

## CHAPTER I.

## THE RELIGIOUS CHARACTER OF THE HISTORY OF ISRAEL.

*Place of Israel among the nations of antiquity—Land, literature, institutions—The distinctive feature of the history is the religion—Its world-wide influence: modern Judaism, Christianity, Islam—"National religions and universal religions"—As a matter of history the religion of Israel is "something more" than other principal religions—The question is, What is the difference? and for an answer we must go back to the earlier times.*

THE history of Israel has attractions such as no other history presents. No nation ever had so wonderful a beginning; none exhibits a more tragic close. The figures that mark the stadia of its checkered history are not the dim shadowy forms that elsewhere meet us in antiquity, but men of warm human sympathy, with strongly marked individuality. The details of the lives of Old Testament worthies have wrought themselves into all literatures, and made themselves the world's possession. People in modern Christian lands are more familiar with the history of Israel than with the ancient history of their own countries, and feel more interest in the characters of Old Testament story than in the great men of their own nations. The graphic delineations of patriarchs and heroes take powerful hold of the imagination of the old and young in all lands. The

missionary to the heathen finds a ready access to the minds of his hearers by means of the simple and impressive recital of the deeds of Israel's great men. And in the battles for religious freedom and national righteousness, reformers have been nerved by the example of Old Testament patriots and prophets to fight manfully for the truth.

The very land which was the home of Israel is unique in its geographical and topographical features. A piece of territory no larger than Wales embraces within itself the climate, natural scenery, and products of lands the most far apart. By its physical features and natural boundaries it is as sharply marked off from adjacent lands, as it is distinguished from any country of its size on the face of the earth. Within this territory, debarred for the most part from the seaboard, lived a people that was contemporaneous with the great world-empires of antiquity, but in true greatness has infinitely surpassed them. Looked at as one of the nationalities of Western Asia, its external history seemed indeed to run a course parallel with theirs. A number of kindred tribes are federated together, and after a time the monarchy arises. Then a schism takes place, and there is a double line of kings, waging their wars and ruling their states very much after the fashion of the kings around them. The institutions, the priesthood, the ritual, the language of Israel, bear strong resemblances to those of kindred Semitic peoples in their neighbourhood; and finally, when the great world-powers absorb those other nationalities or sweep them away, the Israelitish state is also shattered, and its people disappears from the scene. Yet, looked at more closely, Israel presents a broad contrast to those smaller kindred states, and is in essential points clearly distinguished from the greater world-empires. For Israel has not ceased to exist, and its influ-

ence has gone forth into all the earth. The petty nationalities of kindred blood in the immediate neighbourhood have disappeared, leaving scarcely a trace of their existence. The great empires of Assyria and Egypt, whose armies fought across the body of Israel for world-dominion, have crumbled to ruins. The Roman empire, with its iron heel, trampled the Jewish nationality to the ground, but there was a vitality which it could not crush. Greece, like Palestine, was a small country, and its people, like Israel, played a distinguished part in the world's history. Israel, however, had put on record complete annals of its marvellous career before the time that the "father of history" appeared in Greece;<sup>1</sup> and though possessing neither the art, nor the philosophy, nor the science of ancient Egypt, has effected in the world what neither Greece with all these acquirements, nor Rome with its law, nor the Eastern empires with their massive force, could accomplish.

Something very distinctive must have been early achieved or acquired by Israel to enable it to remain apart from these nationalities, great or small, and to outlast them so conspicuously. It was something of a more fundamental kind than the ordinary attainments of civilisation—something nearer to the heart of mankind, belonging in a manner to all ages, and destined to last when the strait bonds of Jewish nationality should have been snapped, and when the greatest of world-empires should have done their best and their worst for the human race. By some inherent force this race, set in the midst of the great nations of the earth, and surrounded by powerful em-

<sup>1</sup> The date of Herodotus is 484-443 B.C. ; Ezra came to Jerusalem in the year 458. The pre-Socratic period of Greek philosophy falls between 550 and 430 B.C. ; the books of Hosea and Amos date from before the fall of Samaria in 721 B.C.

pires, not only held its independent national existence, and maintained itself unaffected in the highest degree by world influences, speaking its own language, practising its own customs, observing its own laws, proudly regarding itself as a race destined to highest distinction and even to world-dominion, but even at the moment of its political extinction held aloft the banner of national supremacy and undying hope. Nor have its expectations been falsified. Scattered to the four winds of heaven, trodden down as the mire of the streets, persecuted in strange lands, wandering from end to end of a continent in search of a resting-place, it has remained one in all that constituted its unity before its independence was lost. Even in this cosmopolitan age, when men of every nationality are becoming daily more and more citizens of the world, and when the modern Jew of Britain, or America, or Germany, or France, makes it his poor boast that he is an Englishman, an American, a German, or a Frenchman, his very speech bewrayeth him, and he is classed as a member of the one race which is the scorn of many, the dread of some, the wonder of all. For, as a nation or race, the Jewish people lives on, and has a definite influence on the events of contemporary history; and this though it is a nation without a home and without independent political existence. It is a great thing to have the control, to the extent that they enjoy, of the money which is intimately bound up with the prosecution of any undertaking, literary, commercial, or philanthropic, to be the arbiters of war or peace, the masters of the Exchange. The modern movement against the Jews in some parts of Europe, though it may have its root in the very thing we have indicated, shows also that the influence of this wonderful race is not merely monetary but intellectual. Even if it is

their possession of wealth that gives them the advantage, the genius that could create the wealth, and so manipulate it as to maintain pre-eminence, is evidently a power of a high degree. To instruct the world in the worship of Mammon, after having taught it the knowledge of God, is no common achievement. A power like this, without political independence at its back, implies an inner uniting bond of no common kind; and when we ask what that bond is, we are driven back to the earlier history of the people for an answer. The possession of wealth by the race is of comparatively modern origin, brought about by their exclusion from the ordinary trades and professions, which were practised in the times when they suffered persecution at the hands of Christians. But the bond that unites them is of much older date: they had become a historic people, and had indeed achieved the best part of their history, before their corporate life had assumed this special phase. Persecution had its chief motive in their distinctiveness, and largely tended to perpetuate it.

The bond which united this people and enabled them to achieve their distinction in the world was a religious one; and the specific contribution of ancient Israel to the world's good was the knowledge of their religion. "The foundation upon which, at all periods, Israel's sense of its national unity rested, was religious in its character."<sup>1</sup> "The history of Israel is essentially a history of religious ideas."<sup>2</sup> The great Eastern empires, by a crushing despotism, welded peoples into kingdoms of colossal size, and prepared a field upon which more civilising influences could have play when the fit time arrived. The people of Israel attained no such empire, and left no such remains of

<sup>1</sup> Wellhausen, *Hist. of Israel*, p. 433.

<sup>2</sup> Stade, *Geschichte des Volkes Israel*, vol. i. p. 12.

greatness as these empires exhibit. Their territory even at the largest was but small; they remained but a short time in these limited dominions; and their country, when they left it, became a No-man's-land, whose inhabitants at the present day own a foreign master, and have no attachment to it beyond an instinctive clinging to the soil that supports them. Rome gave the world a system of law which remained an active influence throughout Europe after the great Roman empire was shattered. Greece died in giving birth to immortal art, poetry, and science. Ancient Israel, on the contrary, never cultivated art nor distinguished itself in philosophy; and, so far from seeking to influence the great world, kept jealously aloof from its movements. What Israel has given to the world is a literature of a very peculiar kind, intensely national in the first place, instinct with an eloquence and a poetry of its own kind; but above all, and herein specifically different from all other national literatures, permeated from beginning to end with religion. From a very ancient time writers in this nation have set themselves to give the story, and a connected story, of their own rise and growth, to codify the laws, to put on record the words and deeds of teachers and leaders; and whether or not a part, great or small, of such ancient literature has been lost, one feature characterises what we possess, it is of a religious cast, and national only because it is religious. A nation is historical only when it makes history, and a nation records its history only when it becomes conscious that it has a history to record; and therefore the earliest of these records which have this national and religious tone, prove that at the time of their composition Israel had a consciousness of its own significant position in the world, and a belief that its history was worthy of being recorded.

"The self-consciousness of the religion of Israel," says Dr A. B. Davidson,<sup>1</sup> "is a phenomenon almost more singular than the religion itself." Of course it is to be admitted that the existence of such writings, when once they did exist, had much to do with the making and moulding of the succeeding history; but the fact of their existing is first of all a proof that the nation was conscious that it had some great part to play.

Yet the religion which was the bond uniting Israel and giving that people their peculiar position in the world, is not a dry system enshrined in ancient documents to furnish study for the archæologist. Other nations of the ancient world had their religious systems, expounded by philosophers, guarded by priests, supported by the state, adorned with the ritual which the highest art could elaborate. These religions, however, faded from the view of the world with the decadence of the peoples who professed them, and are now painfully restored from forgotten writings and crumbling monuments; and even when recovered seem at best but like distant echoes of the religion of Israel. This, like the people themselves, has never ceased to be in evidence before the world, endued with endless vitality, and is operating at the present day in a wider field than its first professors ever dreamed of. We know how the religious systems of Greece and Rome crumbled to powder before the preaching of Jewish missionaries, men of little learning and of no social position; and how all that was best in the art and political life of the most civilised nations of antiquity has been made subservient to the spread of a religion which came from despised Judæa.

For not only does the world owe to Israel the religion

<sup>1</sup> Expositor, third series, vol. vi. p. 165.

of the Old Testament, which for the time was clearly distinguishable from the religions of contemporaneous nations, but to the religion of Israel we must trace back by direct descent the two greatest religions of succeeding times, Christianity and Mohammedanism. These two, with Buddhism, exhibit the highest attainments of the human race in the matter of religion; to them, as distinguished from merely local and national religions, has been given the name of Universal or World religions, because there is something in their character, as proved by their reception and spread, that fits them for peoples of various climes and of various race. Buddhism, no doubt, so far as numbers go, bulks more largely on the map of the world than Islam, yet as a factor in the great world's history it has not had so distinguished a career; it has been more a religion of thought than of action. And then, in its adaptation to the wants of man of every grade of civilisation, of every tribe and tongue, in the spirituality of its teaching and in its living power, Christianity, as the history of the world shows, occupies a place peculiarly its own.

It is a matter of history, which very few question, that both these religions are traceable directly to the religion of Israel.<sup>1</sup> There may be differences in the modes in which the influence is traced, and as to the precise amount of the dependence; but there can be no question that both Jesus and His apostles represented the faith of Abraham as the foundation of Christianity,<sup>2</sup> and that Mohammed appealed to the same spiritual ancestor, declaring that Abraham was neither a Jew nor a Christian, but a Muslim.<sup>3</sup> Thus two

<sup>1</sup> Kuenen, *National Religions and Universal Religions*, p. 56.

<sup>2</sup> Renan, *Hist. du Peuple d'Israel*, i., Pref. p. iii.

<sup>3</sup> The Koran, Sura ii 60.

religions, which have been intimately bound up with the political and social movements of the world, which have subjugated to themselves nations in the foremost rank of intelligence, which have proved themselves adapted to peoples of the most diverse birth and training, and which are at the present moment rivalling one another in the missionary zeal with which they are propagated, are directly founded upon the religion of old Israel, which never was anything more than the religion of a small and isolated people. Mohammed gave forth the Koran as "a warning to all creatures,"<sup>1</sup> and even in his lifetime sent a peremptory summons, prophet of Arabia as he was, to both the King of Persia and the Emperor of Constantinople, as well as to other minor potentates, to accept the religion of Islam. And the command of Jesus, in fulfilment of which His followers travelled in all directions and suffered every hardship, was: "Go ye into all the world, and make disciples of all nations." But though claiming direct descent from Israel's religion, they have this very point in sharp contrast to it, that they both very soon became universal religions, whereas it remained, and still remains, a religion of one people. We have instances of the religion of Israel coming under the view of other nations, as in the story of Jonah; and there were, no doubt, all along, foreign converts to the Hebrew faith. But never did the religion of Israel set about a propaganda; it was only in late times, when the faiths of the pagan world were dying away, that in sickness of heart the religiously minded of the Gentiles became proselytes to Judaism, and found it a stepping-stone to Christianity. Yet though the faith of Israel remained restricted to one race, not only did it by direct genealogy bring forth the two great missionary

<sup>1</sup> The Koran, Sura xxxviii. 87.

religions, but it gave unmistakable intimations that the truth which it contained would have world-wide extension. As if conscious, on the one hand, that they were proclaiming imperishable and universal truth, its writers gave the most glowing anticipations of a latter day of glory, when out of Zion should go forth the law, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem—the word which would lead all nations to walk in the light of the Lord. On the other hand, as if conscious that this truth was for the time held in too narrow bonds for acceptance by all nations, they abstained from pressing it upon the Gentiles, and were content to hold up the witness through the long years of waiting till the fulness of the time should come.

A consideration of such facts as these will have a certain influence on the mode in which we have to approach the religion of Israel, as will be indicated presently. They have been pointed out in the meantime as outstanding features of the subject, which invest the religious history of Israel with peculiar interest, and have always attracted the attention of thinkers and scholars in an uncommon degree. Just as in the New Testament history, where the life of Jesus has been felt to be the key-stone of the whole structure, writers of every shade of opinion have taken in hand to explain His influence on the succeeding development of Christianity; so in the field of Old Testament inquiry the greatest industry and the keenest ingenuity have been exercised in the attempt to account for the origin of that peculiarly religious cast of thought, which is so observable in the Hebrew literature. The very earliest attempts at Old Testament criticism had their point of departure in dogmatic considerations; and though for a time the labours of scholars assumed a more technically critical and literary aspect, the historical view

was never entirely lost sight of, and has of late again dominated the whole process of criticism. Even the works which profess to deal in the most technical manner with the Old Testament books have at their basis a theory of the Old Testament history; and of recent years we have had an increasing number of attempts to set forth the history in a more formal manner according to the principles of historical criticism, till we have almost as many Histories of Israel, and from as varied standpoints, as we have Lives of Jesus. It is not without reason that M. Renan—who, according to his own estimate, would have anticipated the discoveries of Darwin had he given himself in early life to the study of physical science,<sup>1</sup> and who now almost regrets that he had not devoted his lifetime to the history of Greek thought<sup>2</sup>—after working out for forty years a design of his earlier years to write 'The History of the Origins of Christianity,' closes his lifelong labour with the 'History of the People of Israel.'<sup>3</sup>

A religion which has had a history like this, and has attracted such attention from investigators, proves itself thereby to have more than common features, and cannot be approached with indifference. It is true that the most of the modern writers who have undertaken histories of Israel make great professions of impartiality and freedom from prejudice. Thus Kuenen in the opening of his 'Religion of Israel' says<sup>4</sup>: "Our standpoint is sketched in a single stroke, as it were, by the manner in which this work sees the light. It does not stand entirely alone, but is one of a number of monographs on 'the principal

<sup>1</sup> Souvenirs d'Enfance et de Jeunesse, p. 263.

<sup>2</sup> Hist. d'Israel, i., Pref. p. vi ff.

<sup>3</sup> See Note II.

<sup>4</sup> Eng. transl., vol. i. p. 5.

religions.' For us the Israelitish is one of these religions, nothing less, but also nothing more." This sounds exceedingly impartial, but he "doth protest too much, methinks." It may be questioned whether this is not an assuming of a standpoint from which it is impossible to give a sufficient account of the matter in hand. If it be indeed possible for one to regard all religions with perfect impartiality as so many phases of man's activity, we may expect from such a one an even-handed treatment of all; but such an impartiality is very apt to run into an equalising and levelling of all. At all events, for those who regard Christianity as occupying a peerless position among the "principal religions," and who have perceived the way in which it appeals to the religion of the Old Testament, it would be vain to pretend to have no prepossession in the matter. It is not necessary that the historian of a country should be a foreigner; and we prefer that a biographer should be one who was intimately acquainted and in sympathy with the person whose character is to be described. A handful of jewels are, from one point of view, just so many minerals; but we should think none the less of a lapidary whose eyes sparkled when he discovered among them "one pearl of great price." A joiner or cabinetmaker may say that from his standpoint three planks of wood are nothing less and nothing more, though one may be cut from the trunk and the others from large limbs of the same tree; and the anatomist may describe simply as so many "subjects" the dead bodies of a mother and her two daughters. From their standpoint they are right enough; the question is as to the standpoint. Religions are not so many things that may be laid on the bench or dissecting-table, so that learned men may write a series of

monographs upon them. They are not so many dry systems that can be circumscribed by "documents" and examined in books. No religion that has made its mark in the world can be thus appreciated. Account must be taken of the character of the founders and first teachers, as well as of the doctrines or systems they have left; and above all, the effects of the religion in the world must in each case be estimated, if we would know what the power of the religion is. Now the religion of Israel, by its *very position in the world*, has been "something more" in some sense than other religions. No other religion has had so striking an origin, so persistent an existence, and so wide an influence, if we take into account the two religions which have sprung from it. And the main question before a historian of Israel's religion is to make plain what the "something more" is. But to set out with a formula or equation that will represent the history of all religions,<sup>1</sup> and then apply it to the religion of Israel, is to prejudge the whole question in a most unscientific way, and to run in the teeth of historical fact. The science of comparative religion is legitimate, and most useful; but it becomes unscientific when it is a levelling science. Stade very properly<sup>2</sup> assigns to the religion of Israel not only a place among the principal religions, but the very first place,—the universal religion, in a much fuller sense than, *e.g.*, the philosophy of Greece or the law of Rome can claim to be universal. There is enough in the external history of Israel to prepare us for finding in it something very different from what other ancient religions exhibit. Is it impossible that there should be unique things in the world? Is it scientific to assert that there are not? We

<sup>1</sup> See Note III.

<sup>2</sup> Geschichte des Volkes Israel, vol. i. pp. 3, 4.

do not require at the outset to claim more for this religion than for other religions; but neither are we allowed to assume at the outset that it is no more nor better than others. What we have seen is sufficient at least to make us disposed to admit any features that can clearly be proved to exist, even though they have no counterpart in other ancient religions. Since it has, in later historic time, had a unique development, it need be no wonder if in its earlier course it was equally distinguished.

The history of Israel, then, resolves itself into a history of the religion; and the problem of the history is to explain the possession by this people of a faith and practice which distinguished them from their neighbours, and made them the religious teachers of the world. More particularly, it is to the earlier portion of the history that attention has to be turned, with the view of discovering, if possible, a starting-point which will form a sufficient explanation of all that followed.

If we take the modern orthodox Jew with his Talmud and traditions, we can give no account of him, nor understand his persistent adherence to peculiar customs and old-world beliefs, till we go back to the time of the formation of the Talmud itself. And as soon as we begin to investigate that process, we are compelled to go back to Ezra and his contemporaries, who gave the start to the complicated work of the scribes. And when we take up the books that tell us of the activity of Ezra and Nehemiah, and try to account for their influence, we find we are not only at the beginning of one course of development, but also at the end of a long anterior one. A great part of the writings of the Old Testament was by that time certainly in existence; the political history of the nation in its independence had run its course, and

its religious character had become well marked. In order to discover how all this was brought about, we are referred to an earlier period of their history. We turn to the great prophets who lived and wrote before the exile, and we find that, while their conceptions of the national religion are clear and positive, they do not regard the religion as a thing of their own day, nor claim to have reached it by their own study. The very earliest of the writing prophets to whose words we have access, appeal to a series of prophetic men before them who had taught the same truths, and presuppose for the nation of Israel a certain religious standing which rests on an antecedent history to which they pointedly and repeatedly refer. Attempting to make our way still farther back, we find the books which tell of the activity of Moses, the exodus from Egypt, and the consolidation of the people under an elaborate system of law; and we seem to have reached an absolute commencement. But even the Mosaic period rests on an earlier. Moses speaks in the name of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and the same books that tell of the work of the great lawgiver are full of references to the covenant and the promise made to Abraham. With Abraham the history of Israel as a people is made by the Old Testament writers to begin. From him the nation is made to descend by ordinary generation; the promise made to him is seen expanding in the succeeding history; and although the writers give an account of ages preceding, and carry their history back to the very origin of things, Abraham is made to stand at the watershed where the national life of Israel has its rise, the "nations" of the world being thereafter left out of account, or only referred to in connection with the fortunes of the chosen people.

What we want to determine is the origin of this peculiarly religious cast of the history of Israel, and the nature of the religious life which is represented as running this long uninterupted course. And in order to do this, it is of the utmost consequence to secure a firm standing-ground from which to estimate the precise course of events.