

The Parables of Zechariah.

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I.—INTRODUCTORY.

I. *The Time*.—It is a great help in the study of any prophecy when we have the means of bringing clearly before our minds the period and the circumstances to which it was addressed. Indeed, it is by the impossibility of doing so in many cases that the prophetic parts of Scripture are rendered so difficult and unreadable to the common man. They refer to periods of history which are obscurely known, or unknown altogether; and the reader, finding them crowded with allusions to events and names of which he knows nothing, soon wearies of stumbling on through darkness, only relieved by occasional and doubtful gleams of intelligibility. But when the events are known, the prophetic messages fit into them, and peculiarities of phraseology are not very difficult to master.

In the case of Zechariah, we are in the happy position of knowing the date when his prophecies were uttered almost to a day,¹ and we possess fairly ample materials for picturing to ourselves the state of the country at the time. The first six chapters of the Book of Ezra are a historical delineation of the events in the midst of which Zechariah moved, and of the problems to the solution of which his prophetic activity was directed. The Book of Haggai also furnishes a valuable supplement to our information, because Haggai and Zechariah were a pair of prophets, who worked together at the same time and for the same objects. Thus we read in Ezra v. 1: "Then the prophets, Haggai the prophet, and Zechariah the son of Iddo, prophesied unto the Jews that were in Judah and Jerusalem in the name of the Lord God of Israel."

The time was immediately after the return from the Babylonian Exile. In that deliverance both Haggai and Zechariah shared. It was a great time. It had seemed, when the nation was carried away into Babylon, as if their history had come to an end. For their capital, with its glorious temple, was left behind, a mass of charred and shapeless ruins, and new occupants—some sent from the East by their conquerors, others their ancient enemies in the neighbouring countries—

¹ 520 B.C. ought to be remembered as his date.

instantly pounced upon the territory which they were compelled to evacuate. "Dead nations," says the proverb, "never rise again;" and in this case it seemed to be certain of fulfilment. In Babylon they felt themselves like prisoners shut up in a dungeon, for the captivity was enforced by a jealous and powerful hand. Yet the proverb was not to be fulfilled. One thing had not died—the love and promise of Jehovah. As He had found a way to bring the chosen people out of Egypt, so He opened the door of their prison-house and brought them out of Babylon. Cyrus, the conqueror of Babylon, was moved to favour them, and granted them permission to return to their own land and rebuild Jerusalem.

The bewildered joy which this caused is preserved in imperishable freshness in the psalm which begins, "When the Lord turned again the captivity of Zion, we were like them that dream. Then was our mouth filled with laughter, and our tongue with singing. Then said they among the heathen, Jehovah hath done great things for them. Jehovah hath done great things for us; whereof we are glad." It seemed to them a new exodus; and the resemblance was emphasized by the fact that, before they could reach their destination, they had, like their fathers when leaving Egypt, to traverse a great and terrible wilderness. The desert between Babylon and Palestine actually took four months to cross, and it was then infested, as it is at this day, by hordes of banditti. But the dangers were swallowed up in joy as they turned their backs on Babylon and their faces to Jerusalem.

The chief contrast between the new exodus and the old was the sparseness of its numbers. The exodus from Egypt numbered hundreds of thousands, but that from Babylon less than fifty thousand. Yet this small community was the narrow bridge over which the destiny of Israel and the promises of God were to pass to their fulfilment in Christ and the Christian Church. As the exiles left Babylon, they were well aware that they were carrying with them the sacred fire of a great history. Symbolic of this were the vessels and instruments of their temple, to the number of over

five thousand, which had been carried to Babylon by their conquerors, but had now been restored, and were borne in the heart of their caravan; and their primary aim, when they should reach their destination, was to locate these in the restored temple. Indeed, the rebuilding of the temple is described in the record of the time as the object of their journey: "Then rose up the chief of the fathers of Judah and Benjamin, and the priests, and the Levites, with all them whose spirit God had raised, to go up to build the house of the Lord, which is in Jerusalem" (Ezra i. 5).

The journey across the desert was successfully completed; and as soon as they arrived they set up an altar for burnt-offerings in the temple area, from which the smoke could daily be seen ascending to heaven, the symbol of the nation's life.

Very soon, however, the everlasting gulf between ideal and reality began to reveal itself. The beautiful hopes and aspirations of the community were assailed on every side with opposition and obstruction, and even their primary purpose was forgotten amidst the base necessities of existence. Those who had occupied the land in their absence were not glad to see the rightful owners coming back to turn them out, and they gave endless trouble, not less by open offers of assistance than by secret efforts to counterwork their schemes. The old enemies of Israel did not relish being pushed back within their own frontiers, and were ever ready to take advantage of any opportunity of revenge. The returned exiles had their own fields to secure and cultivate; shelter had to be provided for their families; and the thousand immediate necessities of existence had to be attended to.

The consequence was that the vision which had inspired them before they left Babylon slowly died out in the light of common day. Public duty was postponed to private convenience. Year followed year without a single stone being laid on the foundations of the temple that had been begun. Haggai accuses them of being absorbed in the erection of their own "ceiled houses," while the house of God lay in ruins.

Of course such a state of things could not continue without moral deterioration. An ideal cannot be abandoned or a plain duty neglected without the loss of self-respect; and the broad way, once entered upon, inclines rapidly downwards. Moral looseness appeared in various forms,

and the whole community lay under a sense of guilt. Nor were signs wanting of the Divine displeasure. "I smote you," says Jehovah in Haggai, "with blasting and with mildew and with hail in all the labours of your hands" (ii. 17). And again, "Ye have sown much, and bring in little: ye eat, and ye have not enough; ye drink, but ye are not filled with drink; ye clothe you, but there is none warm; and he that earneth wages earneth wages to put it into a bag with holes" (i. 6).

Sixteen years passed in this unsatisfactory way, and it looked as if the demoralised community were to waste away, and the hopes of Israel to perish for ever. But at the critical moment Jehovah bestowed on the community the priceless gift of the two prophets, Haggai and Zechariah, who rebuked the backsliding of their fellow-countrymen, blew the smoking flax of their energies into flame, and saved their country's destiny.

II. *The Prophet.*—Haggai is supposed to have been an elderly man, but Zechariah was a young man; so that in their united labours there was a fine combination of youth and age.

That Zechariah was young may be inferred from the fact that Iddo, his grandfather, came up from Babylon along with him (Neh. xii. 4). That his own father, Berechiah (Zech. i. 1), was dead, may also perhaps be a fair inference from the fact that in Ezra v. 1 he is called simply the son of Iddo. But the youthfulness of the prophet is stamped on his fresh and imaginative pages, which breathe the determination and hopefulness of a heart that has not yet learned the evil patience and prudence of advancing years.

Perhaps it is a sign of youth that the very first word of his prophecy is a warning against imitation of the fathers. Youth has a clear eye for the imperfections of its predecessors; its golden age is in the future; and it thinks that the world can easily be made better. The first prophecy of Zechariah (i. 1-6), which is perhaps to be looked upon more as an account of his own call to the prophetic office than as a message to be delivered on any particular occasion, shows that he had been thoroughly penetrated with a sense of the unworthy part the generation was playing. They were doing as their fathers had done, who had brought down on their own heads the Divine retribution, and, by grasping at their own interests

instead of putting God's glory in the front, had ultimately lost everything in the destruction of their country. For God's righteousness will not be tampered with; men may come and men may go, but it does not change with the times; it will not conform to men's taste or convenience; only, if they conform to it, will its almighty force be their protection.

This introductory prophecy would lead us to expect in Zechariah a prophet of the Amos type—a stern and severe denouncer of sin and vindicator of God's righteousness. But the subsequent book is not denunciatory. Here and there, indeed, it lays hold with terrific force of the conscience; but its prevailing tone is compassionate and encouraging. Zechariah possessed, in no inconsiderable degree, the tender and passionate love for Israel, reverence for its place in the heart of God, and faith in its destiny, which lend such unspeakable lyric fervour and sublimity to the second half of Isaiah. Not that *fervet immensusque ruit profundo ore* like Isaiah; for his literary style, as we shall see immediately, is totally different. But, like Isaiah, he had heard God say, "Comfort ye, comfort ye My people;" and with the same faith he refused to despair of his nation's future, even in the most discouraging circumstances.

It is pleasant to remember that he was not merely "as a very lovely song of one that hath a pleasant voice, and can play well on an instrument," but a practical reformer. Haggai and he succeeded in ousting the torpid spirit of their countrymen; and the wall of the city actually rose to the music of their prophesying, as we read in Ezra: "And the elders of the Jews builded, and they prospered through the prophesying of Haggai the prophet and Zechariah the son of Iddo. And they builded and finished it, according to the commandment of the God of Israel."

III. *The Book.*—The Book of Zechariah, as we now possess it, consists of fourteen chapters; it is the longest of the Minor Prophets. Of these chapters the first eight bear directly on the events which have been described. But the last six seem to have been written at a different time; they refer to events very difficult to identify; and hence they are extremely obscure. So unlike are they to the first eight chapters, that it has been questioned whether they are really from the same hand.

This is not one of the numerous suggestions of

a like kind first started by criticism in recent times. It goes much farther back, and has a very respectable origin. In one of the Gospels a prophecy from the second half of Zechariah is quoted, but it is attributed by the Evangelist, according to the best manuscripts, to Jeremiah (Matt. xxvii. 9). Naturally this was a stone of stumbling; and learned men had to consider how they were to account for what seemed a misquotation on the part of St. Matthew. Noticing the great contrast between the last six chapters of Zechariah and the first eight, they propounded the theory that these closing chapters are not Zechariah's, though by some accident they have become mixed up with his prophecies, but belong to a far earlier time; and that the Evangelist was quite right in attributing his quotation to Jeremiah.

This theory was first propounded in England more than two hundred and fifty years ago, and it was adopted by champions of orthodoxy, intent on defending the accuracy of St. Matthew.¹ But the stone, once set a-rolling, has not been easily brought to rest. The theory passed into the critical schools of the Continent, and there it underwent modification, till the common view came to be that these last six chapters were due to two authors—one as old as Isaiah, the other of the age of Jeremiah. It was maintained with the utmost confidence that they were written in the grand style of earlier prophecy, and could not be as late as Zechariah. In recent years, however, opinion has again changed; and by some of the more recent critics they are brought down more than two hundred years after Zechariah; for at present the fashion in criticism is to float everything at all detachable from a fixed date as far as possible down the stream. To show how widely doctors differ on the subject, it may be mentioned that one book of criticism of the first rank, published last year, fixes the date in the third century B.C.,² and another, published this year, attributes part to the eighth and part to the sixth century.³

Differences of opinion so wide will probably suggest to an unsophisticated mind the doubt whether criteria exist for a decision; and it may also

¹ Mede (1638), Hammond, Whiston, etc. See Farrar, *The Minor Prophets*.

² Cornill, *Einleitung in das Alte Testament*. Wellhausen says that he has never doubted the late date (*Die Kleinen Propheten*, p. 172).

³ König, *Einleitung in das Alte Testament*.

suggest a wholesome scepticism in other cases. It is not to be forgotten that many of the fairest minds, and among them the author of the fullest commentary on this prophet,¹ still attribute the whole book to Zechariah. To us at present the question is the less important, because the part of the prophecy with which this series of papers is to deal lies wholly within the chapters which all agree to be from the hand of Zechariah. Only we cannot illustrate the thought of the prophet with the same confidence from the later chapters as from the earlier.

IV. *The Parables.*—Turning to the eight chapters which, without controversy, are from the pen of Zechariah, we find in them first an introductory prophecy, occupying the first six verses of the first chapter, to which I have already referred as perhaps describing his call to the prophetic office. Then in chapters vii. and viii. we find matter not different from that of other prophets. But in the rest of the book (strictly from i. 7 to vi. 8) we have something peculiar, which is to be the subject of the present course of study.

This long section consists of eight pieces, in which Zechariah developed a new species of literature.² They are a succession of vividly conceived and brightly painted scenes, in each of which some message for the time is conveyed, while in all put together the entire situation with which the prophet had to deal is exhausted. They are the work of a mind poetically endowed, though in some cases the effort of imagination is far higher and more complex than in others. They may be compared to the efforts of an artist who expresses some complex conception in a series of detached pictures, or to a poem like

¹ Dr. C. H. H. Wright.

² "Der Schöpfer einer neuen Art prophetischer Gesichte"—Ewald, *Die Propheten des Alten Bundes*, iii. 187.

"Maud," in which a connected story is told in detached lyrics. Perhaps the more proper name for them would be visions, though what are called the visions of other prophets are not like them. I have ventured to call them parables—a name not perhaps entirely satisfactory, because a definition which might suit our Lord's parables would not fit them; though I do wish to suggest that Zechariah possessed, in considerable measure, the pictorial power which lends so imperishable a charm to our Lord's teaching. But I am falling back on the older notion of a parable as a dark saying—a statement which contains a meaning different from that which meets the ear—a literary form in which the truth is half revealed and half concealed. The pictures of Zechariah are attractive in themselves; but, after we have clearly taken in the picture, we have to search for the spiritual meaning behind it.

As we shall see, the parables are arranged in admirable order. The first three deal with the dangers and fears of the community arising from external enemies; the next four with internal weaknesses and defects, and the last reverts to the prospects of the community among its neighbours, when its diseases shall have been healed. Thus, as has been said, the whole situation is exhausted.

But what, let us again ask, is the situation? It is that of people possessed of an ideal, which has been given them by God, to be the torch to guide them to high endeavour; but they are letting it go, partly because temptations from without are too strong for them, and partly because of internal failure, due to the frittering away of faith and aspiration by the insistence of small necessities. Is not this a situation like enough our own to make us interested in it? The prophet's message drove away the fears and half-heartedness of his contemporaries, and enabled them to achieve their task; and it may still have in it the virtue necessary to perform the same service for us.

The Sympathy of Christ.

HEBREWS iv. 15.

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SURELY our religion is divine: it is so charged with blessing to men. Is it not God only, He who made us in all the varying wonder of glory and weakness which is our nature, who could see

so clearly our deepest needs, and give them so complete and rich satisfaction? For what do we more need than an all-knowing, perfect sympathy in our infirmities?