new views of the Bible at all agree that some of the Psalms at any rate were composed as late as the time of the Maccabean revolution, 165 B.C. The dates of the separate psalms may be very divergent; some of them may have been originally composed before the Exile, some of them perhaps by King David himself. But since the Psalter is a hymn-book, the precise date makes very little difference; for a hymn-book is a collection made for a very practical purpose, and if it does not express the feelings and aspirations of a specific generation it has no reason for existence. Therefore if the Psalter as we have it came from the latest period of Jewish history it would embody the sufferings and aspirations, the faith and the passionate zeal of the Jews of the third and the second centuries before Christ. It would come, therefore, from a time when the Jews were passing through almost the most critical period of their history, a time full of bitter suffering and distress, when they were harassed by enemies from without, and torn by dissensions from within. Jerusalem is described in such psalms as the 74th and the 79th as sacked, and the temple profaned; and the outburst of bitter indignation in Psalm lv,

But it was thou, a man mine equal, my guide, and mine acquaintance.

Let death seize upon them, and let them go down quick into hell: for wickedness is in their dwellings, and among them,

seems to refer to the party among the Jews who were ready to compromise with the heathen and take over their mode of life, even perhaps to contaminate the worship of Jehovah by the assimilation of heathen rites. The depths of this misery are sounded by many of the Psalms

as the heights of the faith by force of which they won their way through the furnace of affliction are measured by such glowing words as those of Psalm lxxviii:

Let God arise, let his enemies be scattered :
let them also that hate him flee before him.

As smoke is driven away, so drive them
away : as wax melteth before the fire, so let
the wicked perish at the presence of God.

But let the righteous be glad ; let them re-
joice before God : yea, let them exceedingly
rejoice.

Sing unto God, sing praises to his name :
extol him that rideth upon the heavens by his
name JAH, and rejoice before him.

Certainly there is no time before the Exile which will furnish the background of hopeless misery and depression, suddenly interrupted by unbounded joy and thanksgiving, which lies behind the Psalter as a whole. The very intensity and desperateness of the suffering and the suddenness of the reaction help us to understand the intensity of feeling uttered forth in these marvelous poems.

Job also probably comes from this same period of the Exile or the succeeding century, the time when the problem of the origin of evil came home to the Jews with such bitter poignancy. Deuteronomy taught them that Jehovah would reward their faithfulness to the statutes and ordinances which he had commanded them, and that he would punish whoever disobeyed; and in the manner of their age they looked for an immediate reward or an immediate punishment. Yet they who were striving with the most anxious care to fulfill every jot and tittle of the law were crushed by poverty and oppression; while their heathen conquerors, living in open defiance of the laws of Jehovah, were growing old in wealth and happiness. For them, and especially for those whose faith was strongest, the dilemma must have been critical. The great poem of Job witnesses to the earnestness with which they attacked the problem, and the triumphant faith with which they came back to the solution that the ways of God are too great for man to understand, that the fear of the Lord is the beginning

and the end of wisdom. Thus Job, like the Psalms, takes on a new and poignant interest when we recognize it, not as an abstract discussion of a philosophical problem, but as a grappling with an immediate and crucial difficulty.

This fact, that Job deals with an actual difficulty of a specific generation of the Jews, leads us to what is perhaps the most distinctive feature of this Hebrew poetry.

To use a technical term, Hebrew poetry never reached the point of representation. In other words, it never passed beyond the point of expressing the writer's own emotions to the point where he could imagine himself into the feelings of other persons, whether real or invented. This limitation appears constantly in the historical books, in the speeches which the writers, after the manner of all historians of antiquity, whether Oriental or classical, put into the mouths of the chief persons of the history. The Deuteronomist compilers of Kings, for example, making up a prayer which would be fitting for Solomon at the dedication of the temple, made him speak in the language and thought of Deuteronomy, a book which was called forth by the great change in the fortunes of Israel through the destruction of Samaria three hundred years after his death. They could not imagine to themselves how Solomon would really have felt; all they could do was to put their own hopes and yearnings into his mouth. This lack of the faculty of constructive imagination is a chief note of the Hebrew literature.

In the poetry this limitation resulted in the absence from our Old Testament of all poetry which cannot be roughly classified as lyrical. The Hebrew mind had no apparatus for inventing characters, or for understanding the thoughts and feelings of other men. Ostensibly Job is either a drama or a debate; yet though Satan is a protagonist in the prose introduction he is not mentioned at all in the poem; in the colloquies, the speeches of the three friends can be interchanged without injury to the book; and in chapter xxvii,

Job shifts over and occupies the ground which has been held by the friends against him. Clearly the authors of this great book came into no clear imagination or understanding of Job as an individual and consistent character. They made no effort to get into the point of view and temperament of the ostensible hero of the poem; as we say nowadays, they made no attempt to create a character. Job is best understood as a generalized figure of suffering Israel, a conception which was dear to the hearts of the Jews at this period; it was set forth by the Isaiah of the Exile in such a passage as the following:—

And he made his grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death; because he had done no violence, neither was any deceit in his mouth.

Yet it pleased the Lord to bruise him; he hath put him to grief: when thou shalt make his soul an offering for sin, he shall see his seed, he shall prolong his days, and the pleasure of the Lord shall prosper in his hand.

This same idea appears in certain of the Psalms:—

For my loins are filled with a loathsome disease: and there is no soundness in my flesh.

I am feeble and sore broken: I have roared by reason of the disquietness of my heart.

My lovers and my friends stand aloof from my sore; and my kinsmen stand afar off.

They also that seek after my life lay snares for me: and they that seek my hurt speak mischievous things, and imagine deceits all the day long.

During the bitter times of the Exile and of the century or two succeeding, the Jews found a melancholy comfort in thus figuring themselves as sufferers because of their very faithfulness to Jehovah. The book of Job can thus be best understood. In a sense Job himself is individualized, but no more so than is the suffering servant of Jehovah by the Isaiah of the Exile, or than the suffering Israel described in the Psalms. We may suppose that the purpose of the author of the book was satisfied with the description of Job's sufferings as a vivid portrayal of the sufferings of his race. Further than

this I think it is safe to say he does not attempt to individualize him. If one reads the poem carefully, one will see that it could be applied to many men of a considerable variety of temperaments; indeed, the fact that the piety of the Job of the prologue, which consists so much in offering sacrifices, is different from the larger-minded piety of the Job of the colloquies, seems to show that the author had little idea of what we mean by consistent characterization. He made no effort to make Job an individual in the sense that Hamlet and Henry Esmond are individuals; furthermore, there is no evidence that the men of his race ever were conscious of the possibility of such an effort.

This unconsciousness of the possibilities of the creative imagination helps to mark the great abyss which lies between the Old Testament and our modern literature. From the time of the Greeks down, representative art is the largest and most important part of pure literature. All the drama, all story-writing, and all poetry except lyrical, is representative in that its effort is to set forth the actions and feelings of persons whom the writer knows only indirectly and by force of his creative imagination. In the books of the Bible there is no such literature. If one recalls the fact already indicated, that the only other work with which English-speaking people are familiar, which comes from the same Oriental background as the Bible, is the *Arabian Nights*, one realizes the distance from us of this Bible literature. R. L. Stevenson pointed out in his *Gossip on Romance* that the people of the *Arabian Nights* are mere puppets; that their stories are a pure succession of adventures, undiluted by any understanding of character on the part of the authors, unbroken by any attempt to make the people real. These Israelite writers are on a somewhat higher plane, for they could tell a simple story in terms of the most vivid detail; and they could in a simple, unconscious sort of way make

the different actors in their stories seem like distinct people. Their creative imagination did not go so far, however, as to enable them to invent a character, or even to detach themselves from their own experiences in order to imagine consistently and convincingly the mental workings of any one whose circumstances or temperament differed much from their own. The thought of their authors was, as compared to those of our own age, primitively simple; it was never able to push beyond its own experiences and create that of other men.

In this limitation, finally, we may find part of the power of this literature. The Hebrew poetry has power over our feelings because it is always in dead earnest. There is no play-acting here. When one sees or reads *Hamlet*, or *Macbeth*, or *King Lear*, one is absorbed in the distress and suffering; but always behind the absorption is the sense of detachment from real affairs. Unconsciously we feel that we can afford to take part by imagination in the suffering, because after all it is not real. To understand and appreciate the poetry of the Old Testament one must remember that it is always real. The sufferings, or the joy, or the faith are the experience of real men uttering forth the depths of their soul. Their poetry had always the direct and practical purpose of unburdening real feeling: there is no make-believe here. Even in Job the apparent form of a drama is the thinnest of masks for the deep and real feelings

which lie underneath. The book is not an effort of the author to imagine how such a man as Job, suffering such trials, would have felt, but rather the expression of actual distress over the hopeless plight of his people. The mental tortures under which Job writhes are therefore those of real people in real and harrowing perplexity; and the overwhelming power of the answer of the Almighty the direct witness of a faith which could not be daunted by the most grievous trials.

Thus we may bring this brief survey of the poetry of the Bible to an end. In form and style it has power which springs in part from the unblurred concreteness and directness which was made not only possible but necessary by the character of the old Hebrew language and of the English language in the sixteenth century; in part from the strong but unconscious rhythm caused by the balancing of the lines of the Hebrew; in part from the richness of music which is due in all probability to the sonorous influences of the Vulgate. Behind the manifold variety of the imagery and the deep music of the style we can see, and not too vaguely, the intensity of faith which soared above all earthly troubles to the highest conception of God yet reached by man, — the faith which is to be traced in the constantly wider and more spiritual messages of the prophets, rising during the period that produced the Psalms to a clear grasp of immortality and the blessings of paradise.

A TANGLED WEB

BY MARGARET COOPER McGIFFERT

I

JOHN VANCE had not a grain of malice in his make-up, and he was almost extravagantly fond of young Pruyn. But when a brilliant man has worked for fifteen years at his chosen profession and has failed of recognition except in a limited circle, it is hard for him to believe in the reality of a success that happens over-night to a boy just out of college. "It's nothing but youth and animal spirits," he warned Hudson Pruyn. "The public likes you immensely, just as I do; but youth won't last, and you must put foundations under your work if you don't want your house that you built in a day to tumble down about your ears."

Pruyn only laughed good-naturedly, and went on writing stories that were snapped up by the magazines, and novels for which publishers contended. He had an unbounded admiration for Vance, as a man with more brains and more heart than any other man he knew, and with a style that illuminated every subject he touched; but, considering himself only an ordinary young fellow, who had made a lucky hit by writing just as he felt about things that he liked, he could not quite see how he could combine with his own happy-go-lucky ease the careful art of a man who was, immeasurably, his intellectual superior.

"What I write is n't art, I know perfectly well," he assured his friend. "It's nothing but happen-so. But there's no harm in it; I like to do it, people like to read it, the publishers like to pay for it; so we're all happy."

Vance labored to prove to him that a man's lifework must be taken seriously. "You have gifts to thank the gods for," he insisted; "but if you play with them,

they will burst like soap-bubbles. You have never had to grind; you follow habitually the line of the least resistance, and your fatal facility" —

"You have the descent to Avernus in your worrying old mind," Pruyn interrupted. "But you need n't fear for me. All my tastes lie in the other direction."

"I don't fear anything for you but superficiality," Vance returned gravely. "I want you to be a man, not a trifle. How many gushing notes have you received in the last week? How many teas and dinners have you attended? How many sentences of real literature or sound sense have you read? How much hard thinking have you done? You have galloped over a sufficient number of pages with your fountain pen. You have galloped a sufficient number of miles on horseback to keep you in good condition. You have spent the rest of your time as if Heaven had not blessed you with brains."

"I have spent a lot of time with you and the other fellows," Pruyn reminded him. "As much time as you were willing to waste on me. If you were n't all so confoundedly busy, I'd be with you all the time. Do you think I don't know the difference between men and triflers? Do you think I would n't go in for art if I had it in me? I believe that you fellows that would starve before you would paint a picture or write a page that does n't seem to you true are the salvation of this materialistic age. But the trouble with me is that I don't know whether things are true or not. I don't know how I write. I do it just as I ride or swim or row or golf. I play the most unscientific game of golf imaginable; but I get there with as few strokes as most fellows, and I get the good out of it."