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## ART. II.—STUDIES ON ISAIAH.—III.

2. **E**GYPT.—The condition of Egypt need not detain us very long. The first, and in many ways the greatest and noblest, empire the world had ever seen had been reduced to a pitiable condition. Egypt proper in the time of Isaiah was split up into a number of small States, while the chiefs of the Soudan, called Cush or Ethiopia in the Old Testament, dominated Southern Egypt, having risen from a subordinate position to that of independent and powerful monarchs. The first of these was So, as he is called in Scripture, Shabaka according to the Egyptian monuments. With him Hoshea, the last King of Israel, endeavoured to form an alliance (2 Kings xvii. 4). But Egypt, or, rather, Ethiopia, proved, as was afterwards said by the Rabshakeh or chief of the officers of the Assyrian host (2 Kings xviii. 21; Isa. xxxvi. 6), a "bruised reed." And so Hezekiah found it. By this time Shabaka had been overthrown and reduced to subjection by Sargon of Assyria. Shabaka's son had been defeated in an attempt to throw off the Assyrian yoke, and had afterwards been defeated and slain by Taharka, or Tirhakah, the Cushite or Ethiopian king into relations with whom Hezekiah was proposing to enter. From a political point of view much might be said in favour of such a course. Tirhakah was virtual master of Egypt. But on this point the prophet Isaiah was of the same opinion as the Rabshakeh. Egypt was not in a position to resist the overwhelming might of Assyria. Repeatedly does the prophet rebuke those who, at a moment even of such imminent danger, would put their trust in the calculations of mere human policy (chap. xxx. 2-5, xxxi. 1). And his view was justified by the event. The history of Israel, the history of Egypt as related by Herodotus, the silence of the Assyrian monuments, all point in the same direction. Some "blast," some "rumour," some dire, inexplicable, and, save in the Scripture narrative, unexplained calamity, falls on the Assyrian monarch (Isa. xxxvii. 7).<sup>1</sup> His schemes against Egypt and Judah alike are suddenly and incomprehensibly frustrated, in spite of the overwhelming superiority of his resources and military skill. And, as the prophet predicted, he is forced to "return into his own land," where he "falls by the sword." Instead of labouring to explain away so extraordinary and unmistakable an intervention of Almighty power, it were surely wiser to adore Him who thus mightily displayed it. Whatever means He may

<sup>1</sup> Chronicles, it may be observed, so often charged with exaggeration, confines the destruction wrought by the angel to the "leaders and captains" and "mighty men of valour" (2 Chron. xxxii. 21).

have employed, in the hollow of whose hand all means lie hid, certain it is that no mere human contrivance can have achieved this result. Here, as often besides, the great Ruler of all has said to powerful monarchs and mighty conquerors: "Thus far shalt thou go, and no farther." *Flavit et dissipati sunt*. Not the might nor the counsel of Egypt wrought this great deliverance. They were but "shame" and "confusion" in God's sight. It was His mighty arm, once more, as often before, bared in defence of His people, which had delivered them from their enemies when all mere human resources were in vain.<sup>1</sup>

3. *Israel*.—The history of the Ten Tribes after their separation from their brethren is an instance of the fact that no nation can possibly maintain its existence apart from the abiding influence of religious truth. A further conclusion may be drawn from that history. It is worse to apostatize from revealed truth than never to have known it. The life of Jeroboam once ended, his dynasty came immediately to an end. Religious apostasy culminated in the moral degradation, first of the monarch, and then of the people. Moral degradation, here as always, brought instability, disunion, and disintegration in its train. No family retained the crown for more than four generations.<sup>2</sup> One great King, Jeroboam II., arose who cast a transient gleam of light on the declining history of his country. But at his death all was once more darkness. The stamp of decay was irretrievably imprinted on the people which had abandoned the worship of the true God, and had cut itself off from the appointed centre of that worship at Jerusalem.

What the condition of Israel before its destruction was we learn from the writings of the prophets Hosea and Amos. The former describes the abandonment by Israel of the religion given it by God as "whoredom"—a figure used very freely by the prophets.<sup>3</sup> This apostasy naturally leads to general idolatry (chap. xiii. 2). But this is by no means the whole of the prophet's indictment. He points to the moral retrogression involved in their unauthorized worship (chap. iv. 13). Society was disorganized. Law and order were in abeyance. Assassination was frequent. The worthless priests of the order of Jeroboam (1 Kings xii. 31; 2 Chron. xiii. 9) assembled in troops to commit murder and practise immorality on the way to Shechem (chap. vi. 9). Drunkenness and adultery are described

<sup>1</sup> The history of this period is well and carefully told by Dr. Sinker in the eighth, ninth, and tenth chapters of "Hezekiah and his Age" in Messrs. Eyre and Spottiswoode's Bible Students' Library.

<sup>2</sup> Zachariah, the son of Jeroboam II., reigned only six months.

<sup>3</sup> Chap. iv., especially vers. 6, 10-13.

as almost universal, and extend downwards from the royal palace (chap. vii. 4-7). Dishonesty, robbery, and oppression are as common (chaps. vii. 1, xii. 7). Amos bears witness to the same state of things. His prophecy (chap. i. 1) is chiefly directed against Israel, though Judah is sometimes mentioned. Oppression, injustice, incest of the most depraved kind, are, he tells us, systematically indulged in (chaps. ii. 7, v. 11). The Divine law is cynically and cruelly violated (chap. ii. 9; cf. Exod. xxii. 26). Luxury is widespread (chaps. iii. 12, 15; v. 11), and bears its natural fruit—unrestrained self-indulgence (chap. vi. 4-6). Though the law in some cases is superstitiously obeyed, the spirit of its enactments is utterly set aside (chap. viii. 5, 6). Such is the contemporary picture given us of the state of Israel. Criticism sees in it only the ordinary condition of the Semitic races of Palestine. In the days of Jeroboam I. the "evolution" of the later "ethic monotheism," we are given to understand, was "slowly" and "gradually" proceeding. The Churches both of the Old and New Covenant see in the history of Israel something more serious—the abandonment by a nation of its God. "The Lord rejected all the seed of Israel," we are told, "and afflicted them, and delivered them into the hands of spoilers, until He had cast them out of His sight. For He rent Israel from the house of David, and they made Jeroboam, the son of Nebat, king; and Jeroboam drove" (or drew away) "Israel from following the Lord, and made them sin a great sin. And the children of Israel walked in all the sins of Jeroboam which he did: they departed not from them; until the Lord removed Israel out of His sight, as He spake by the mouth of all His servants the prophets." Where recent criticism sees only an interpolation by a religious enthusiast, the reverent student of Scripture recognises the hand of one of the recognised "servants" of God, for to the prophets, as the Scriptures intimate, was the task given of recording the national history. So Israel was "carried away out of their own land to Assyria unto this day" (2 Kings xvii. 20-23). Is this history or fiction? Let the prophets Hosea, Amos, and Micah, whom even criticism admits to have been contemporary writers, answer the question. Israel "doth commit great whoredom, *departing from the Lord*" (Hos. i. 2). She "went after her lovers, and *forgot Me*, saith the Lord" (Hos. ii. 13). She "hath forgotten the law of her God" (Hos. iv. 6), and "played the harlot" (ver. 15). Her people "have wandered from Me" (Hos. vii. 13). The "law (Torah) written in ten thousand precepts" (Wellhausen would have us believe that a Torah is oral testimony only, and his followers tell us that it only consisted of four chapters in Exodus) is "counted

a strange thing" (Hos. viii. 12). God's people are "bent to *backsliding*" from Him (Hos. xi. 7). They have "transgressed against Him," and "have not returned to Him" (Amos iv. 4, 9, 10, 11). The worship at Bethel and at Gilgal (which seems by this time to have superseded the worship at Dan, lying as it did on the northern border of Israel, far away from the centres of national life) were instances of that transgression (Amos iv. 4, v. 4, 5). The "sin of Samaria" and the setting up (by Jeroboam, of course) of a god at Dan are further mentioned (Amos viii. 14). Micah writes in the same strain (chap. i. 5). The "statutes of Omri" and the "works of the house of Ahab" are contrasted with the law of the Lord, whose "righteous acts" were done in the sight of His people from the time when He led them up from Egypt (Mic. vi. 2, 4, 5, 16). What need can there be to quote further? No one can read the writings of these prophets with ordinary attention and not see that their language is quite incompatible with the idea of a "slow" or "gradual evolution" from heathenism to monotheistic religion, and is only explicable on the idea of a definite and wilful "backsliding" from the law of God.

4. *Judah*.—Although the same punishment ultimately fell on Judah which had fallen on Israel, and for the same cause—disobedience to the law of God—yet we discern a marked difference in some respects in the history of the two kingdoms. First we note that Israel's declension was immediate, that of Judah gradual. Indeed, the smaller kingdom, for a time at least, seemed—as was indeed natural—even to advance in religious fervour and, as a consequence, in prosperity. It was, be it remembered, but an insignificant portion of a whole by no means formidable, either in territory or population. But it was reinforced by a considerable immigration from the sister kingdom. It was therefore able from the first to contend with Israel on something like equal terms, an equality more nearly reached as the time went on. Moreover, with the exceptions of the feeble Jehoram and his brother Ahaziah, Judah enjoyed a succession of excellent monarchs until the reign of Ahaz. It was then that the declension began; and the corruption which then seized hold of the people was too deep-seated for Hezekiah, even with the inestimable advantage of Isaiah's influence behind him, to root out. It is needless to draw a picture of the moral and political condition of Judah from the reign of Ahaz onward. It corresponded, as the prophets we have cited testify, very closely to that of Israel. Hezekiah was doubtless deeply anxious to bring about a reformation (2 Kings xviii. 4-6; 2 Chron. xxix.-xxxi.), and his example and that of his court was unquestionably calculated to bring it about. But luxury and immorality, arrogance and violence, were too widely

spread to be eradicated. The masterly picture drawn by Isaiah in his first chapter, which could hardly have been true of any period of his life but the reign of Ahaz, needs no further explanation. We will defer our observations on the condition of Judah as there described till we comment on that chapter. But the allusion to the iniquity of Judah having affected the "head" and the "heart" (chap. i. 5) must certainly have referred to the government and the monarch himself. Neither Uzziah, Jotham, nor Hezekiah would have tolerated "princes" who were "rebellious" (against God, obviously) and "companions of thieves," though doubtless a great deal of local injustice was done in their reigns, as in England during the Middle Ages, of which neither the justest nor the ablest monarch could take cognizance. Nor will any other period fit in with the prophet's lament (chap. iii. 12) that "children" oppressed God's people, and "women ruled over them," a passage which most probably refers to harem intrigues, either under a capricious and passionate monarch, or under one who was imbecile enough to allow the children of a favourite sultana to dictate his actions.

The reign of Ahaz was doubtless, as has been already said, the turning-point in the history of Judah. The promise of the reigns of David and Solomon had not been fulfilled. Solomon's departure from the "statutes and judgments" handed down from the days of Moses had shattered his kingdom. The more distant portions of it, impelled by the desire of the powerful tribe of Ephraim to regain the ancient ascendancy of the house of the pious and capable Joseph, as well as by dissatisfaction with the burdens which Solomon's selfish magnificence imposed on his people, successfully revolted from his successor. Yet, as we have already seen, prosperity did not at once forsake the tiny kingdom which was all that remained to the house of David. The prophecy that the descendants of David should become rulers of a world-power might yet have been fulfilled. In those days of false religion and imperfect morality, all that was needed in order to found a vast empire was the manly virtue, the fidelity, and the self-devotion which only true religion could inspire. Here criticism once more goes astray. Instead of removing difficulties and reconciling contradictions, it has chosen for itself a destructive mission. It has torn the Mosaic institutions into fragments, and put them together again in a shape of its own. It has failed to see that the mission of Moses is a fact of the first rank in history. His conception of God is altogether unique. Other nations have formed more or less sublime conceptions of Him, and have connected with their ideas of Him more or fewer admirable

moral sentiments. But of *corporate* religion—of religion as cementing together a whole community—there is nothing outside the Bible. With the Israelite God was the Father and the Ruler of the race. He was not only an object of awe and adoration, but of confidence and love. He was no capricious being, like the gods of the heathen. They who would serve Him must cultivate mercy, justice, and truth. And faithfulness to Him on the part of His votaries involved faithfulness to one another. Had the Israelites set themselves to keep their law, they would not have displayed the fault of other nations—selfish greed on the part of the individual, leading to demoralization and disintegration. They would have *held together*, and by mutual fidelity, as well as by valour, justice, and self-control, would have achieved the conquest of the world.

If we need a proof of this, we find it in the history of David's reign. The king himself is no typical Eastern potentate, the unresisting slave of his own passions, the imperious master of all beside. He trembled before the prophet whose sublime task it was to proclaim the majesty of God's law. He made no attempt to deny that he had shamefully transgressed it. The warriors who followed him were bound together by mutual fidelity to the Lord and the Lord's anointed. Men like Abner; Saul (in his earlier days, before he became corrupted by vanity and love of popularity); Joab and Abishai (with all their faults); Benaiah and the rest of the "thirty"; gallant, honest, manly, self-sacrificing old Uriah; Ittai, with his touching fidelity<sup>1</sup>—these were men to whom ancient history presents no parallel. No people could have withstood the onset of hosts led by warriors such as these. As it was, they spread the empire of one who but a short time before was a persecuted fugitive from a distracted and down-trodden nation until it extended from the Euphrates to the border of Egypt. It might easily have spread further, had not luxury relaxed the fibre of the administration, and substituted, as it has so often done since, self-indulgence and ostentation in the place of frugality, public spirit, and the love of justice. A brilliant and cultivated voluptuary, by forgetting the duty of self-mastery which the law of God set before him, sowed the seeds of suspicion and of jealousy among his servants, and thus destroyed the splendid prospects which his father's virtues and patriotism had placed within his reach. Judah, in her turn, failed to keep the law which had been set before her

<sup>1</sup> If Uriah and Ittai were of foreign extraction, which is not by any means certain, they must have been naturalized Israelites. And it is plain that the command to exterminate the Canaanites, which we find in the Pentateuch, was confined to the period of Joshua's invasion.

(2 Kings xvii. 19). Therefore the empire of the world passed into other hands. It is true that the Assyrian power was not built on the foundation of a lofty morality, but on personal ambition and lust of power. It was cruel, rapacious, and unprincipled. But power which proceeds from warlike aggression has at least *some* moral characteristics which deserve respect. War cannot be waged without a measure of order, co-operation, discipline, self-command, self-devotion. There are lower depths of crime than the excesses, terrible as they are, committed by a conquering army. It is on the nations plunged in indolent and selfish voluptuousness, such as the inhabitants of Palestine were when Joshua's invasion took place,<sup>1</sup> that the hand of God has always lain most heavy.

As we have seen, however, a succession of virtuous princes arrested Judah's decay. Perhaps even the rebellion of Israel may have acted as a stimulus to the obedience of Judah. The chronicler records an enthusiastic oration by Abijah which seems to imply this (2 Chron. xiii. 4-12). There is no reason why we should reject it as unhistorical, and every reason why we should not do so. Asa and Jehoshaphat, however they may have come short of the high ideal of the prophetic writers to whom we owe the history of God's people, were actuated by the same motives of fidelity to God's revealed law. The prophets, we are told, rebuked them for their shortcomings, and the remonstrances of Jehu, the son of Hanani, produced an immediate effect on the mind of the latter king (2 Chron. xix. 2-10). The ill-starred alliance with Ahab's family brought the misfortune on Judah of two irreligious monarchs. But the evil of their influence does not yet appear to have gone very deep. The reigns of Jehoash and Amaziah were on the whole favourable to the fortunes of Judah. And the chronicler (2 Chron. xxvi.) credits Azariah (or Uzziah) with having largely increased the internal resources and external authority of his kingdom. Nor does the chronicler appear to display that habit of romancing here which the modern critic, dominated by his theory, would have us believe is his special characteristic. For the inscriptions of Pul (Tiglath-pileser III.) mention Azariah of Judæa, but while Hamath in Syria is subdued, and Rezin of Damascus and Menahem of Israel become tributaries, the King of Judah is neither represented to have been overthrown in battle nor to have purchased a precarious liberty by making his submission. Jotham seems to have maintained the position in which his father left him. But though his rule was one of more

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<sup>1</sup> With the exception of Tyre and Sidon, which had substituted commercial for warlike enterprise.

than usual fidelity to the Divine law (2 Chron. xxvii. 2), we have a hint of future dangers in the conduct of his people (*ibid.*). And so, when the wicked Ahaz succeeded his pious father, apostasy from the Lord and the influence of the idolatrous and immoral cults of Palestine at once overran the country like a flood.

The question will be asked—indeed, it is asked, and very generally asked in these days—In what, if the foregoing account of the history be correct, does the history of Judah differ from that of Israel? To that we answer with St. Paul: “Much, every way.” It is true that Judah’s obedience to the Divine law did but protract its resistance to the might of heathendom a few short years. But we must not forget that, while Israel was so completely absorbed by the nations among which it was placed when carried away captive that all trace of her existence has been lost, the Jewish race still subsists, and the Jewish law is still observed as far as circumstances permit, after the lapse of nearly 2,500 years. This unique fact must compel every scientific historical inquirer to admit a unique character in the institutions endowed with so astounding an amount of vitality.<sup>1</sup> Nor does the destruction, first of Jewish ascendancy and afterwards of the very existence of Judæa as an independent nation, invalidate the claim for a Divine origin of Jewish religious institutions. Not in vain was God’s arm so often stretched out to preserve His people. For while one object of the Mosaic law was to lay the foundations of religion and sound morality, another part of the Divine purpose was to indicate to man that he was unable of his own strength to fulfil the precepts which God had given him. And so the sad story of declension from Ahaz to Zedekiah, though arrested by the remonstrances of the prophets and the efforts of such devoted monarchs as Hezekiah and Josiah, does but point us to the conclusion, by no means obscurely hinted at in the writings of the prophets themselves, that it is only by the Righteousness of Another, absorbed into and made part of our being through the influence of faith, that the law of God can be fulfilled in us, and that thus, and thus only, can mankind advance step by step to its ultimate goal.

J. J. LIAS.

*(To be continued.)*

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<sup>1</sup> We cannot here discuss the point; but the fact that the restoration of Judæa as an independent nationality has been prophesied, and that this restoration is more probable at this moment than ever it was, must suggest a doubt whether any reasonable man can be satisfied with a purely naturalistic explanation of the contents of the prophetic writings