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Union Seminary Magazine

VOL. XIX.

APRIL—MAY, 1908.

No. 4.

TENNYSON'S RELIGIOUS BELIEFS

BY REV. F. P. RAMSAY, PH. D.

Alfred Tennyson is the most representative English poet of the nineteenth century. For this reason the religious beliefs held by him and expressed in his poetry are of peculiar interest to any student of religious thought. But let us endeavor to understand what his beliefs were before undertaking to measure the significance of his holding and teaching them.

We turn first to one of his earliest poems, *The Palace of Art*. Opening with the statement,

"I built my soul a lordly pleasure-house,
Wherein at ease for aye to dwell,"

he proceeds to describe this lordly pleasure-house of his soul as furnished with all the treasures of literature and art from all the ages. Then the soul in "Godlike isolation," separating herself from God and from men, whom she despises as "droves of swine," says at last:

"I take possession of man's mind and deed,
I care not what the sects may brawl.
I sit as God holding no form of creed,
But contemplating all."

THE BOOK OF KINGS: ITS OCCASION, THEME AND PURPOSE

BY W. M. MCPHEETERS.

The author of the Book of Kings has not told us for what purpose he composed his book. Can we discover it? Of this much, at least, we may be certain, namely, that he had a purpose. Purposiveness is an essential element in all rational conduct. Further, if it is worth while to try to understand the Book of Kings, it is worth while to try to ascertain the purpose for which it was written. For the purpose of the book is just the meaning of the book; so that, missing its purpose, we miss its meaning. Further still, to miss the meaning of the book as a book, is to miss the meaning, not only of its structure, but of much of its contents. And finally here, while the author has not given a formal statement of his purpose, still he has not left us wholly without clues to that purpose. These properly followed up ought to bring the latter to light.

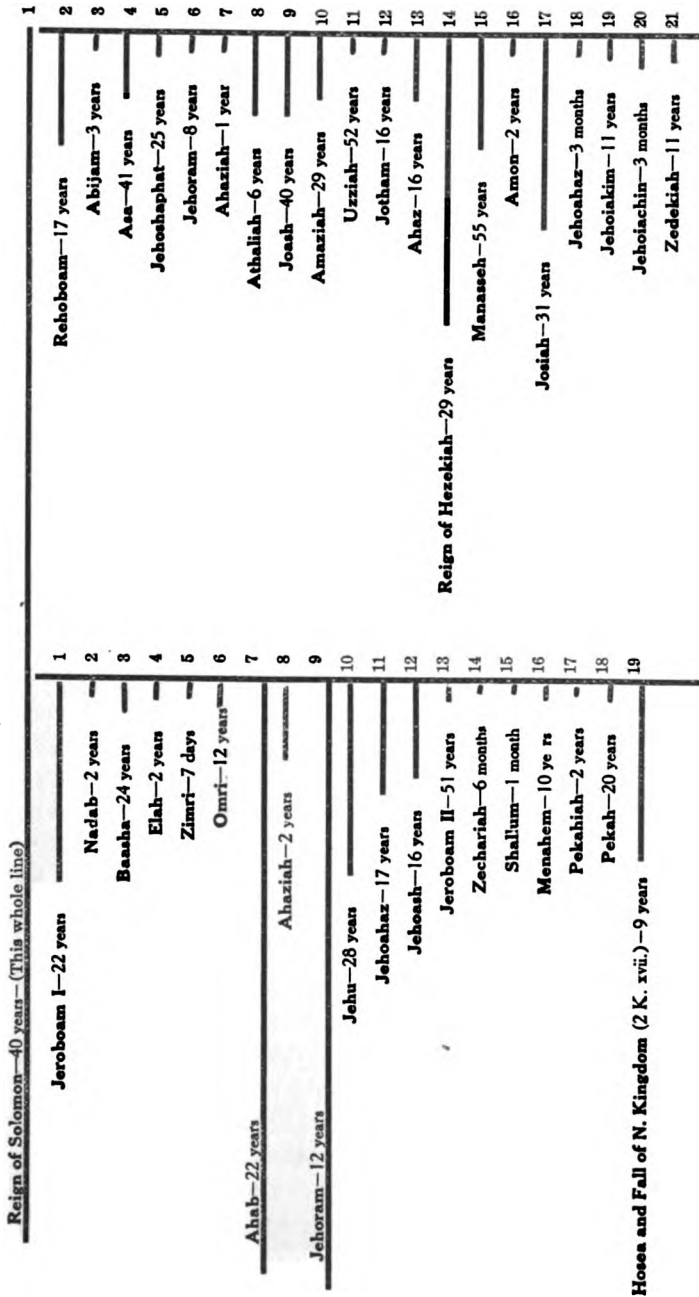
Professor Charles Foster Kent has said: "It is * * * a self-evident fact that a book was not written—at least, not in antiquity, when the making of books was both laborious and expensive—unless a real need for it was felt."* If so, then the

*The Origin and Permanent Value of the Old Testament, p. 67.

purpose of every book must be to meet some need. Determine the need that called forth the book, and you will have in your hand a key to the purpose for which the book was written. But, again, every specific need is the offspring of some definite historical situation. Whatever, therefore, throws light upon the situation that confronted the author of the Book of Kings ought to throw light upon the need that this book was designed to meet, and so upon the purpose for which it was written. Here, then, is one clue that ought to lead to definite results. Another will be found in the contents of the book itself. I use the words "contents" somewhat broadly, intending to include under it, not

merely the subject matter of the book, but also the distribution of the matter. A study of these ought to disclose the theme that the writer is developing; and his theme, considered in the light of the circumstances that lead to the writing of the book, ought to be a pretty safe guide to the purpose for which the book was written.

Let us take up first the writer's distribution of his matter. The accompanying diagram will reveal to the eye its most marked peculiarities. A mere glance at the diagram is of itself sufficient to show—(1) that either the author was utterly destitute of all sense of proportion, or else that his distribution of his matter is significant. For example, while he gives twenty-eight per cent. of his entire space to Solomon's reign of forty years, he gives but two-fifths of one per cent. of his space to Uzziah's long and exceptionally brilliant reign of fifty-two years; and while he gives but one per cent. of his entire space to Asa's reign of forty-one years, he gives six and three-fifths per cent. of that space to Hezekiah's reign of twenty-nine years; while he gives but one and one-fifth per cent. of that space to Manasseh's reign of fifty-five years, he gives no less than four and one-fifth per cent. of that space to Josiah's reign of thirty-one years. (2) Equally noticeable is his distribution of space as between the kings of the southern and those of the northern kingdom. Thus to the reigns of Rehoboam, Abijam, Asa, Jehoshaphat, Jehoram and Ahaziah in the southern kingdom, covering a period of some ninety-five years, the author gives but five and three-fifths per cent. of his entire space. On the other hand, to the four kings of the house of Omri, that is Omri, Ahab, Ahaziah and Jehoram, whose reigns aggregate only forty-eight years, he devotes twenty-nine and three-tenths per cent. of his space. Indeed, as the diagram will show, from the division of the kingdom until the fall of the northern kingdom the writer's attention is devoted almost exclusively to the latter. In other words, to this period of two hundred and fifty-four years, as against the forty-five and one-tenth per cent. of space allotted to the northern kingdom, but twelve per cent. of space is devoted to the southern. So



This diagram shows *Relative Amount* of space devoted to each King of Judah and Israel

much then for the author's distribution of his space. The key to its significance will be found in an examination of the subject matter of his book.

Turning then to the contents of the book, the following facts force themselves upon our attention: 1. From the very beginning two events are constantly before the writer's mind. One of these is the fall of the northern kingdom, with the consequent deportation and virtual annihilation of the Ten Tribes. This is obvious from the fact that from the disruption of the kingdom to the fall of Samaria the writer's attention is devoted almost exclusively to the course of affairs in the northern kingdom. (See above.) When that point is reached the Ten Tribes disappear from his narrative. The other event of which the author never loses sight is the fall of Jerusalem and the captivity of Judah. When this point has been reached, his narrative has arrived at its final goal. Concerning subsequent events, with one single exception, he has nothing to say. Closely connected with the fact just mentioned is another that cannot escape the attention of a careful reader of the Book of Kings. It is this:

2. At every stage of his narrative the author is concerned to direct the thought of his readers to the *causes* that brought about the catastrophes above mentioned. To begin with, the disruption itself was no fortuitous, inexplicable event. "It was a thing brought about of Jehovah." It was not, however, brought about capriciously and without cause, but "because" Solomon's "heart was turned away from Jehovah, the God of Israel, * * * he kept not that which Jehovah commanded." (1 Kings 12:15; 11:10.) Just as little was the disaster that befell the house of Jeroboam fortuitous or due to the divine caprice. The sentence against Jeroboam ran, "Thou hast done evil above all that were before thee * * * therefore will I bring evil upon the house of Jeroboam," etc. (1 Kings 14:9-10.) Some things—and some very important things—the author leaves his readers to ascertain for themselves, but upon this particular point he is explicit to the point of becoming monotonous. In the case of the house of Baasha, the house of Ahab and the house of Jehu, as well as in

the case of individual kings of both kingdoms, he reiterates with great explicitness his "because" or "forasmuch." (1 Kings 16: 2-3, 19; 21ff; 2 Kings 21: 10ff; 22: 26.) Nor will the full force of this point be perceived, unless we note the fact that passing by other matters of great interest, the author of Kings singles out for comment those incidents in the career of each king that were most truly illustrative of his moral character and his attitude towards Jehovah. Thus, barring one matter to which I may find space to refer later, he passes over all the brilliant exploits of Jeroboam II, and contents himself with saying, "He did that which was evil in the sight of Jehovah; he departed not from all the sins of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, wherewith he made Israel to sin." (2 Kings 14: 24.) By means of this and similar constantly recurring formulæ does he keep the attention of his readers riveted upon the *causes* that brought about the destruction of both kingdoms.

3. But if the author is careful to advertise his readers of the fact that the terrible catastrophes in which the two kingdoms had been overwhelmed were not fortuitous or due to the divine caprice, he is no less careful to impress upon them the fact that these catastrophes were not the result of any unavoidable fatality. Ten of the twelve tribes of Israel had, it is true, been, as it were, blotted out of existence, except as they were still represented by a remnant of a handful who had cast in their lot with Judah. The writer, however, is at pains to let his readers know that this was not the mere outcome of any 'inevitable destiny.' For what other purpose does he place upon record the remarkable promise given to Jeroboam at the beginning of his career? "And it shall be, if thou wilt hearken unto all that I command thee, and will walk in my ways, and do that which is right in mine eyes, to keep my statutes and my commandments, as David, my servant, did; that I will be with thee, and will build thee a sure house, as I built for David, and will give Israel unto thee." (1 Kings 11: 38.) Still another way in which this same truth is thrust upon the notice of his readers is by the ever recurring formula, "for it was a thing brought about by Jehovah, that he might

establish his word," etc. (1 Kings 12: 15b.), or "according to the word of Jehovah, which he spake by the hand of his servant," followed by the name of some prophet. (1 Kings 14: 18b.)

4. Once more, as the subject matter of the book shows clearly enough, the author of the Book of Kings makes it evident that the disasters that had overtaken Israel and Judah were in no wise traceable to any impotence in Jehovah to avert them. Such seems to be the purpose of the narratives in 1 Kings 21; 2 Kings 6: 7: 13: 14-19. And it is obviously the explanation of the fact that fully two-thirds of the space devoted to the reign of Hezekiah is taken up with a detailed account of the deliverance of that monarch and Jerusalem from the hand of Sennacherib. The significance of this feature of his narrative, the writer emphasizes by placing an account of the downfall of Samaria beside and so in sharp contrast with his account of the deliverance of Jerusalem. (2 Kings 18: 9-12 compared with 2 Kings 18: 13-19: 34.) Never was a case more desperate from a human point of view than was that of Hezekiah. Never were boasts better backed up by facts than were the boasts of Sennacherib. And yet never was deliverance more complete, more signal or more clearly through "the act of God" than that of Hezekiah and Jerusalem. Sennacherib himself made the case a test case as between the gods of Assyria and Jehovah.

5. By far the larger part of the author's space, however, is devoted to incidents that make it obvious that the explanation of the calamities of Israel and Judah was not to be found in any lack of long-suffering mercy on the part of Jehovah. Thus: (a) Of the seventeen and a quarter pages that are given to the reign of Solomon, about one-fourth, possibly one-third, are taken up with matters that ought to have been *motives deterring* Solomon from the course that he actually took. The writer mentions the dangers which threatened Solomon at the time of his accession, and how God delivered him out of them all and established him upon the throne. He tells of the three several warnings that God Himself gave Solomon. (1 Kings 3: 13; 6: 11-13; 9: 1-9.) He notes also the solemn charge given to Solomon by David. (1

Kings 2:2b-4.) That his repeated reference to these matters is significant appears from the fact that he himself says: "And Jehovah was angry with Solomon, because his heart was turned away from Jehovah, the God of Israel, *which had appeared unto him twice.*" (1 Kings 11:9.) (b) Of the two and three-quarters pages assigned to the reign of Jeroboam, about three-fourths are taken up with a detailed statement of the measures used by God to deter him from his evil ways. (1 Kings 13-14:18.) After narrating at length the incidents connected with the warning given Jeroboam by "the man of God out of Judah," the author adds: "After this thing Jeroboam returned not from his evil way, but made again," etc. (1 Kings 13:33.) (c) The long section beginning at 1 Kings 16:29 and continuing to 2 Kings 9:12 is almost wholly occupied with the measures employed by God to restrain and reclaim the northern kingdom. The conspicuous figures in the narrative here are not Omri, Ahab, Jezebel, Ahaziah and Jehoram, but Elijah, Micaiah and Elisha, with prophets and sons of the prophets in the background, and ever and again coming to the fore. Just as God throws up the great mountains against the great oceans to hold the continent firm against the poundings of the waves, so the author of Kings tells his readers God sent prophets as commanding and dauntless as Elijah, Micaiah and Elisha to stay the oncoming waves of Baal-worship and calf-worship that threatened, and finally wrought the destruction of the northern kingdom. But Israel did not perish without abundant warning. Nor was the fatuous and fateful union between the daughter of Jezebel and the son of Jehoshaphat consummated without the latter having been sufficiently warned; for Jehoshaphat was present when Micaiah foretold the death of Ahab, and likewise when Elisha denounced Jehoram, the son of Ahab. And the obvious purpose of this part of the narrative is to make these facts stand out. (d) Still another means used by the writer to signalize the patient, long-suffering mercy of God is by referring to God's readiness to stay His judgments at the least appearance of penitence, even in the case of kings like Ahab (1 Kings 21:27-29) and Jehoahaz, the

son of Jehu (2 Kings 13:4). Indeed, the seventeenth chapter of 2 Kings is nothing else than a passionate protest on the part of the author of the book that the destruction of the northern kingdom was, as it were, thrust upon God in spite of every effort upon His part to prevent things from coming to that pass.

6. One other feature of the contents must not be permitted to pass unnoticed. I refer to those passages in which the author calls attention to the fact that God did not permit either the sins of His people, or even the demands of His own righteousness, to cause Him to forget, or to allow to lapse His covenant with Abraham and with David. There is something very beautiful, and even pathetic, in the words: "But Jehovah was gracious unto them, and had compassion on them, and had respect unto them, because of his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and would not destroy them, neither cast he them from his presence as yet." (2 Kings 13:23.) And the recurrent formula, "Nevertheless, for David's sake did Jehovah his God give him a lamp in Jerusalem to set up his son and to establish Jerusalem," etc. (1 Kings 15:4, 11, 13; 2 Kings 8:19; 19:24; 20:8, and perhaps I might add 21:7) is so striking that it has led Keil to the view that the purpose of the book as a whole is to set forth and to vindicate God's faithfulness to His covenant with David. In other words, Keil regards the Book of Kings as simply a historical commentary upon 2 Sam. 7:12-15. No doubt there is an element of truth in such a point of view, though the result of our examination of the contents of the book itself will, I feel confident, convince the thoughtful reader that this conception of the purpose of the book as a whole is inadequate.

Imperfect as has been our examination of the contents of Kings, it has, I think, proceeded far enough to justify the statement that the theme of the book is: *The causes leading up to, issuing in, and explaining the rejection of the Ten Tribes and the Exile of Judah.* These causes, as depicted with much detail by the writer, may be summarized in a single sentence, namely: the incorrigible refusal both of the northern and of the southern kingdom to conform to the fundamental terms of the covenant:

neither Jehovah's mercies nor His lesser judgments availing to bring them to repentance.

Let us now turn to our other clue to the purpose for which the Book of Kings was written—that is, to the situation of the writer's own contemporaries. For doubtless his book was primarily written for their benefit and to meet their needs. The last incident mentioned in the book (2 Kings 25: 27ff) indicates that it was published some time—how long we need not here stop to inquire—after the first year of the reign of Evil-merodach, king of Babylon. Now Evil-merodach began to reign in the year 560 B. C. Jerusalem, it will be recalled, fell about 587 B. C. Jehoiachin and others had been carried into exile about ten years prior to that time. And a considerable body of Jews had been carried to Babylon as early as 606 B. C. A little reflection, then, will show that all of the contemporaries of the author of the Book of Kings who were under twenty-six years of age *had been born in Babylon*. Indeed, it seems altogether probable that by far the larger part of his contemporaries had been born and had grown up amid the scenes of the Exile. To them Jerusalem, with its temple and palaces, its historic sites and holy convocations, was not even a memory. It was a mere name, learned from the lips of others. They were total strangers to the land of their fathers, which they heard spoken of as the land given to Abraham and to his seed forever. Further, the memory of the oldest contemporary of the author of the Book of Kings could not go back to a time when the Ten Tribes were even settled in their own land, and still less to a time when they came up to Jerusalem to worship. No doubt pious mothers, *as their children grew up*, taught them the great facts of Israel's past. No doubt the writings of Moses and of the prophets were more or less familiar to the exiles. But the things of which they were poignantly conscious were that they were in exile, strangers in a strange land; that Jehovah seemed to have cast His covenant behind His back; that their nation was decimated, ten of the original twelve tribes of Israel having been virtually annihilated; that the heel of the Assyrian was upon their neck; that the gods of Assyria seemed to have

made good the boast of Sennacherib. These, I say, were the grim, the painful, the perplexing facts that burned themselves deeper and deeper into the consciousness of the exiles with every passing day. It is obvious that they were facts to put even the strongest and most genuine faith to a severe test. They were obliged to raise questions in the minds of the younger generation, questions that clamored for an answer, questions which deserved an answer, questions which, unless they were truly, wisely, sufficiently answered, would leave faith without a rational basis. They presented a *nodus vindice dignus*. They called for someone to vindicate the ways of God to Israel.

Both the contents of the book, therefore, and the circumstances of those to whom it was in the first instance addressed, point to the conclusion that the specific purpose set before himself by the author of the Book of Kings was to *vindicate God's righteousness in His judgments and His faithfulness to His promises, as against the difficulties presented both to reason and to faith by the fact of the exile and by the rejection and virtual annihilation of ten out of Israel's twelve tribes*. The vindication offered by the writer is, that the judgment was deferred again and again, and that it was only executed after Israel and Judah had proved themselves to be incorrigible in their refusal to conform to the fundamental terms of the covenant. Further, the writer so frames his vindication as to illustrate the abundant mercy and patience of Jehovah: he so frames it—notably in the case of the deliverance of Hezekiah, as to make it plain that the fate which overtook Israel and Judah was not due to any impotence of Jehovah. In a word, he performs the remarkable feat of so vindicating Jehovah's righteousness as to awaken hope in Jehovah's mercy and confidence in Jehovah's faithfulness and power.

That he had other subordinate ends in addition to the main purpose just mentioned goes without saying. But his book as a whole is an historical commentary upon the challenge uttered by God through the lips of Isaiah: "What could have been done more to my vineyard than I have done in it?" (Isaiah 5: 4-7.)