THE BIBLE, THE PERSIAN INSCRIPTIONS, AND THE AVESTA.

HOW our distinguished popular expounders of the Bible can proceed in their all-important tasks without some attempt to acquire such interior information as may be available about the religion of Cyrus and Darius is difficult for an expert to understand.

These imperial persons, according to our own venerated Semitic Scriptures, actually restored the Jewish tribes to Jerusalem, permitting, encouraging and assisting the rebuilding of the city and even of the Temple.

As we read throughout Ezra and the rest, it is obvious that they did everything which it was conceivable for them to do to meet the national religious aspirations of the exiled tribes; and that they did so, moved by some correspondence between their own religious opinions and those of their protégés was at least believed by the Jewish writers to be the fact; see the extensive statements everywhere.

And we may indeed certainly concede that the Persian rulers were animated by some measure of sentiment aside from political expediency. According to the Jews Cyrus was actually inspired by "the God of Heaven" to take the course which he did take toward the Israelites—and in Isaiah xliv and xlv he is accepted by Yahveh Elohim as 'His Anointed'; and we may safely infer that the same approbation was supposed by Ezra and his colleagues to have been present in the mind of the Jewish Deity toward Darius

and his successors. If we had no records whatever of these distinguished Iranian monarchs, our inattention might be condoned, for we could then only dimly conjecture what their religion might have been; but we possess documents of it which surpass in certified authority almost all other equally ancient records of the human race. For their main bulk consists of the well-preserved Persian Inscriptions of Behistan, Persepolis, Naksh i Rستم, etc. These impressive sculptures have long since been deciphered, and except for an isolated difficulty here and there they are easier than the Bible, that is to say, than parts of it; they are certainly easier than the Avesta. They are of course meagre as to extent when regarded as literature; but they are perhaps the fullest of all closely related inscriptions upon stone, while their religious fervor, whether genuine or affected, is the strongest ever recorded in such writings and hardly surpassed by any compositions anywhere. Nowhere in literature within the same compass of words are such trenchant and dogmatic assertions made of the existence of One Supreme God as the Creator of "this Earth and yon Heaven, of man, and of amenity for him"—and not even in the Psalms have we more strenuous iterations of personal faith. "Then I prayed to Auramazda," Darius wrote for his stone-cutters, "Auramazda brought me aid—by the gracious will of Auramazda I became King;" and from that on everything favorable which he did or which happened to him occurred, as he asserts, "through the gracious will of Auramazda." The name, as we know, was one of the purest and most significant perhaps ever applied to a believed-in deity, probably far superior to our own word "God" in both its origin and bearing.* It means "the life-spirit-Lord, the Great Creator"; or the latter word may mean "the Wise One"; so my

* In the light of refined reason, and in view of all Indian usage, compare Asura which is Ahura;—what name approached it?

colleagues generally prefer, following tradition. He restored the temples which Bardiya (Smerdes) destroyed in his Magian iconoclasm just as he and Cyrus restored the temple at Jerusalem, and as Cyrus restored the Temple City Eshshakil (so) at Babylon, and there is hardly a place where the words "by the gracious will of Auramazda" could come in where they are not cut. The iteration is unexampled. He must have been the champion hypocrite of all the ages if he did not believe that God was indeed his supporter.

But these quite astonishing accumulations of fervent personal religious feeling have a certain peculiarity which at once deepens as it intensifies our problem.

It is this: the same expressions recur without variation, letter for letter, throughout the reigns of Darius, Xerxes, Artaxerxes the II and the III, something over a hundred years. We have indeed the side sentence showing deeply-rooted and superficially animated sentiment,—but even these are repeated like formulas while the main phrases were positively such; they must have headed many a political document as well as these formal summaries of sculptured history.

The chief terms were of course household words as well as familiar in every possible school of religious learning, or center of public service, which is of course a matter of deepest import to the history of religion;—for it proves something so hard to believe that we are almost tempted to exclamatory adjectives. It seems actually to establish the certain fact that in a most effective percentage these formulas expressed the sincere religious convictions of a portion of the populations, and if only of a portion, yet how vast must have been the aggregate.

If Darius ruled from Egypt to India and from the Ocean to the Caspian, surely five per cent. alone must have meant a million souls, and that in generation after gen-

eration. Is it possible that these people could have been intellectually convinced, as no such populations upon the face of the earth were then convinced, of the omnipotence of a supreme good God, whose primal attribute was truth, and yet not have experienced some genuine religious emotions which ultimately formed themselves into religious principles and religious character, especially among that portion of the people who were still young? Surely every pastoral clergyman knows that this is impossible. People by the millions must have been genuinely pious in Persia under the Achæmenids.

We are still, let us hope, acutely sensible of the importance of religious revivals, although they may have taken place in times long past and resulted from the early propagation of the Gospel,—and these latter claim of course a sacred precedence among all revolutions of religious sentiment,—but no true Christian can ignore the possible regenerations of moral character which must have taken place under this sublime and simple creed of Darius and of the Gathas. Of course other gods are recognized such as Mithra and Anahita, and so in the later Avesta. We Christians have also our Archangels, and it can hardly be said that we refrain from worshiping our saints; that is to say, not those of us who have the pre-eminent right to represent the Faith. In the wonderful Gathas, however, which are closely related to the inscriptions, there is no Mithra mentioned, nor is there any Anahita, and the Archangels themselves are primarily the attributes of God. It was by far the most intellectual and refined system that had ever been developed anywhere at their period or, as some might say, since then.

We must not indeed conceal the defect that even Darius in the very acme of his almost passionate expressions (of trust in God) takes pains to record and with obvious satisfaction his execution of his captured arch-enemies, and he

does not shrink from giving us the details of his barbarity; but we must also not forget that if Darius had not struck terror upon his other opponents by such ghastly exhibitions, those other opponents would undoubtedly have experienced no hesitation;—they would have struck terror upon his survivors by executing him with every exactly similar fiendish horror;—moreover these infamies have been at least equalled, if not indeed excelled in the executions of Christian believers by Christian believers themselves.

And we can not say that the masses of the populations were responsible for these enormities (though they evidently thought them to have been deserved), so that we cannot at all on this account exclude the conviction that a really vast amount of genuine personal piety, equal in its type to that of our own middle ages, must have prevailed in the Persian Empire at this period.* Can Christian pastors and teachers afford to ignore this mighty spiritual fact, or great series of facts in teaching the Bible to their hearers, especially when it is indubitably true that the whole course of our religious history might have been, nay must have been, different but for the interposition of those friendly rulers? Christ doubtless would have been born in the fulness of time, and would have taught and agonized, but who can say that these events would have taken place in Palestine, and have possessed at all the influence which they have now in fact exerted? Surely we can spare a few cheap hours for finding out what lies beneath it all.

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* See my detailed remarks in *Zarathushtra, the Achaemenids and Israel*.