

MAX MULLER'S "RIG-VEDA."

Max Muller's long-expected translation of the sacred hymns of the Brahmins has at length been published in London by Trubner & Co. The Saturday Review gives the following notice of the work:—

The popular expositor of the Science of Language here returns to his first field, that in which his earliest honors were gained, and in which also he laid the foundations of that general knowledge of the structure and connection of languages for which he is now famous.

The hymns of the "Rig-Veda," if not the oldest, are certainly among the oldest writings known to mankind. The era of their production cannot be settled, and it is probable, nay, almost certain, that their composition was the work of long periods, perhaps even of many centuries. Thus much at least is known of their antiquity, that five or six centuries before the Christian era their language and their grammar had become so obsolete that critical treatises, known by the title of *pratikhyas*, were required to explain and illustrate their construction and signification. They thus go back to, or may even precede, the very dawn of history, and so they present to us some of the earliest outpourings of the human mind.

Since the period of the *pratikhyas* their contents have been guarded with the most scrupulous care, and "the text of the Veda is better authenticated and supported by a more perfect apparatus of criticism than the text of any Greek or Latin author." The importance, then, of these productions, as illustrating the early history of man, the development of thought, and the formation and affinity of languages, cannot be overrated.

But what are the Vedas, and the Rig-Veda in particular? The ordinary answer is, "The sacred books of the Brahmins," and this is true; but how much does it cover? The Vedas are four in number, but the Rig is the great original, the fountain from which the contents of the others have been drawn and moulded into different forms for liturgical and sacrificial purposes. The Vedas, then, are the sacred books of the Brahmins; but it must not therefore be concluded that the Scriptures of the Hindoos, their laws and authorities in matters of religion. So distant is the period when these hymns were composed, so manifold have been the changes which have come over Hindu thought and feeling, that though some faint traces may be found in them of institutions which now exist, and of ceremonies still observed, the Hindu religion of the present time contains but very little that can be referred to those writings which are confessedly its basis.

It is not difficult to trace the progress of this divergence, through a succession of different schools of thought, and through various classes of writings. From age to age the differences have grown wider and wider, until at length it has come to this pass, that the great objects of Hindu worship are deities unknown to the Vedas; and although verses from these ancient books are still used at sacrifices and in ceremonies, they are recited by priests who have learned them orally, or from ritualistic manuals, but who have no real understanding of their language and meaning, and no knowledge of the books from which they are derived. Some few learned Brahmins are to be found here and there, who have made the Vedas their study, and have acquired a more or less extensive knowledge of their language and import; but they are few and far between, bearing perhaps a not much greater proportion to the whole than Sanskrit scholars do to the educated classes of England.

These facts lead us up to the otherwise startling statement that the Vedas are now more generally and far better understood in Europe than they are in India. In the consideration of the circumstances by which this result has been achieved will sufficiently account for it. When a knowledge of the Sanskrit language, and of the vast literary treasures which it contains, first broke upon the mind of Europe towards the close of the last century, great were the expectations excited, and active were the efforts made to obtain copies of the Vedas—those books which inquiring philosophers hoped would unveil many of the mysteries of religion, and prove the futility of much that was commonly believed. But they were not easily obtained. The few Brahmins who had a knowledge of them had also a reverence for them, a reverence which was only exceeded by the awe of those who, being ignorant of their contents, looked upon them with superstitious fear, and dreaded the imprecations passed upon the man who should disclose them. Some time thus elapsed before copies were obtained, and such was the mystery attaching to them that one of the Jesuit missionaries in India endeavored to improve the opportunity, and pave the way for Christianity, by forging a Sanskrit work to which he gave the name of the second or Yajur-Veda; and which, being translated into French, under the title *L'Eclaircissement*, deceived Voltaire, Coleridge, a Company's civilian, one of the earliest but one of the few of those who, being ignorant of their contents, looked upon them with superstitious fear, and dreaded the imprecations passed upon the man who should disclose them.

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Soon after the first volume of the text was published the late Professor Wilson undertook the work of translation, and in 1850 his first volume appeared. At the time of his death three volumes had been published, and a fourth has since been brought out, edited by Professor Cowell, of Cambridge. A translation of a large portion of the Rig is thus before the world, and besides the earlier translation of Rosen there is a French translation of a portion by Langlois, and a German one by Benfey, all independent of each other. It may, therefore, be asked, what need there is yet of another version? The question is one which it is not difficult to answer. Professor Wilson's knowledge had been acquired in India by study with Pandits, and he had in consequence a greater respect for native commentators than is felt among the scholars of Europe.

He took for his guide the Indian Eustathius, Sayana, and his translation gives the interpretation put upon the text by that commentator. Who, then, was this scholar, and what is his authority? Sayana was a scholar of great repute who lived in the south of India in the fourteenth century. He was thus quite a modern writer, very far removed from

the age in which the Vedas were compiled, and thoroughly imbued with the principles and feelings of modern Hinduism. Professor Wilson held that Sayana "undoubtedly had a knowledge of his text far beyond the pretensions of any European scholar, and must have been in possession, either through his own learning or that of his assistants, of all the interpretations which had been perpetuated by traditional teaching from the earliest times." Whatever may be the weight attached to these opinions—and that there is some weight in them will be readily admitted—still it was impossible that Sayana, or any other man, in his position, could have approached the study of these volumes free from all feeling and prejudice in respect of the religion in which he had been bred, and of which these writings were held to be the origin. That institutions of a later date did warp his judgment was most necessarily to be expected to show. Professor Muller admits that "Sayana's commentary was a *studium* for a scholar-like study of the Rig-Veda," in which opinion he is far more favorable to the scholar than some other European critics; but he goes on to say that "Sayana in many cases teaches us how the Veda ought not to be, rather than how it ought to be, understood." The bias with which Sayana approached his text will be sufficiently indicated by one example. In the Vedas mention is made of five sorts or classes of men, and the commentator unhesitatingly understands this as referring to the four great castes of Hindoos, and a fifth comprising the barbarians. The germ of the great institution of caste may lurk in this allusion to the various "sorts of men," but nothing is to be found in the hymns which distinctly indicates the existence of a recognized division of castes.

The author of the present volume sums up the merits of former translations very shortly in the following words:—"That of Sayana (Wilson) represents the tradition of India; that of Langlois is the invention but not the original, but the Rig is the great original, the fountain from which the contents of the others have been drawn and moulded into different forms for liturgical and sacrificial purposes. The Vedas, then, are the sacred books of the Brahmins; but it must not therefore be concluded that the Scriptures of the Hindoos, their laws and authorities in matters of religion. So distant is the period when these hymns were composed, so manifold have been the changes which have come over Hindu thought and feeling, that though some faint traces may be found in them of institutions which now exist, and of ceremonies still observed, the Hindu religion of the present time contains but very little that can be referred to those writings which are confessedly its basis.

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"Verse 7. That *parvata* (mountain) is used in the sense of *cloud*, without any further explanation, is clear from many passages, as 'Thou, Indra, hast cut this great broad cloud to pieces with thy lightning.' We actually find the words mixed up together, such as 'the under of the cloud.' In the *Edgah* books, rocks, said to have been fashioned out of Ymir's bones, are supposed to be intended for clouds. In old Norse the words *berg* and *rock*; may, the English word *cloud* itself has been identified with the Anglo-Saxon *clod*, rock."

To this it may be added that the mountains in the sky is an image familiar to most people. On the same verse there is another and more interesting note:—"On the subject of the sea it is to be taken for granted that the sea is the sea, and that the sea of the earliest cosmography of the Vedic Hindus, Sayana explains, 'They who make the clouds go and the winds upon the sea, situated to in this and the following verse, indicates more familiarity with the ocean than we should have expected from the traditional inland position of the early Hindus, and it has therefore been supposed that, even in passages like our own, *samudra* was meant for the sea, the waters above the firmament.' But although there are passages in the Rig-Veda which seem to indicate that the sea was taken to mean *ocean*, the text shows in many places that the number of passages, the clear and distinct ocean. There is one famous passage which proves that the Vedic poets who were supposed to have lived in the mountains, and that the rivers of the Punjab, had followed the greatest and most direct line of their rivers, the *Saraswati*, as far as the Indian coast. It is well known that, as early as the composition of the *Manu*, as possible as the river *Saraswati*, and that the river *Saraswati* is later than the Vedic age, and that at that time the waters of the *Saraswati* reached the sea. It can be proved that in the Vedic age the *Saraswati* was a river as large as the Nile, and that it was the outlet of the waters of the Punjab and the *Saraswati* to the sea. It is well known that, as early as the composition of the *Manu*, as possible as the river *Saraswati*, and that the river *Saraswati* is later than the Vedic age, and that at that time the waters of the *Saraswati* reached the sea. 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