

A Study of Jeremiah's Use (xviii. 1-17) of the Figure of the Potter.

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THE figure of the Potter is of frequent occurrence in Scripture, but is by no means always used to convey the same lesson. If the more minute modifications are overlooked, its usages may be arranged under two principal heads. In every case the power of the potter over the clay is emphasised. But while some passages stop with that fact—that the potter's power is absolute, without measure or limit; others teach distinctly that the potter is not ruled by his fancy or caprice, or by any momentary or arbitrary impulse, but that the exercise of his power is itself determined by some quality or fitness within the clay. The former lesson is most frequent in Isaiah and Paul, although it is not confined to them (*cf.* Job x. 8-13). In both parts of Isaiah the figure in this sense constantly occurs, with a variety of moral precepts deduced from it (*cf.* xxix. 16, xlv. 9, lxiv. 8, *et al.*). And when St. Paul wanted to indicate the folly of man's disputing with God, he wrote, "Hath not the potter power over the clay, of the same lump to make one vessel unto honour, and another unto dishonour?" (Rom. ix. 20, 21). That is the most obvious meaning of the figure, which may be found in almost every literature. Sitting at his frame, the potter can do with the clay what he likes; and as the fancy takes him, can mould a pitcher or a rose-bowl. He at his wheel is the symbol of power; the clay, of helplessness and necessary submission.

The thoroughness of Jeremiah's belief in this first lesson, although he does not appropriate this figure to its expression, is evidenced throughout his prophecy (*cf.* xviii. 6). In i. 5, the truth of Jehovah's absolute rights over man is set forth in an even more unqualified way. And nowhere does the prophet hesitate in his ascription to God of complete control over man, or to man of the obligation of submissive and full obedience. But according to him, that is not a complete account of the relation either of God to man, or of man to God. And in this chapter he uses the figure of the potter to show, on the one hand, that the potter's power is not exercised arbitrarily; and, on the other, that its exercise is determined, and even in some sense conditioned, by the clay itself. That truth, on its two sides, is the principal lesson of this paragraph, suggested by its symbolism, and receiving more forcible utterance as the figure fails to restrain the prophet's indignation against sin.

1. With regard to the figure, it is in the particulars of the fourth verse that Jeremiah's use of it differs from that of most other scriptural writers.

Bidden by God, he went down to a potter's workshop, possibly in the valley of Hinnom, where clay seems to have been worked from time immemorial. There he saw a vessel that was being made, "marred in the hand of the potter." It is not an unfamiliar occurrence. Sometimes the fault is the potter's, due to such causes as the presence of grit on his fingers, or a lack of skill in revolving his wheel; and sometimes the cause is in the clay itself, which has not been washed and kneaded to uniform consistency and fineness. Here the whole of the context shows that the last-named cause alone was contemplated by the prophet. And when the potter saw that the clay he was dealing with would not answer the purpose he had in view, he crushed it down into a shapeless heap of mud, began anew, and made it into "another vessel." In other words, the potter's treatment of the clay depends upon his knowledge or discovery of its capabilities. Or, dropping the figure, God does not always carry out His first design with a man, and any change of design on His part is determined by some adequate cause, which is always to be found in the man himself—in the way in which he exercises his freedom of will, or in the attitude in which he puts himself towards conscience and duty and truth. The plastic skill and power of the great Potter, in themselves immeasurable and without limit, do yet depend for their direction, if not for their application, upon the clay.

2. That truth is in the Old Testament an especial favourite of Jeremiah's, and in this single paragraph he is not contented with the dubious form it assumes in the figure, but recurs to it once and again afterwards. The fourteenth verse, which is unintelligible enough in the Authorised Version, is thus rendered by the Revisers, "Shall the snow of Lebanon fail from the rock of the field, or shall the cold waters that come down from afar be dried up?" And when that is compared with the preceding verse, it becomes evident that the prophet wanted to point a contrast between the steadfastness of the phenomena and laws of Nature, and the apparent fickleness of those of morals. To the one the eternal will of God, which knows no change, is central; to the other, the uncertain will of man. And hence "the virgin of Israel" can manage sometimes to do "a very horrible thing"; though the snow of Lebanon never fails, and the springs that it feeds are never dry. That is almost the sole use that Jeremiah makes of illustrations from Nature throughout his prophecy. Whenever he

refers to it, almost without exception, he is thinking of its consistency and order (*cf.* vv. 22, 24, viii. 7, xiii. 23, xxxiii. 20, *et al.*). According to him, the constraint of God is ever upon the so-called powers of Nature, but never in the same sense upon the spirit of man. The only power in the universe, not completely subject to the rule of God, but permitted to rebel against Him and to check and alter His purposes, is man's personality or will. To that extent the Potter renounces his power over the clay, and the clay is allowed to determine the design of the Potter.

3. The same truth is put in a third way in the section, shut in by the seventh verse and the tenth—one of those interesting passages in which the word "repent" is placed upon the lips of Jehovah. Sometimes, as in Gen. vi. 6, the word seems to imply a certain feeling of regret, which it is difficult to harmonise with the qualities that necessarily enter into the conception of a God. In those cases the best that can be said is, perhaps, that God is accommodating Himself to man, revealing Himself according to human modes of thought and speech. But here (vers. 8 and 10) there is no emotional element in the word, which appears to denote nothing more than a change of purpose on the part of God in regard to man. And the meaning evidently is that neither God's threats nor His promises are absolute, in the sense that they are incapable of diversion or of change. But men can actually, by their choice of evil or carelessness concerning right, frustrate God's purposes of grace, just as by penitence and self-reform they can avert a doom that is impending. That is the word of the Lord by others than Jeremiah (*cf.* Ezek. xviii. 20-24). It is in accordance with the teaching of the New Testament, with the teaching of reason, and with the fundamental conception of justice. There is no finality in God's design for a man, until the man's will has either frittered itself away, or hardened itself into invincibility. But by the attitude towards God into which men put themselves, they determine the pattern according to which His methods mould them, and every change of attitude on their part is quickly followed by its appropriate and necessary change of design.

And it is sometimes almost possible to see this process of a change in God's purposes taking place in the affairs of nations and in the careers of individuals. It is often said that through the whole history of the Jews there can be traced one great plan. But whilst that may be true enough of the history as a whole, the plan, if the history be taken in its separate periods and generations, is apt to look a little broken and particoloured,—much like a geological series, at one point deflected downwards, and not cropping up again until miles have been traversed. Concerning the Ninevites again, the record is, "God saw their works, that they

turned from their evil way, and God repented of the evil which He said He would do unto them, and He did it not." Jonah himself was designed by God to be a prophet, but the action of his own will made him a sacrifice to appease the sea, until, when he willed better things, God's plan for him changed back again. And Adam was made by God in His own likeness, and intended in some way of perfect innocency to reflect and reproduce on the earth the Divine glory. But because he exercised his will in sin, the spoilt clay was made into a very different vessel. And how easily every man can discover by reflection upon his own life moments in the past, when some evident change took place in the plan according to which the life was unfolding! Of such moments that of conversion is the most important, but by no means the only one. There have been periods of restlessness followed by periods of peace; long weeks during which the spirit was torn and in dismay, succeeded by a time when it seemed to rest quietly upon God: perhaps changes of the opposite kind—designs of grace and purity in the past, and now a manifest drifting of the spirit towards ruin. And thus in Scripture, in history, in human experience, there is cumulative evidence that God does not always carry out His first designs for men, but that those designs are sometimes changed on account of a change of will in the men themselves.

From such a truth it is an immediate inference, that the responsibility for a man's character rests substantially upon himself. God gives, in the conscience and by His spirit, a clear revelation of what is right, and in His Son a source of strength that is sufficient for every duty. He gives opportunities, allurements, warnings without number; and having given those, ceaselessly present with us, His part in the formation of character may be said to be done. The man has then to determine, by the action of his own will, whether the law of perfecting or the law of perdition shall work in him. It is a frequent fancy in our dulness, that the will is altogether too weak to be charged with such a responsibility. Paul thought in that way once, "O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from this body of death?" and was almost heart-broken until the Spirit of God showed him the means of deliverance,—"through Jesus Christ our Lord." And it is still true that the man who brings his weakness of will and all his moral failures to his Saviour, finds in Him forgiveness, and wisdom, and power, and everything else he needs to brace his spirit and make it pure. Even in Old Testament times, a Psalmist once sang, "I sought the Lord; and He heard me, and delivered me from all my fears;" and again, "The Lord is my strength and my shield; my heart trusted in Him, and I am helped." And that experience is repeated now ever the more readily in the case of a man who really fears God.