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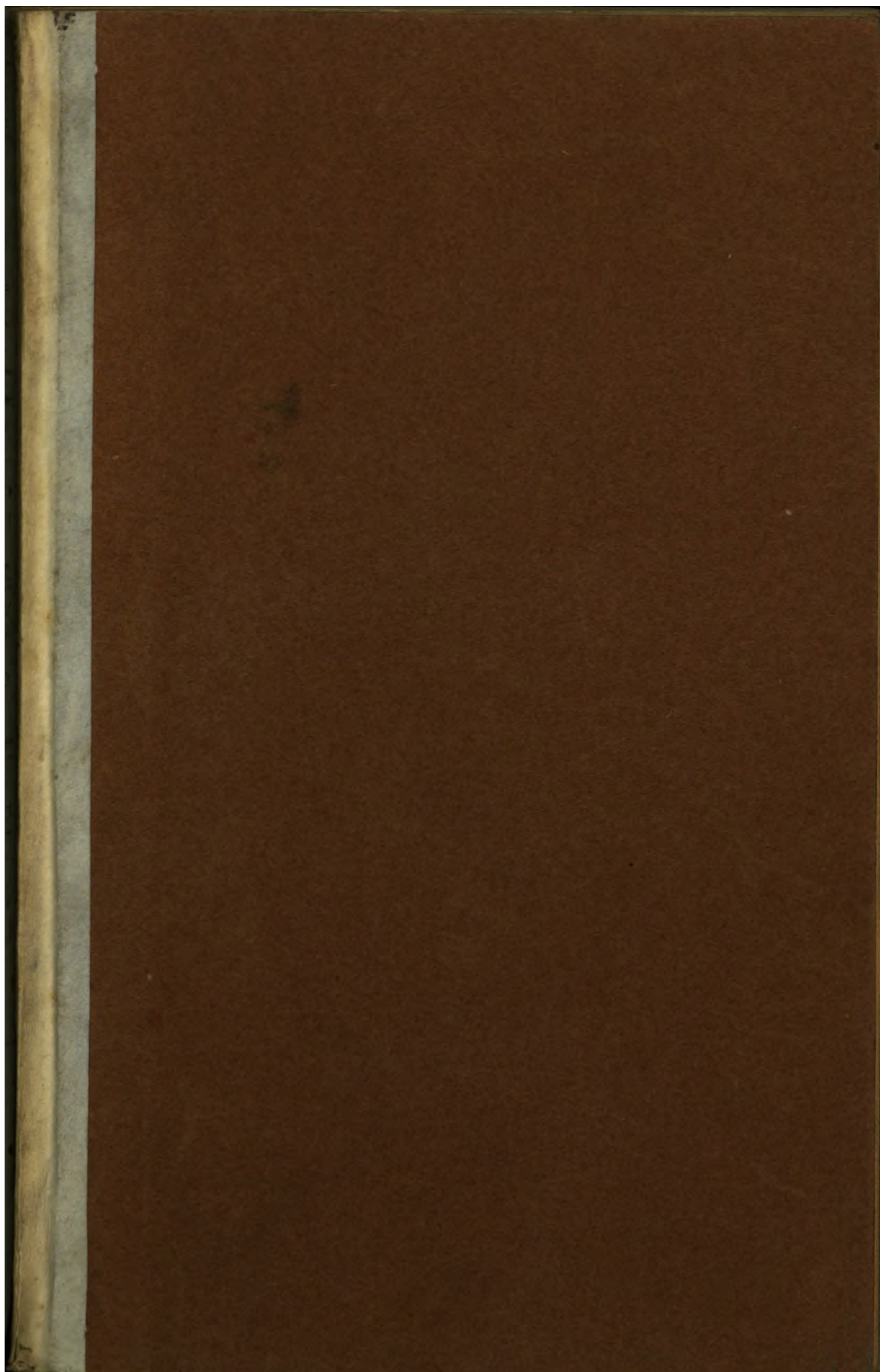
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UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD PRIZE POEM
ON A SACRED SUBJECT,
1857—1860.

THE WATERS OF BABYLON.

A PRIZE POEM

BY THE
REV. WILLIAM ALEXANDER, M.A.

BRASENOSE COLLEGE, RECTOR OF
CAMUS-JUXTA-MOURNE.

C'est là le mystère après lequel soupirent toutes les âmes
exilées, qui s'affligent sur les fleuves de Babylon, en se souvenant
de Sion. BOSSUET,



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THE WATERS OF BABYLON.



A DREAM of many waters.—I beheld,
And lo! a summer-night in Babylon,
And the great river, even Euphrates, wash'd
The land of Shinar, somewhat swifter now
When snows were melting on Armenian hills.
So by the hundred gates, lintel and post
All polish'd brass, the waves went washing on.
And on the flood the osier barges rode,
Shield-shaped, with earthen jars of palm-tree wine
Heap'd on the deck, and dark shapes stretch'd around.
League upon league, through tracts of wheat and corn,
That look'd on boundless plains like knightly hosts,
From helm to spur all glimmering with gold:
Through ranks of cedars, planted of the Lord
Round the lign-aloes, by the river's side:
Had they dropp'd down the flood. Then the tilth ceased



And banks, like mountains, rose on either hand,
Worthy of wonderment, the work of kings ;
And long canals stretched lighted by the moon,
And by the company of Chaldean stars :
Till there came houses, bastion'd fortresses
With lion-gonfalons, and a maze of streets—
And then the terraced pyramid of Bel,
And a vast palace, with its gardens hung
As by art magic in the spicèd air
Pencill'd, like purple islands fast asleep.
But evermore, by all the gates of brass ;
And where the barges floated down the stream :
And far along the sloping line of streets
Hung with a thousand cressets naphtha-lit :
And up among the garden-terraces ;
I heard the murmur of Euphrates flood.

So as I linger'd there, anon methought
The tide of life in that great city pent
Parted in twain, and took its separate way :
For one moved upward by the basalt wall,
A host of fierce-eyed men, with long black hair
Stream'd o'er white tunics, their dark faces wreath'd
With turbans white, in every hand a staff

Lily-carven, or with an eagle head.
And haughty girls in gilded cars swept on
To the Assyrian Aphrodite's fane,
With faces passion-flush'd or terror-pale,—
Red and white roses, rich, but soon to fade.
High on the palace-terraces above
There walk'd a king— * it made me fear to see
How like he was to those old sculptured kings,
Black-curl'd, black-bearded, full of state and woe.
Who sit the world out on their chairs of stone,
Staring for ever on the arrow-heads,
Wherein their bloody chronicles are writ.
There too I saw grey-beard astrologers,
Who read the silver horologue of heaven ;
And them, who shape the purpose shadow'd forth
In visions of the head upon the bed ;
And priests, who give attendance at the shrine
Well-strewn, that hath no image of its god,
Or at that other where he sits eterne,
Statue, and throne and pedestal of gold,
Grinning and glimmering through the frankincense.

From all these diverse went another way

* Daniel iv. 29.

Another concourse, gentler of regard.
 And as a widow, when her son is dead,
 Putteth her white lip down to the white shroud,
 And communeth a little while with death,
 So did the exiles commune with their Past.
 Psalms did they murmur, poesy of him,
 Shepherd, King, Saint, and penitent, who wore
 The golden grief that gave the golden song ;
 And later lamentations. For as when
 A wandering man, beside an ocean shore
 Belated, hears the waves upon the beach
 Discoursing drearily, and night hangs black
 On the black rocks, over the moaning sea ;—
 But suddenly there circles in the gloom
 A bird's voice wailing, like a soul in pain,
 Not dispossess'd of some immortal hope :
 So Jeremiah wail'd o'er Judah's path,
 Still round and round that strange old alphabet
 Weaving his long funereal chant of woe *,
 Still singing sweetly of the seventy years !

* In primis quatuor capitibus Lamentationum versus literis
 initialibus ordinem Alphabethi sequuntur, ita tamen, ut in capite
 tertio tres semper versus continui ab eadem litera incipient.
 Ackermann. Introd : in Libros Sacros.

I saw the exiles seek the river side,
There where the willows grey grew in the midst
Of Babylon, and hang their harps thereon.

Thus evermore in ear of either throng
Sounded the voice of waters. It went up
Over the city, where the forests hang,
Sleepily parleying in the charmed light
Round alabaster stairs, and curious flowers
From Media brought, and sunny steeps of Ind.
How different to each!—To these it swept
On with a din of Oriental war.
It sounded an alarm that waken'd up
Far echoes from far rivers all night long,
Angering the dragon in his lotos bed,
And bringing Persian kings unto the brink
Of the Choaspes with their silver jars.
Like a soothsayer it denounc'd a woe
On Tigris, telling the predestined time
When he should wail along a waste of bricks
Painted with pine-cones, and colossal bulls.
And like a divination it aroused
As it were gods, ascending from the earth,
Disquieting old kings to bring them up,

Uruk, and Ilgi, Iva, and the rest,
 Whose politic alliances, fierce wars,
 And love, and hate have perish'd like themselves,
 Forgotten in the city where they dwelt.

But to the other throng the river told
 Things written in their great old Hebrew book.
 It told how it had swept through Eden once,
 A bright chord of the fourfold river-lyre.
 And it had old-world songs of Abraham ;
 And him of Rehoboth who went to rule
 Among the dark eyed dukes on Seir's red rocks * ;
 And him of Pethor †, walking wrapped in thought.
 Anon it seem'd to sing. " My waves flow past
 " A dungeon, and one bound with chains of brass,
 " A king—a crownless, childless, eyeless ghost ‡ !
 " And on my surface lights and shadows play,
 " And moonlights quiver on the ripply lines,
 " The silver roll among my sighing reeds,
 " And the stars look into my silent depths.

* These are their dukes . . . and these are the kings that reigned in the land of Edom . . . Saul of Rehoboth by the river reigned. Genesis xxxvi. 19, 31, 37.

† Numbers xxii. 5.

‡ Zedekiah—See ii. Kings xxv. 7.

“ But on the awful river of his thoughts,
“ Black, as the waters of a mountain lake
“ What time the hills are powder’d white with snow ;
“ Sunlight, and moon, and stars, are not at all :
“ Dark, dark, all draped with shadows of his life.”

Then rose another tale—a legend wild *—
How the Ten Tribes, the banish’d of the Lord
Took counsel with themselves, that they would leave
The multitude of heathen, and fare forth
To a far country, where there never came
Oarsman or sail. A penitential host,
They enter’d the Euphrates by the ford.
And often hath the moon at midnight hung
Pillars of luminous silver o’er the wave,
But not a pillar half so broad and bright
As that which steer’d them on, while the Most High
Held still the flood ; and aye their way they took
Twice nine long months, until they reach’d the land
Arsareth—there the mountains gird them in,
And o’er the gleaming granite pass white clouds,
That sail from awful waterfalls, and catch

* See the legend of the journey of the ten tribes across the Euphrates to Arsareth in II. Esdras. Ch. xiii. 40.

And tear their silver fleeces on the pines.
And never hunter scaled those granite peaks,
And never wandering man hath heard the roar
Of cataracts soften'd through those folds of fir,
But a great temple hangs upon the hills,
And ever and anon rolls through its gates
A mighty music washing through the pines,
And silver trumps still snarl at the new moon ;
And all their life is sacrament and psalm,
Vesper or festival, and holy deed.
There do they dwell, until the latter time,
When God Most High shall stay the springs again.

The waters changed their meaning. There came down
Some of the others to Euphrates' brink,
And much they question'd why those harps hung there,
Saying, 'Come, sing us one of Sion's songs' !
How shall they sing God's song in the strange land ?
For it is native of the Temple, laid,
Like a white flower on Moriah's breast ;
And it is not for Asia's sealike plain,
But for the shadows of the purple hills :
Not for the broad and even-pulsing stream,
But for the land, where Jordan passioneth

His poetry of waterfalls, night and day
Anger'd by cataracts, lulled by nightingales,
Wreath'd with white foam, and triumphing for ever,
That is to the Euphrates, as a saint
Before his coronation, with his soul
Full of sweet yearnings and of tears divine,
Is to some cold and passionless idol god
Imprison'd in his rigid marble lines.

Next, as from a far country there came one
Slow of gait, his garment travel-stain'd,*
And in his hand, methought, he held a scroll,
Written from right to left, Semitic-wise.
Then one said to him, 'wherefore art thou come?
And he, 'I come from him of Anathoth.'
Whereat, he bound a stone upon the scroll,
And flung it far away into the flood,
When suddenly a trumpet blast wax'd loud,
Against Chaldea rousing Ararat,
And Minni, and Ashkenaz, kingdoms old.
Yea, instantaneously a mighty voice
Of heav'n, and earth, and all that is therein,

* Seraiah—cf. Jeremiah, li. 59.

Sang over Babylon : and as far north
The ice-bound mariner looks up, and lo !
The sky is spann'd with the auroral arch,
And the heav'n, full of glory, blossometh
With light unspeakable—so now, methought,
The sky grew radiant up above my head
World upon world. And then I heard a song,
Angels, archangels, and the company
Of Heaven, chanting unto golden harps
With exultation, " Babylon the Great
Is fallen, fallen " ; and from earth below
Rose echo, " fallen, fallen " back again.
And then I thought that I could hear far-off
The cedars and the firs of Lebanon * ,
With a wind rustling all their odorous robes,
That shaped itself in long low syllables,
As if a happy thought went sighing through
Their dark-green halls, and sombre colonnades,
Saying, " no feller comes against us now.
Since they have laid thee low, O Babylon " !
And the great river sobb'd, " O Babylon " !
Till Hades' self was moved at his lament.

* Isaiah xiv.

I beheld gods, and demigods, and kings,
Like shadows upon unsubstantial thrones.
I saw the crowns upon their withered brows,
Like the thin circlet of the waning moon
Over a thin white cloud. Ranged were they all,
A royal consistory, row on row,
Sleeping their sleep. But now their ranks were stirred,
As the wan leaves, shrunken from red to white
—The chesnuts' ashes, or the beeches' fire—
Are stirr'd in heaps, and a shrill murmuring went
Among them, like a wailing of the birds.
And they look'd narrowly on one that came
Into their company, and laugh'd, and said,
“How art thou fallen, oh thou Morning star!
“For we are kings at least, and take our fill
“Of rest, each one in glory on his bed,
“Strewn with sweet odours, divers kinds of spice,
“But thou art as a wanderer in our land,
“Thy carcase, trodden under foot of men—
“Disrobed, disceptred, dropp'd with blood, discrown'd!”
Then heav'n and the abyss were mute once more,
And the curse fell upon broad walls, high gates,
Utterly broken, burned in the fire;
And the curse fell on garden-terraces,

Faded, all faded, like a golden cloud
And tumbled, like a cliff in heaps of stones ;
And the curse fell upon Euphrates last,
Fountain and flood, and all his sea dried up.

Yet other shapes and sounds came to me still.
I saw a fire dark-red in the fierce sky,
Three shadowy figures flitting to and fro ;
Far-off I heard their *Benedicite* *.
I saw a host, across the river's bed,
Trample right onward to a palace-gate,
Whence from a great feast fled a thousand lords
And dark sultanas, dress'd in white symars.
And in the hall there was a blaze of light
Round gold and silver cups of strange device,
And one mysterious figure, scarlet-robed †,
Waiting unmoved, and on the dais high
A king, the wine still red on his white lips.
And I beheld a barge upon the wave :
Lo ! at its helm there was a godlike form,

* The Song of the Three Children.

† Daniel v. 29

A glittering tiar above his kausia *.
 Sitting the centre of a light of gems,
 Shadow'd by silk-embroider'd sails, he steer'd
 His pinnace to the dyke Pallakopas,
 Keeping his royal court and state on deck,
 As he sailed down to see the pictured graves
 Of the old kings, that sleep world without end,
 Where shadows are the only moving things.
 And one kept court upon the deck as well,
 White-lipp'd, and grim, and stern, and that was Death !
 —And then a stately chamber, muffled round
 With golden curtains, rose beside the stream :
 And his face cover'd with a silken veil,
 Walk'd the Resch-Glutha † among aged men,
 Thin faces, pinch'd up foreheads, narrow hearts,
 Whereon the thoughts of God's eternal book
 Are stamp'd in petty legendary lore ‡,
 As the great waves with all their noble beat
 Carve out those feather'd lines along the strand.
 And last I thought Euphrates was dried up,

* See the account of Alexander's death in Mr. Grotes twelfth volume.

† The Prince of the Captivity.

‡ The Gemara, Mischna, and Talmud grew up among the Babylonian Jews.

And o'er his bed the kings of the Orient,
 Surging with war's full stream of clanging gold *,
 March'd to the battle of Almighty God †.

But on before me swept the moonlit stream,
 That had entranced me with his memories,
 —A thousand battles, and one burst of psalms—
 Rolling his waters to the Indian sea
 Beyond Balsara and Elana far,
 Nigh to two thousand miles from Ararat.
 And his full music took a finer tone,
 And sang me something of "a gentler stream ‡"
 That rolls for ever to another shore,
 Whereof our God Himself is the sole sea,
 And Christ's dear love the pulsing of the tide,
 And His sweet Spirit is the breathing wind.
 Something it chanted too of exiled men
 On the sad bank of that strange river, Life,
 Hanging the harp of their deep heart-desires

* πολλῶ ρεύματι—

χρυσου καναχῆς.

Soph. Antig. 130.

† Apoc. xvi. 13, 16.

‡ A gentler stream with gladness still

The city of our God shall fill. Ps. xliv. N. V.

To rest upon the willow of the Cross,
And longing for the everlasting hills,
Mount Sion and Jerusalem of God.
And then I thought I knelt, and kneeling heard
Nothing—save only the long wash of waves,
And one sweet psalm that sobb'd for evermore.



