

ART. II.—STUDIES ON ISAIAH.

5. *THE Curse of Discord* (chap. viii. 9-15).—Faction (see last paper) naturally leads to discord and confusion. The people of the land (ix. 19-21), under dishonest leadership, are led to rob and oppress their brethren. And therefore, whether the dissensions are local or social, disaster is the result. Where there is no solidarity, no mutual trust, there can be no success. "Make an uproar [R.V.], O ye peoples, and ye shall be broken in pieces." In other words, "Allow angry passions to arise among you, and secession and separation are the natural result." Civil discord prevents a nation from playing the part in the world's history for which God intended it. It is therefore a serious danger. No "counsel" (ver. 10) is of the slightest use if it is dictated by this spirit. Parliaments, intended to be the voice of a people, are paralysed if they permit themselves to be the instrument of party animosities. Each man who is actuated by the spirit of party accuses his brother of being a "conspirator" (ver. 12) against the national welfare. No man is credited with patriotism or public spirit by his antagonists. The unworthiest motives are attributed to him, however clear it may be to impartial persons that he is only seeking the public good; and the public is often only too ready to believe his evil report. Aristides is ostracized, though he has won the name of "the Just." Temple retires into private life because he will not pander to the factions of his day. Pitt is driven by overwrought nerves into the retirement of a sick chamber because he will neither flatter King nor people, but persists in standing up for the rights of free men against the passions of aristocrats and the interests of traders.

Beware, then, of belittling unfairly our public men. The task of government of so vast an Empire is difficult enough. Let us not make it impossible. A people in whom the fear of God dwells will take public matters seriously and conscientiously, and not treat its statesmen as our great poet represents a wilful and satirical woman as treating the opposite sex:

"I never saw a man,
How wise, how noble, young, how rarely featured,
But she would spell him backward: if fair-faced
She'd swear the gentleman should be her sister:
If black, why Nature, drawing of an antic,
Made a foul blot: if tall, a lance ill-headed;
If low, an agate very vilely cut;
If speaking, why, a vane blown with all winds;
If silent, why, a block moved with none.
So turns she every man the wrong side out,

And never gives to truth and virtue that
Which simpleness and merit purchaseth."

"Much Ado About Nothing," Act III., Scene 1.

In this spirit of wanton and childish detraction a country is too often wont to deal with its greatest men. The prophet warns his countrymen, and through them ourselves, not to deal with public matters in such a spirit.

Do not, he says, "fear the fear" (ver. 12) of those who conjure up spectres of ruin whenever a nation attempts to do its duty to those who form part of it. "Sanctify Him"¹—that is, recognise His eternal and unchangeable holiness. "Let the Lord of Hosts, and Him only, be your fear, and let Him be your dread." In other words, do what is right, let the consequences be what they may. Remit the tea tax rather than violate the law which has been held sacred by the Anglo-Saxon race for many centuries. Emancipate the slaves sooner than allow the curse of injustice and cruelty to lie heavy upon the British Empire or the American Republic. But if you choose to do otherwise, then He who would fain be thy defence will become thine enemy (*cf.* chap. liii. 10). He desired to be thy "sanctuary," but ye would none of Him. Therefore, (ver. 14) He hath become a "stone of stumbling and a rock of offence," a gin and a snare to those who do not first seek His will, and then do their best to perform it.

6. *The "more Excellent Way"* (vers. 16-18).—As a specimen of the unfair interpretation of the Scriptures to which modern criticism delivers us, we may take the interpretation of the "Cambridge Bible for Schools" here. "Both words"—*i.e.*, "testimony" and "law"—are, we are told, "here used of the contents of the revelations communicated to the prophet during these months of danger and anxiety." In other words, it is first assumed that the Law as we now have it was not given till long after Isaiah's death, and then a non-natural sense is given to words with the true sense of which Israel had long been familiar. The prophet is here obviously appealing to the principles of Israel's religion, as opposed to popular opinion, just as he does once more (in ver. 20) in opposition to the resort to sorcery. The appeal is forcible if we put this interpretation upon it; it is feeble and unconvincing if the prophet has only his own opinion to put against that of other men. For, as we have seen in the introductory remarks, the inspiration of the prophet is regarded by the modern critic as nothing beyond that to which any good and intelligent man could attain. We have had many curious

¹ Literally, "make Him holy"—*i.e.*, regard Him as such.

interpretations of the word *torah* (law) of late, but it is somewhat new to find that it here means no more than a more or less authoritative revelation of things to come. Besides, the "law" and the "testimony" stand in close connection in the Pentateuch as we have it. Is it not more natural to see here an allusion to the ancient institutions of Israel than to the exhortations, however earnest and impassioned, of a seer who enjoyed no special privileges of Divine guidance but such as were shared by other men as earnest as himself? We are told, on the authority of a scholar, the belief in whose trustworthiness and accuracy have, however, been a good deal shaken of late, that the *torah*, or law, meant originally nothing more than the oral instructions of the priest. This is, however, a simple assertion on his part, and is due partly to the notion, which recent discovery has exploded, that the Israelites had no written literature till a comparatively late date, and partly to the fact that the assumption is necessary to the establishment of his theory. That the word *torah* (law) is used in the Bible in the sense of *written* instruction is plain enough to anyone who studies the Scriptures. It is only needful here to refer to the expression "*book of the law*," so frequently found in Holy Writ. And it is a wholly unscientific method of criticism, however frequently it may be resorted to at present, to declare that every passage in which the word *torah* is used in the sense of *statute law* must necessarily be of later date. As to testimony (*t'udah*), if it be not the word applied in the Pentateuch to the Ark, it is closely kindred with it. The word is only found in this chapter and in Ruth iv. 7, where it certainly has not the signification of prophetic intimation, but of definite attestation of a fact. Therefore it is safe to conclude that Isaiah here is not appealing to his own utterances in the past as a confirmation of his words in the present, but, as a Christian is wont when addressing his brethren on solemn occasions to appeal to the teaching of his Master, so the prophet here is solemnly adjuring those to whom he is speaking to return to the "statutes and judgments" given to them from Sinai, which they had so shamefully and rebelliously set at nought.¹ "Bind up"—*i.e.*, gather together—the precepts of the Divine law. "Seal the testimony"—*i.e.*, add your own solemn acceptance to the standing evidence of its truth. "Among my disciples"—*i.e.*, among those who have hearkened to the prophet's message.² "Wait, as I do, for the Lord, whose face your disobedience to His behests has caused to be hidden

¹ See Bishop Perowne, "Sermons," p. 371.

² I have followed Bishop Perowne in the interpretation of this passage.

from you." The children born of the prophet (chap. vii. 14-17; viii. 1-4) were given as a witness of the speedy fulfillment of his words. They are "for signs and for wonders in Israel from the Lord of Hosts, who dwelleth in Mount Zion."

7. *Recourse to Sorcery.*—Why, if the modern critical view be correct, should Israel *not* have recourse to sorcery? In Isaiah's time, as we are given to understand by the critics, none of the more stringent prohibitions of sorcery which the Pentateuch now contains were in force, perhaps not even in existence. Magical incantations of the kind described were common in every nation and under every religion. Why should the pious Jew refuse to resort to them? The answer is that in no religion are they so strictly forbidden as in that of the Jews. "Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live" (Exod. xxii. 18) is, it is true, a statute found in the portion of the Pentateuch assigned by the more moderate of the modern school of critics to Moses. But on this point "scholars" are not "agreed." And at least it must be admitted that this prohibition does not cover the whole ground. To justify Isaiah's remonstrances we require the far stronger and more specific prohibitions which are only to be found in Lev. xix. 26, 31; xx. 27; Deut. x. 10, 11, all of them declared by the critics to be later than Isaiah. Moreover, the existence of sorcery, common as we have just declared it to have been in every race and country, appears to have been altogether absent from the history of Israel, with one exception, during the whole of the period throughout which modern criticism has supposed it to have been occupied in emancipating itself from the influence of "fetichism," "animism," and polytheism. The one exception proves the rule. It is that of Saul, who himself acted rigidly on the statutes contained in a law which was not, we are told, in existence till some six centuries after his time (see 1 Sam. xxviii. 3, 9), and who is only recorded to have resorted to the acts the practice of which he had so strictly forbidden when he has been told by the prophet of Jahveh that he must no longer rely on His protection, and when his requests for counsel were no longer heeded (1 Sam. xxviii. 5). Here, once more, as on countless other occasions, we meet with the fact that the critical reconstruction of Israelite history, shadowy and incomplete as it is, involves us in more difficulties than does the history as it stands.

True to his calling as a prophet of the divinely given law, Isaiah rebukes these practices. He recalls the Israelites once more (ver. 20) to the law and to the historical evidence on which it rests. In the midst of things living—the Eternally Self-Existent and His living statutes—will His people turn unto the dead? to these gods who have no existence? There

is "no dawn" of hope (ver. 20) for those who thus forget themselves. The wizards that "peep" (R.V., *chirp*) and "mutter" are of the tribe of ventriloquial impostors so well known in ante-Christian times. Such were the priests who concealed themselves in the statue of Memnon in Egypt. Such were the priests who hid themselves in the famous Ear of Dionysius, which still exists at Syracuse, and whose voices were conveyed from its recesses to the worshipper at its mouth. We read that in the period of religious unbelief and anarchy which synchronized with the origin and infancy of the Christian Church men once more began to resort largely to these (as they believed) *audible* evidences of Deity. Lucian, in the second century B.C., ridicules and exposes some of these impostors. But Isaiah's condemnation is grander and nobler by far. Those who turn aside from the Divine law to such miserable substitutes shall pass their lives (vers. 21, 22) in distress and misery. For they are guilty of want of faith in the Most High. Therefore their self-chosen helpers shall fail them in their need. The nation which goes aside unto superstition shall lose its place among the nations. There is no moral strength among those who seek what is beneath rather than that which is above. They may be dissatisfied and angry with themselves, but that will do them no good. Like the Italian peasant or the African fetish worshipper, who curses God and Jesus Christ, beats the statue of his patron saint, heaps all possible indignities on the fetish which fails him in his need, these Israelites will curse their king, who has encouraged their superstition, and their God, who has left them to themselves, but that will not help them. The "weariness" (or perhaps "anxiety") of perpetual distress and calamity shall encompass them on every side. If they look up to heaven, the God whom they have flung aside has no comfort for them. If to earth, the gloom of anguish does but increase and multiply around.¹

¹ It is not easy to translate this passage. Nearly every commentator takes a different view of it. It is full of grammatical puzzles, which neither the Hebrew scholar nor the textual critic has as yet been able to solve. Sometimes, as in ver. 20, the LXX. has a different reading (*gifts for dawn*, by the change of *Resh* into *Daleth*). More frequently it gives up a difficult sentence in despair. We sorely need a more careful study of supposed Hebrew synonyms and of their true idiomatic meaning. One striking explanation of the last word in chap. viii. 22 has been suggested. It is separated from the rest of the verse, and treated as an introduction to chap. ix. "Behold, distress and darkness, the gloom of anguish and dimness. IT IS DISPELLED. For there shall be no more gloom to her who was in anguish," etc. But striking as this is, it is certainly an unusual construction in Hebrew, if it is ever to be found at all. So it will be safer, if less spirited, to render: "Behold, distress and darkness, the

Is there no need for such exhortations now? Twenty centuries of Christianity have not expelled the superstitious spirit from the Christian Church. In our own land it stood its ground firmly—at least, among the less enlightened, for many centuries. Students of history remember how in the reign of Henry VI. the wife of Humphrey, Duke of Gloucester, Protector of king and realm, was compelled to do penance for sorcery and sedition combined.¹ The murderers of Sir T. Overbury, we are told, resorted to sorcery to attain their object.² The hideous details connected with the burning of witches show how such superstitious ideas lingered on in England and Scotland long after the Reformation. Has this superstition left us even now? Do not even those who refuse to betake themselves “to the law and to the testimony,” in whose souls there is not even the glimmer of true spiritual life, fly for refuge to the deceits of “spiritualism,” the follies of palmistry, and the vain imaginations of the “Christian scientist”? *Naturam expellas furca, tamen usque recurrit.* Loquacious expositors of science—not its truest and most thoughtful students—have claimed to have destroyed revelation and reduced everything to a materialistic level. But, do all we can, we cannot eliminate the supernatural and spiritual. Abolish Jesus Christ; explain away all the prophecies of Him; convert His Incarnation into a commonplace incident and His Resurrection into a myth or symbol, and immediately a cloud of fanaticism and superstition arises, to take the place of the living God Whom He revealed and Whom men have chosen to disbelieve. If driven from such delusions by repeated discoveries of the knavery lying beneath them, then people fly to pilgrimages to Lourdes, or invoke the aid of “blessed medals,” and of “scapulars,” or avail themselves of the thriving business which the representatives of St. Joseph and St. Anthony of Padua are driving with those who vainly hope to get on the “blind side” of the Most High! Happily, the “sign of the Son of man” is too plainly written in the heavens for such delusions to be widely spread as yet in this land. But did those evil days which Isaiah has so strikingly depicted ever return to us again, they would assuredly be days of “tribulation and anguish;

gloom of anguish and dimness driven along [*i.e.*, extending itself in all directions]. But [the word may be either translated *for* or *but*] there shall not be gloom [any longer] to her who was in anguish.”

¹ See “Henry VI.,” Act I., Scene 4, Act II., Scene 3, for a dramatic representation of this. It is probably not Shakespeare’s.

² There is a vivid portraiture of the “wise woman,” Dame Ursley Suddlehop, in Walter Scott’s “Fortunes of Nigel.” David Ramsay, the father of Margaret, is an historical personage of the reign of James I., and was not himself free from the reproach of dealings with the black art.

of gloom and blackness spreading ever more and more widely around.

II. THE PROMISE OF THE DELIVERER.—This promise is, as we have just seen, so closely interwoven with chap. viii. 9-22 that it cannot but have been part of the same prophecy. The word “gloom,” ver. 22 (A.V., *dimness*) is repeated in chap. ix. 1. It runs thus: “Behold distress and darkness, the gloom of anguish and dimness driven onward. Yet the gloom shall not be as was her anguish in days gone by.” We have already seen that there is a continual swing of the pendulum throughout the writings of the prophets generally, and especially in Isaiah, from the beginning to the end of the prophecy which bears his name, between denunciation and promise, between the vision of punishment to come and that of ultimate hope and joy. This prophecy must be taken with that in chap. vii. 10-16; viii. 1-8. It is repeated in another shape in chap. xi. This, and not dependence on human contrivances or superstitious fancies, is the true remedy in hours of disaster and gloom such as the prophet has so vividly depicted. Have faith in God. Raise your eyes to the heavens, and see the sign of the coming Deliverer. Let nothing induce you to faint or waver, or be untrue to your calling as the child of God. For “he that endureth to the end, the same shall be saved.” So the prophet now points to a time when present anxiety and distress shall have passed away. “The gloom shall not be as was the anguish at a former period. Then God made vile the land of Zebulon and the land of Naphthali. Hereafter he shall make it glorious.¹ Beyond Jordan,² in the direction of the sea, Galilee of the nations³—the people who were walking in darkness have seen a great light.” The reference to the “making vile” the land of Zebulon and Naphthali is explained by the Assyrian invasion of Naphthali by Tiglath-Pileser, recorded in 2 Kings xv. 29. The “light” which, as Isaiah predicted, was to shine, is nothing else than the teaching of our Lord Jesus Christ. By that light God will “multiply the nation, and

¹ The Hebrew word usually translated *glory* means literally *weight*. Our translators misunderstood it here, supposing it to mean that Jahveh should add heavy burdens to those formerly borne by the tribes here mentioned. The LXX. here is most confused. The translator seems to have had a different text before him, and not to have comprehended even that.

² All kinds of conclusions as to the authorship of the Pentateuch have been drawn from the words “beyond Jordan.” But, as may be seen from this passage, as well as others, they apply to either side of the Jordan, quite independently of the side of the Jordan on which they were written.

I.e., in contact with the Gentile peoples beyond.

make its joy great."¹ The overthrow of the oppressor shall be as signal as when Gideon smote Oreb and Zeeb, and drove Zebah and Zalmunna in headlong flight before him—a day well remembered in Israel (see Ps. lxxxiii. 11; and *cf.* chap. x. 6). But it will be a spiritual, not a material triumph. "For the booted warrior is ever found tramping in the midst of the tumult, and his garment is rolled in blood. But the deliverance of which the prophet speaks shall be through a burning of devouring fire."² For a child has been born to us, a Son has been given to us. Upon His shoulder shall the princely burden rest, and His name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor,³ Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace." It must be obvious to all reasonable thinkers that this grand prophecy has been fulfilled to the letter. And Jesus Christ, and He only, answers to its terms. Even the Jew of Isaiah's day could hardly have looked on Maher-shalal-hash-baz, who was no doubt, though obviously only in a most restricted sense, a type of the Redeemer, as rising in any way to the majestic level of its requirements. But in Him, and in none else, all is literally fulfilled. The wondrous wisdom of Jesus Christ has guided the ages ever since He appeared among us. He is in truth Immanuel, "God manifest in the flesh," and "mighty" in deed and word has He been, and is He still, upon the earth. The term "Eternal Father" has involved some difficulty to those who have but a feeble grasp on the doctrine of the Incarnation and its effects. The prophecy speaks, let us bear in mind, of Jesus Christ "*come in flesh.*" It has nothing to do with the relations of the Persons in the most holy Trinity. But as St. Paul speaks of Jesus Christ as the "second Adam"—the source, that is, of a new and recreated humanity⁴—so does Isaiah prophesy of Him as the author of a regenerated order of things on the earth; not only the Founder and Preacher, but the Inspirer and Sustainer of the

¹ The "not" (of A.V.) is a mistake for "to it," which has the same pronunciation, though not the same spelling.

² The literal translation is: "For every boot is trampling in tumult, and the garment is rolled in blood. And (the garment) hath been (*i.e.*, it is decreed to be) for the burning of devouring fire." The "but this" of the Authorized Version has been condemned. But it is probably a happy guess. The verse is all through a *constructio prægna*ns, and demands at least *some* interpreting words.

³ As all the other epithets are in couples, it has been thought that the two first should be translated "Wonderful Counsellor." There is no reason save one against this rendering. But with Handel's magnificent chorus ringing in one's ears, it is, and will continue to be, impossible for many of us.

⁴ *Kaw*η *κ*τίος.

new and final dispensation of truth and life, the "devouring fire" which shall burn up all that is worthless and despicable. And as the prophets were ever dreaming of a time when they should not "hurt and destroy" in God's "holy mountain"; when "Ephraim" should not "envy Judah," nor should Judah "vex Ephraim," so when He came, whose birth was heralded by the angels' song, "Peace on earth, goodwill among men," the era of perpetual peace was inaugurated. It is daily nearer at hand; and the more His kingdom spreads, the more certain the advent of that era becomes.

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NOTE.

I cannot refrain from commenting on the utter inadequacy of the modern critic when face to face with so clear and unmistakable a prediction of great, eternal, and spiritual truths such as confronts us at the opening of chap. ix. Dr. G. A. Smith utterly refuses to see in the names in chap. ix. 5 any reference to the divinity of Christ or to the plan of salvation as unfolded by Him in the Fourth Gospel and the Epistles. Though "we firmly hold that Jesus Christ was God," we are somehow bound not to allow to our belief the support of prophecy. In Professor Driver's "Isaiah and his Times" this magnificent prophecy is passed over as "a few brief but pregnant sentences." The "Cambridge Bible," intended, as its title informs us, for young people in "schools and colleges," is less definite, but is, nevertheless, studiously vague where it ought to have been warmly inspiring. The "birth of the Messiah," it admits, is here foreshadowed. But instead of rising to the "height" of Isaiah's "great argument"; instead of seeing here a detailed prediction, under the guidance of the Divine Spirit, of the person and work of Jesus Christ, it leads the young student aside to "the high-sounding titles" of "Egyptian and Babylonian monarchs" disinterred by "Guthe and others"! The "Mighty God" of Isaiah is dwarfed into a "God-like hero, or Hero-God." The "Everlasting Father" shrinks up in its pages into one who "continually acts as a father to his people." In other words, the prophecy was never fulfilled at all, for there was no one in the after-history of Judah to whom it could possibly apply; and all the grand traditions of prophecy handed down in the Jewish and Christian Churches, embodied as they are in the services of the Church of England, are contemptuously flung aside, the great predictions of the Evangelical prophet are evacuated of all their force, and nothing is left us but the lamest and most impotent conclusions. What is to become of the pulpit teaching and the general belief in the Church of England, if nothing is left to us but this miserable remnant of what the whole Church of Christ once possessed and enjoyed?

