

Hebrew Prophecy and Modern Criticism.

BY THE REV. F. H. WOODS, B.D., LATE FELLOW OF ST. JOHN'S COLLEGE, OXFORD.

V.

(FIRST HALF.)

“There shall be abundance of corn in the earth upon the top of the mountains; the fruit thereof shall shake like Lebanon: and they of the city shall flourish like grass of the earth.”—Ps. lxxii. 16.

It is now time to take a general view of the great Messianic hope, which found its expression in the books of the Old Testament, and more especially in the Prophets. The most natural course, perhaps, would be first to arrange in order those prophecies which seem to speak of facts connected with the Christ of our four Gospels, and then to trace, if possible, the gradual growth of the Messianic conception. But such a method is beset with many practical difficulties. (1) The present state of biblical criticism does not permit us to draw such a chronological outline with sufficient exactness, and were we to take it from the present arrangement of Old Testament books and sections, it would be extremely misleading. (2) Such a method would not satisfy the needs of at least many a thoughtful inquirer. What he most wants to know is not—For how many facts related in the Gospels can I find, or seem to find, scattered predictions or allusions in the Old Testament? but this—What portraits do the prophets draw of the great Coming Age, and to what extent and in what ways were their expectations justified by Christ and Christianity? (3) To tear the so-considered Christian elements of prophecy out of their contexts and string them together for such a purpose, is to rob them in a great measure of their vitality and their beauty, and often to obscure their meaning. It was out of the present and temporal that the more distant and more spiritual grew, and we must realise and understand the former before we can fully appreciate the latter.

For these reasons I shall adopt what seems a more feasible and satisfactory plan. I shall attempt to collect some of those broader and more frequent features of prophecy which mainly contributed to form what has been, and is, the great hope of the Jewish nation. The prophets often compared themselves to watchmen. From their tower they looked out on the great world about them and beyond them. Below their feet lay the level plains, often dark, gloomy, monotonous. Beyond rose the

beautiful but hazy outline of the distant hills, tipped here and there, it might be, with the rosy tints of the coming dawn. But if we are to understand the prophet's landscape, we must not look too exclusively at the rays of distant heavenly light, but take also into our view the dark and gloomy foreground, which at times intercepted the brilliant future from their view. It is this double aspect of the prophet's mental view, this mixture of light and shade, which has given such very different impressions of their character and their work. They have been described by some as gloomy pessimists, by others as utopian optimists. Each statement expresses a truth. The age of the prophets was for the most part an age of moral and religious corruption, and also very usually one of impending disaster. To cry out against present wrongs, and foretell God's immediate judgments, was the first and most pressing part of their work, hence their pessimism; but there were very few who did not look beyond this darker prospect to some brighter future for their nation, which the purifying power of judgment should make possible. Herein lay their optimism.

But it is not with the present surroundings of the prophets, nor with the impending disasters of the immediate future that we have now to do. These changed with the special characters of the time. We have rather to consider those elements of hope which we find repeated under various aspects in different prophets, and which tended to pass into what we may call a sort of prophetic tradition. Among these, if what I have been saying is true, we shall hardly be surprised to find that material blessings occupy an important place. And it is to these that I purpose to confine myself in the present paper.

First among them we may place the fertility of the soil and agricultural prosperity. These naturally entered very largely into the national hope. The Jews were originally, it seems, a nation of small peasant proprietors. The land, at the

present day dry and sterile from want of water, was in biblical times proverbial for its fertility, "a land flowing with milk and honey." Near the coast were the extensive cornfields of the lowlands (*Shephelah*), behind on the higher lands the mountains of Ephraim were celebrated for their vines; and to the south were the rich pasture-lands of Judah. But the agricultural industry was waning in the age of the great prophets. Constant wars had too often devastated the country, and well-nigh paralysed agricultural enterprise. The crops, too, very frequently suffered from natural disasters, locusts, mildew, and drought. Moreover, the old hereditary system of land tenure was breaking down, even in the more conservative northern kingdom. The land was passing out of the old families into the hands of large mercenary-minded proprietors—men who, in the scathing language of the prophets, ground the face of the poor, and sold the needy for a pair of shoes.¹

In contrast to such a state of things, a time of unexampled, if not even miraculous, agricultural prosperity was foretold by almost every prophet in succession. In the Book of Amos, the herdsman of Tekoa, it is not surprising to find such a promise forming the most conspicuous feature of that one vision of national hope with which the book closes. "Behold, the days come, saith Jahweh, that the plowman shall overtake the reaper, and the treader of grapes him that soweth seed; and the mountains shall drop sweet wine, and all the hills shall melt."² But we should not have expected such promises of rural blessedness in the townsman and polished courtier, Isaiah. And yet we do find them frequently enough. Thus, in contrast to the famine which should be sent as a punishment for the luxury of the men and the immodest vanity of the women, he foretells a day when "the sprout of Jahweh shall be beautiful and glorious, and the fruit of the land excellent and comely for them that are escaped of Israel."³ Later on, in xxx. 23, 24, in the midst of that strange succession of Messianic hopes, which bursts upon our view so suddenly after the denunciations in the earlier part of the chapter, he draws a picture

of rural life, in which corn would be so abundant that even the oxen and young asses that ploughed the land would be fed on the very choicest meal.

The melancholy Jeremiah and the stern Ezekiel both find room for the same theme. Jeremiah, in the only complete picture which he draws of post-Captivity life, in ch. xxxi., foretells that the virgin daughter of Israel shall again plant vineyards upon the mountains of Samaria (ver. 5), and describes how the people in Zion "shall flow together unto the goodness of Jahweh, to the corn, and to the wine, and to the oil, and to the young of the flock and of the herd" (ver. 12). In a somewhat similar strain, Ezekiel promises to the land the fertility of Paradise: "I will multiply the fruit of the tree, and the increase of the field, that ye shall receive no more reproach of famine among the nations;" so that they that passed by would say, "This land that was desolate is become like the garden of Eden."⁴

The same thought is repeated by the deuterot Isaiah in ch. li. 3: "For Jahweh hath comforted Zion; He hath comforted all her waste places, and hath made her wilderness like Eden, and her desert like the garden of the Lord." But figures of this kind are so often employed by him metaphorically, that to press the literal meaning of the words would be, perhaps, to ignore the poetry of the passage. Yet it seems probable that a promise of natural productiveness is at least included. In ch. lxxv. 21, 22, one of the privileges of the "new heavens and the new earth" is that the people would be able to plant vineyards, and eat the fruit themselves, instead of its falling a prey to their enemies (cf. lxii. 8, 9). Finally, in the last age of Hebrew prophecy, the priestly prophet Malachi promises the richest agricultural blessings on the condition that men will give God the tithes which He claims: "Bring ye the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be meat in Mine house, and prove Me now herewith, saith Jahweh of hosts, if I will not open you the windows of heaven, and pour you out a blessing, that there shall not be room enough to receive it. And I will rebuke the devourer for your sakes, and he shall not destroy the fruits of your ground; neither shall your vine cast her fruit before the time in the field, saith Jahweh of hosts. And all nations shall call you happy: for ye shall be a delightful land, saith Jahweh of hosts."⁵ Many other examples of the

¹ Isa. iii. 15; Amos ii. 6.

² Amos ix. 13.

³ Isa. iv. 2. The word *צמח* has been here explained, as in Zech. iii. 8, of the Messianic King who was to sprout up from the royal house of David (cf. Isa. xi. 1). But the context makes it best to refer it to the crops of the soil regarded as Jahweh's possession.

⁴ Ezek. xxxvi. 30-35.

⁵ Mal. iii. 10-12.

kind might be added, if necessary. The point for which I am contending is not merely that the several prophets foretold at different periods future seasons of plenty, but that in almost every instance the promise is so blended with other Messianic thoughts, that it clearly formed an essential part of the prophet's great future hope.

A second common feature among the material blessings of the promised future is the enormous increase of the population. This was a hope which had its roots in the early history of the people. When Hosea foretold (i. 10) that "the number of the children of Israel" should be "as the sand of the sea, which cannot be measured nor numbered," he was but echoing the promise to Abraham in Gen. xxii. 17.¹ Other prophets express the same thought by various figures. Thus, *e.g.*, the deuter-Isaiah in ch. liv. 1-8 compares Jerusalem desolated during the Captivity to a barren woman, who is suddenly blessed with children: "Sing, O barren, thou that didst not bear; break forth into singing, and cry aloud, thou that didst not travail with child: for more are the children of the desolate than the children of the married wife, saith Jahweh." In Isa. xlix. 20, 21, there is a somewhat similar thought of a bereaved mother finding herself surrounded by children so numerous that their home is not sufficient for them.

These prophecies prepare us for the still bolder figure which describes the sudden springing up of the people in the redeemed Israel as a resurrection from the dead. The best-known example is the striking vision of the dry bones in Ezek. xxxvii. The prophet, it is true, himself apparently explains this of the revival of the people, who were dead and buried as it were in Babylon, into a new and vigorous life. "Then He said unto me, Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel: behold, they say, Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost: we are clean cut off. Therefore prophesy, and say unto them, Thus saith the Lord Jahweh: Behold, I will open your graves, and cause you to come up out of your graves, O my people, and I will bring you into the land of Israel."² But this last verse seems to imply some further meaning,

¹ According to Kuenen (*Hexateuch*, Eng. Trans. p. 244) it belongs to the eighth century, and is therefore about contemporary with Hosea; but even so it is probably based upon an earlier tradition; cf. xiii. 16.

² Ezek. xxxvii. 11, 12.

which is certainly suggested by the general character of the description. Great stress is laid, for example, on the fact that the bones are very many, and that when they are restored to life they become "an exceeding great army." It was as though the Captivity was to be entirely wiped out, and all those who had died in Babylon were to share with the survivors the new national life.

The same idea is expressed rather differently by the probably somewhat earlier prophet to whom we owe that unique prophecy, Isa. xxiv.-xxvii. In xxvi. 13-19 there is a strong contrast between the utter and hopeless destruction of Israel's enemies and the sudden increase of their own people. Then follows a description of the half-desperate yearnings of the people which should precede the fulfilment of this promise. They are compared to the agonising, but for a long while fruitless, birth-throes of a travailing woman. But suddenly the pains are over, and with one of those rapid transitions of thought so characteristic of these chapters, the prophet describes the upspringing of the dead of Israel. "Thy dead shall live, my dead bodies shall arise, Awake and sing, ye that dwell in the dust: for thy dew is as the dew of herbs, and the earth shall cast forth the dead."³ Many commentators take both these passages as conscious predictions of the resurrection of the body; and as far as the last passage is concerned, there is much to be said for this view. The promise in xxv. 8, "He hath swallowed up death for ever," is evidently part of the same prophecy. But even these words cannot be intended to express, what taken literally they imply, a universal resurrection; for they are followed in the very next paragraph by a woeful description of the destruction of the typical enemy Moab at God's hand. If a resurrection is intended in the 26th chapter, it is at least with two important limitations. (1) It is *expressly* confined to Israel. The foreign lords which had had dominion over them "are dead, . . . they shall not rise." (2) It is connected in the prophet's thought with some definite historical event, in all probability the Restoration which should follow the taking of Babylon (see xxv. 2).

³ Isa. xxvi. 19. Dr. Driver (*Isaiah and his Times*, p. 123) takes the first two clauses as a prayer, "Let thy dead live; let my dead bodies arise"; but this does not affect the general meaning of the passage.