

## ART. VII.—STUDIES ON ISAIAH—V.

## HOMILETIC HINTS.

1. THE first verse most probably applies to the whole prophecy—that is to say, *pace* the critics, to chaps. xl.-lxvi., as well as the rest. For the vision of the destruction of Babylon in the latter part of the book is treated from a point of view entirely Jewish.

“I greet you at the beginning of a great career, which yet must have had a long foreground somewhere for such a start.” So said Emerson to Walt Whitman at the outset of his literary activity.<sup>1</sup> Precisely the same may be said of the prophetic dispensation, the grandest period of which opens with Isaiah. For, as we have seen in our preliminary remarks, the religious system of which the prophets are the exponents has its roots deep in the history of the race. Israel, as well as Judah, had received a revelation which, for purely selfish reasons, it had cast aside and trodden underfoot. The whole force of this opening chapter is lost if we deny that the chosen people had received a God-given religion, to which it had proved unfaithful. Judah and Jerusalem were “children” who had “rebelled.” They had “forsaken” Jahveh their God, “despised the Holy One of Israel,” were “estranged and gone backward.” This, and this only, was the explanation of the misery, spoliation, and desolation they saw around them—the sad experiences of the past, the imminent danger which threatened them in the future. And this rebellion was not the neglect of mere external rites. The forms prescribed in the law of Moses were duly observed. The burnt-offerings still smoked on the altars; the fat was consumed as directed; the altar of incense still shed its perfumes around. The new moons and Sabbaths were duly kept; the solemn gatherings were inaugurated as usual. It was the moral principle which, in the Pentateuch as we (as well as they of Isaiah’s time) have it, was inextricably entwined with the ritual, that was neglected. The outward service, elaborate as it was, was duly rendered; but the hearts of the people were not clean. As it was in the beginning, even so it has been ever since. The history of the Christian Church has corresponded to that of the Jews. The external rites of our religion have ever commanded crowds of worshippers; but what has too often been lacking is the spirit of Christ. On the ordinances “Touch not, taste not, handle not,” we still lay, perhaps, undue stress; but, as Joshua reminded the Israelites, the “weightier matters of the law” are too often beyond our

<sup>1</sup> I quote from Robertson, “Early Religion of Israel,” p. 186.

strength.<sup>1</sup> The best service we can offer is but a distant approach to the "sanctification of the spirit."

2. We have a vivid picture here (vers. 7-9) of the desolation caused by an invading host. But we in this favoured country can have but little idea of the disorganization and distress caused by war, even when the invaders profess Christianity. How much worse it must have been in days when Christianity was unknown few of us are able to conceive. Historians, while they glorify the triumphs of their heroes, are apt to pass very lightly over the horrors which followed in their train. It was the Duke of Wellington who, when congratulated on his victories, remarked significantly, in reference to those horrors, that "there was only one thing worse than a victory, and that was a defeat." Of the social disorganization and moral degradation which a conquering army spreads abroad we may get an excellent idea in "Wallenstein's Lager," by Schiller, as well as of the helplessness of the down-trodden people in the presence of a brutal and domineering soldiery. Schiller knew only too well by his own experience what he was describing. A less lurid, but still a very definite, picture of the latter may be found in the "Conscrit," by Erckmann-Chatrion. Zola's "Débâcle," too, paints the horrors of a war in darker colours, but with a far less high-toned and sympathetic pen. It is only by resorting to such works of fiction that we shall find the information which will stir up our sluggish imaginations to comprehend the state to which disobedience and moral declension had brought a people who were destined to "sit"<sup>2</sup>—who even *had* sat—each man "under his own vine and his own fig-tree," with "none to make him afraid."<sup>3</sup>

3. From the very beginning of the Mosaic dispensation the moral law was closely intertwined with the ceremonial; but it was the special work of the prophets to point out the superiority of the former to the latter. From the days of Samuel to those of Malachi they enlarged on the comparative unimportance of positive precepts compared with righteousness, justice, and truth. But our fallen humanity continued to assert itself. When our Lord came, the rebukes of the prophets were as though they had not been uttered. The Pharisees and Scribes kept up their minute external observance of the law, but their hearts were full of bitterness, contempt, and pride, of ravening, extortion, and excess; while the Sadducees contented themselves with a light-hearted, latitudinarian, self-indulgent respectability. Even the testimony of Christ, combined as it has been with the gift of His Spirit to those who own Him as their Lord, has been given to

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<sup>1</sup> Josh. xxiv. 19.    <sup>2</sup> Mic. iv. 4.    <sup>3</sup> 1 Kings iv. 25.

a faithless and perverse generation. Man, even regenerate man, is tempted to "return to his vomit again, and the sow that was washed to her wallowing in the mire."<sup>1</sup>

So it was not long after Christianity was preached that men began to decline from the high ideal that their Master had set them. Cyprian tells us of the crimes with which the lives even of the confessors were stained.<sup>2</sup> Councils held to define the doctrines of the faith were disgraced by violence and sharp practice; Christians soon degenerated into persecutors; and by degrees the religion of the spirit became a hard and fast system of ordinances which reduced Christians, even as early as St. Augustine's time, to a worse condition than the Jews.<sup>3</sup> Since the Reformation the evil has been diminished to a certain extent. But our own time has seen a great recrudescence of the evil. Our Lord spoke strongly against the tendency to "teach for doctrines the commandments of men,"<sup>4</sup> and to "make the word of God of no effect by human traditions."<sup>5</sup> St. Paul denounces slavery to ordinances,<sup>6</sup> and reminds us that the kingdom of God "is not meat and drink, but righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost."<sup>7</sup> And yet a school has risen among us which sets what it calls "Catholic tradition" above the example and teaching of Christ and the custom of the Church in the Apostles' times; which unduly magnifies externals; makes attendance at religious ceremonies, and not the morals of the people, the test of the spiritual condition of a nation; and has led to our making statistics instead of the extent to which the lives of the people are leavened by the doctrine of Christ the test of religious progress. Have we not need still to listen to Isaiah's warning amid the many threatening signs of decay of faith and consequent declension in manners which we now see around us?

4. Ver. xvi. points to us the only way of escape from the dangers which beset us. Not only, observe, "wash you, make you clean, put away the evil of your doings from before Mine eyes," but "cease to do evil, learn to do well," and "seek justice, relieve the oppressed, judge the fatherless, plead for the widow." Some are quite content if they shed a few penitential tears during appointed seasons of humiliation of sin, and they thus deceive themselves and fall into divers temptations. But this is not Scripture repentance. The evil habits must be broken off; they must be replaced by good ones. Uprightness of life and transparency<sup>8</sup> of motive must

<sup>1</sup> 2 Pet. ii. 22.

<sup>2</sup> Ep. v. 3 (Oxford edition, xiv.).

<sup>3</sup> Preface to the Prayer-Book.

<sup>4</sup> Matt. xv. 9.

<sup>5</sup> Matt. xv. 6.

<sup>6</sup> Col. ii. 20.

<sup>7</sup> Rom. xiv. 17; cf. Col. ii. 16.

<sup>8</sup> *Ελικριετα* (1 Cor. v. 8; 2 Cor. i. 12 and ii. 17).

take the place of our untrustworthiness, evasion, and sailing near the wind; sympathy with the rights, the cares, the distresses of others. And if any one say, "This is beyond my powers," the answer is, "In your own strength it is, of course, impossible." But "*all* things are possible to him who is born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God."<sup>1</sup>

5. There is no need for despondency. Under the Law, as among the heathen before Christ, all effort seemed to end in failure. Under the Gospel there is steady progress towards the lost ideal. This is why the sternest denunciations of the Hebrew prophets always ended with words of hope. God will purge those whose "hands are full of blood" if they will but turn to Him. He will restore the condition of things which has passed away. Zion shall once more be the "city of righteousness, the faithful city." For the "Redeemer has come" to her. Henceforth we have but to cast ourselves upon His mercy, to listen to His voice, to trust in His power, to be guided by His Spirit, and the evil which "doth so easily beset us" will pass away. The very distresses which encompass us will work their own cure if we do but turn to the Great Physician in our need. We shall learn to be ashamed of the "oaks we have desired" and the "gardens which we have chosen"—that is, the ideals we have set up in our hearts instead of the example of Christ. The fire of the Divine wrath shall destroy what we have done apart from our Master, and shall "purify" us that we may be able to "offer Him the offering" of His own "righteousness," dwelling in, and reflected by, ourselves.<sup>2</sup>

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NOTE.—I had to hurry over the correction of my last two papers. A parenthesis has got wrong on p. 370, note. The parenthesis should end at "Isaiah," not at "xxxv." On p. 287 I ought to have written "found and maintain" instead of "found." On p. 288, Abner and Saul, of course, were not followers of David, though they were typical Hebrew warriors of the same stamp as David's followers. And in writing of Ittai the Gittite, I had overlooked 2 Sam. xv. 19, where Ittai is spoken of as a "stranger and an exile." Ittai and Uriah, as well as the Cherethites and the Pelethites, doubtless formed part of a band of trained foreign soldiers, who should supply the defects of the Israelites in military exercises. In the early part of the reign of Saul they evidently had neither discipline nor weapons. The Philistines had both. The Pelethites have been thought to be Philistines, and the Cherethites Cretans.

<sup>1</sup> John i. 13.

<sup>2</sup> Mal. iii. 4.