ZWINGLI;

OR,

THE RISE OF THE REFORMATION IN SWITZERLAND.

A LIFE OF THE REFORMER,

WITH SOME NOTICES OF HIS TIME AND CONTEMPORARIES,

BY

R. CHRISTOFFEL,

PASTOR OF THE REFORMED CHURCH, WINTERSINGEN, SWITZERLAND.

TRANSLATED FROM THE GERMAN,

BY

JOHN COCHRAN, Esq.

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FIRST SECTION.

HULDREICH ZWINGLI’S BOYHOOD AND SCHOOL-TIME.

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“Yea, I have loved thee with an everlasting love; therefore with loving kindness have I drawn thee.”—Jer. xxxi. 3.

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1. Zwingli’s Parentage and Birthplace.

At the Eastern extremity of the pleasant valley of Toggenburg, at an almost Alpine height, lies the village of Wildhaus. A simple dwelling, that stands on a green meadow to the right of the highway, recalls to the mind of the traveller, as he passes through this mountain valley, the memory of a great man. For in this plain but cheerful-looking house stood the cradle of Zwingli, the Reformer, a man by whose agency God caused the light of His glorious gospel once more to arise in new splendour over a world darkened by human invention and by sin. In the latter half of the fifteenth century, there lived here, begirt by a numer­ous flock of children, a respectable and pious couple, Huldreich Zwingli and Margaritha, whose maiden name was Meili. The confidence and esteem which Zwingli, the father, enjoyed among his fellow-villagers had raised him to the office of head or am­mann of the community. This mark of their confidence they conferred upon him as soon as, in the gradual development of a freer constitution, they had wrung from the manor of the land, the Abbot of St Gall, the right of choosing their judges, their ammann, and even the parson himself. In its ecclesiastical rela­tions, Wildhaus had formerly stood in filial dependence on Gams; but, at the expressed wish of the inhabitants, it had been raised to the position of an independent community, and the first par­son they elected, in the exercise of their new rights, was the bro­ther of the ammann, Bartholomæus Zwingli. He was afterwards, from 1487 till 1513, parson and dean at Wesen, at the outlet of the Wallen Lake.

The mother of Zwingli had also a brother an ecclesiastic, John Meili, from 1510 till 1523 abbot of the cloister of Fischingen, in the canton of Thurgau. The inhabitants of Wildhaus had been from time immemorial known as a cheerful, merry, song-loving people The natural character of their coun­try made them shepherds. In the first days of May, as soon as the mountains put on their coats of green, the cattle is driven up with the harmonious clangour of bells, to the higher pastures, and ever higher and higher a part of the inhabitants continue to ascend, till, at the end of July, the loftiest Alp is reached. The youngsters, who are left at home during this summer time, to attend to the affairs of the house, and to gather in the hay for provender to the cattle during winter, haste on the Sundays up the steep sides of the mountain to celebrate with their com­panions, who are tending the flocks, gladsome pastoral sports, in which the joyous note of song mixes itself with the simple tone of the Alpine horn. When winter extends its domain from the icy summits, the shepherds drive their flocks downwards in the direction of the winter stalls. This simple-hearted peasantry spend the winter evenings in rude hamlets, dimly lit by a tal­low candle, but the dreary time is lightened by the joyous voice of song or the pleasant tone of some musical instrument, for rare it is to find a cottage in which some of the inmates at least cannot handle an instrument. The Ammann Zwingli had meadows and alps, and he and his family shared the calling and the joys of his fellow-villagers. On the 1st of January 1484, his spouse presented him with a son, who received from his paternal uncle, Parson Bartholomæus, the rite of baptism, and the name of his father. Young Huldreich had seven brothers and two sisters. He appears to have been from an early age distinguished for the liveliness of his disposition, and the quickness of his parts, so that the eyes of his parents and his two spiritual uncles rested on him with satisfaction and full of hope. It was the desire of their hearts that he should be a priest, as his father’s brother and his mother’s brother were. The mind of the boy Zwingli received its first intellectual nourishment in his father’s house, and in the long winter evenings, when his father related, in the circle of his family and more intimate associates, stories from Swiss history, showing his attentive auditors how their native valley of Toggenburg had acquired greater and yet greater freedom, and how its inhabitants had secured themselves in the possession of it, by allying themselves with the bold confederates who rolled back from their mountain steeps the hosts of Charles the Bold. Tales of this sort fell like sparks of living fire on the soul of young Huldreich, and in the age of his manhood they burst forth into an ardent love of home and native country. The boy often, too, hung on the lips of his pious grandmother, as she stirred his piety by the relation of legendary tales and biblical stories. But, most of all, the language in which God speaks to the inhabitants of the mountain regions moved his young spirit “I have often thought, in my simplicity,” writes his friend Oswald Myconius, “that from these sublime heights, which stretch up towards heaven, he has taken something heavenly and divine.” When the thunder rolls through the gorges of the mountains, and leaps from crag to crag with crashing roar, then it is as if we heard anew the voice of the Lord God proclaiming, “I am the Almighty God, walk before me, and be thou perfect” When in the dawn of morning the icy mountains glow in light divine, so that a sea of fire seems to surround all their tops, it is as if “the Lord God of Hosts treadeth upon the high places of the earth,”[[1]](#footnote-1) and as if the border of His garment of light had transfigured the hills. It is then that, with reverential awe, we feel as if the cry came to us also which pierced to the ear of Isaiah, “Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord of Hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

Here, under the magnificent impressions of a mountain world and their wonders, there awoke in the breast of young Zwingli the first awful sense of the grandeur and majesty of God, which after­wards filled his whole soul, and armed him with intrepidity in the great conflict with the powers of darkness. In the solitude of the mountains, broken only by the bells of his pasturing flocks, the reflective boy mused on the wisdom of God which reveals itself in all creatures. An echo of this deep contemplation of nature, which occupied his harmless youth, we find in a work which, in the ripeness of manhood, he composed on “The Pro­vidence of God.”[[3]](#footnote-3) “Do not,” says he in this treatise, “even the animals which belong to the genus of mice proclaim the wisdom and providence of God? When, for example, the hedgehog car­ries so dexterously into his hole a quantity of fruit on his prickles, rolling himself round on it, and forking it—or when the marmot sets one of his number as a watch on an eminence, that by its whistle it may give warning at the right time of the approach of danger, to those who are running about and working, gathering together the softest hay, one making a waggon of the other, this one lying on its back, allowing itself to be loaded on belly and breast with hay, which it catches with its feet, and holds fast, that seizing his fellow, which has let himself be made a hurdle of, by the tail, and carrying him with the booty to the store­house, which work the animals perform that they may pass the winter in sleep—or when the squirrel draws a piece of wood to the bankwith its mouth, and ferries across a river as if in a canoe, its upright tail serving it instead of a sail—what voice, what language can so highly exalt the divine wisdom as the acts of these animals do which belong to the lowest order of intelli­gence? Nay, do not even the things without sense and intelli­gence manifest that the power, goodness, the renewing and sus­taining energy of God is present with them? The earth, for ex­ample, the mother of all, shuts never ruthlessly her rich treasures within herself; she heeds not the wounds made on her by spade and share. The dew, the rain, the rivers moisten, restore, quicken within her that which had been brought to a standstill in growth by drought, and its after-thriving testifies wondrously of the divine power. The mountains, too, these awkward, rude, inert masses, that give to the earth, as the bones to the flesh, solidity, form, and consistency, that render impossible, or at least difficult, the passage from one place to another, which, although heavier than the earth itself, yet soar far above it, and never sink, do they not pro­claim the imperishable might of Jehovah, and speak forth the whole volume of His majesty? In these works of God we be­hold proofs of the existence of that divine power which sustains them all in being, not less than in Man himself.”

2. Zwingli at the Schools of Basle and Berne.

On young Huldreich’s reaching his eighth or ninth year, his father resolved to take him to his uncle at Wesen, and commit the boy to the charge of this relative. The way to Wesen led father and son over the green heights of the Ammon, from whose summit young Zwingli for the first time looked abroad upon the wide world, now, as it were, unrolled before his eye. Well might the glance of the future apostle of the truth from this summit sweep full of boding meaning to the valley of Glarus, to the woody heights of Einsiedeln, and to the lovely shores of the lake of Zurich, at each and all of which places, he afterwards, in full trust in the God, who laid the foundation of the hills, waged the glorious war for the faith once delivered to the saints. The dean of Wesen loved his brother’s child as his own son, and sent him to the public school to receive the first rudiments of his education. When the knowledge of his master at this semi­nary, as soon happened, no longer met the demands of the ready-witted pupil, his uncle took care to have him sent to Basle, and placed there under the charge of his friend, George Binzli. Binzli was a learned man, who, at the same time, possessed a mild disposition and a warm heart. Here, too, the rapid pro­gress of the boy speedily outran the capabilities of the master. Young Huldreich was especially clever in the disputations which were then common, as well in the lower as in the higher schools, excelling in these all his class-fellows. His musical talents, too, began to develop themselves in an extraordinary degree, and to excite universal admiration. The faithful teacher, per­ceiving that his school would no longer avail for his precocious scholar, sent him home, with a recommendation that he might be sent to a seminary better correspondent with the attainments he had made. At that time, Henry Woelflin (Lupulus), at Berne, taught the dead languages with great applause. The Ammann of Wildhaus and the Dean of Wesen resolved to send the boy thither. Lupulus was deeply read in the Greek and Roman classics, and in ancient history; he had also made a journey to the Holy Sepulchre, and, by personal observation, had gained a knowledge of Italy, Greece, and Palestine. The history of his native country, too, he had investigated with diligence, and he had sung with enthusiasm the life of the pious hermit Nicolaus von der Fluee. Under his tuition Zwingli was introduced to an acquaintance with the Roman orators and poets, and at the direction of this teacher he began to exercise his poetic talent in attempts in verse, after the models of the great Latin poets. The Dominican monks, who in Berne as well as in other places, strove in rivalry, by means lawful as well as unlawful, with the Franciscans, for the superior veneration of the people, had their attention turned to the sharp-witted boy with the surprising musical talents, and sought to win him for their order. With this design, they in­duced him to enter their cloister, and live in it, till he should reach the age that might permit him to become a member of their order. But the eye of God watched over the lad, and pre­served him from the snares of these corrupted monks. His father and uncle heard of the danger which impended over young Huldreich, and they recalled him home, to send him elsewhere.

3. Zwingli at the High Schools of Vienna and Basle.

Zwingli had now attained a development of understanding, and an extent of learning which fitted him to attend the High School. At the advice of his uncle, the celebrated High School of Vienna, which had obtained, under the Emperor Maximilian I., an increase of renown, was selected. Here he formed the acquaintance of two intelligent youths from his own country, both of whom, at a later period, had their brows encircled with the poetic wreath, by the hand of the Emperor, and acquired great fame as men of learning. Joachim von Watt, called Vadian, son of a rich merchant of St. Gall, was the one; Henry Loreti, called Glareanus, a peasant’s son from Mollis, in the canton of Glarus, was the other. The three Swiss youths, united to each other in the bonds of a close friendship, devoted them­selves with unwearied assiduity, and distinguished success, to the investigation of the sciences, then dignified with the name of philosophy; but above all, and with especial predilection, to the study of the Roman classics. Two Suabian youths studied along with them at Vienna, who were also closely connected with the young Swiss, John Heigerlin, the son of a smith at Leutkirch, hence called Smith or Faber, and John Mayer von Enk, gene­rally surnamed Eck. Both of these ranked afterwards amongst the most virulent enemies of the Reformation

Zwingli, after having laid in, during about two years study at Vienna, rich stores of intellectual wealth, was called home by his father about the year 1502. The desire to prosecute his studies, and also to apply the results of his industry, impelled him, shortly after, to proceed to Basle. Arrived there, he became teacher in the school of St Martin, and, with the best success, introduced the youth who attended the school to the knowledge of Latin. At the same time, he attended himself the prelections of the High School. Myconius writes, in reference to his studies at this period:—“He studied philosophy here with more ex­actness than ever, and pursued into all their refinements the idle, hair-splitting sophistries of the schoolmen (sophists), with no other intention than that, if ever he should come to close quarters with him, he might know his enemy, and beat him with his own weapons. He diversified his more serious studies by indulging in pleasantry and wit among his friends, for he had indeed great gaiety of spirit, and his discourse overflowed with wit and learning.” To the number of his friends also at this period, belonged Wolfgang Fabricius Capito, a native of Hagenau, in Alsace, of whom we shall afterwards hear more. But in regard to a teacher here, the Lord, whose eye had watched over his youth so faithfully, and whose hand had led him thus far so wisely, ordered things well for him in this respect also. He here found an instructor suited to his necessities, one who, instead of conducting him to the barren steppes of school-wisdom, which only feeds the common mind with vanity, while it incites the ingenious to ridicule the folly of its lessons, led him to the ever­green pastures of heavenly wisdom, as they are revealed in the Word of God. Thomas Wittenbach, a native of Bil, in Switzer­land, had studied at Tuebingen, where he delivered, afterwards, prelections in the High School, and came in 1505 to Basle. To a profound knowledge of the Latin and Greek languages, and the works contained in them, this eminent man added that of a deep acquaintance with Holy Scripture. Out of the barren deserts of school-wisdom, destitute of all water, it was the delight of this excellent man to lead his pupils to the living sources of God’s Word\* and teach them to draw water from thence for themselves and their flocks. It was in the light of God’s Word that he saw and felt beforehand what at a later period, was loudly proclaimed by others, “*The time is not far distant,*” said he, with prophetic wisdom, *“when the scholastic theology will be swept away, and the old doctrine of the Church established in its room, on the foundation of God's Word. Absolution is a Romish cheat; the death of Christ is the only payment for our sins?*” Such a seed-corn as this, found in the heart of Zwingli, so receptive of the true, a soil in which it struck its roots vigorously, shot up strongly, and bore noble fruit at an after-day.

It was at the feet of Wittenbach that Zwingli met with a youth, just then entering his twenty-third year, with whom he formed a covenant of friendship that lasted till death. Leo Jud, son of a priest of Rappoldswyl, in Alsace, was the diminutive, sickly, mild, but bold and intrepid youth who shared with Zwingli a like love for truth and for music. After hard study, the recreation of the two friends was vocal and instrumental music. Leo poured forth a fine treble, at the same time that he struck the tymbal, while Zwingli, who had so well cultivated his musical talents that he could handle any of the then known instruments with equal skill and ease, played an accompaniment. Their sojourn together, however, was not long now. Soon the hour struck which parted the friends from each other till they should meet again with ripened powers, and with chosen armour from God’s Word, to wage together God’s battle in Zurich. Leo Jud be­came, soon after, parson at St Pilt, in Alsace.

Zwingli, who remained at Basle, was honoured with the de­gree of Magister, a title which he accepted more out of deference to the prejudices of men, who weigh the learning by the title, than from any sense of its intrinsic worth. He at no period made use of the degree, being wont to say, “One is our Master, even Christ.” The period of his studies had now reached its termination. He received this year a call to be parson at Glarus, being elected by the free votes of the community, and he accepted it. He entered on his new sphere of usefulness with the glad consciousness within him that he had well employed the season of preparation. God had preserved him against gross declensions, despite the general wickedness and corruptions of the time. “I acknowledge myself,” are his words, “to be a great sinner before God, but I have not lived immorally, and on no occasion has discipline been exercised upon me.” With a heart overflowing with gratitude for the divine guidance, he exclaimed, “God has granted me, from the age of boyhood, to devote myself to the acquirement of knowledge, human and divine.” Not yet being consecrated to the priesthood, he went to Constance to receive the consecration. On his return he preached at Rapperschwyl, on the Lake of Zurich, his first sermon, and he for the first time performed mass at Wildhaus, his native town. The community of Glarus had, in the free exercise of their right of election, chosen the young magister as their parson. Before, however, Zwingli could enter on his sacred office, he was des­tined to have a painful personal experience of the system of cor­ruption under which his native country groaned. Henry Gœldli, the descendant of an aristocratical house, at this time Master of the Horse to the Pope, and a boon-companion of his Holiness, appeared with a papal letter of investiture for the place, although he was already in the possession of several livings. The com­munity of Glarus maintained their right of election with success; yet Zwingli was obliged to indemnify the papal intruder with a sum of money, for renouncing claims that were totally groundless.

1. Amos iv. 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Isaiah vi. 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. De Providentia Dei. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)