

*SHORT PAPERS UPON THE PROPHET  
JEREMIAH.*

NO. I.—JEREMIAH'S CALL.

THE prophecy of Jeremiah is one of those books of Holy Scripture too generally neglected. It does not bear directly, except in one or two passages, upon our Lord's life and mission; it does not give expression to our devotional feelings, as do the Psalms: and though it possesses a special beauty of its own, it has none of that warmth of feeling, or splendour of diction, or wealth of imagery, which places Isaiah on the roll of those great writers whose genius will throughout all ages reach unto and influence the deepest springs of the human heart. And yet Jeremiah has deep feeling: it is a human heart which tells us in his pages of its sorrow. We see the workings of that heart, see it so overwrought that the gentle backward nature of the man is from time to time stirred within him until he is carried along in a torrent of irrepressible emotion. The personal character of no one of the prophets stands out so plainly and distinctly before us as that of Jeremiah, and it is Jeremiah's personal character which is so interesting. Others far surpass him in poetry, in oratory, and even in the revelations which they were commissioned to declare; but of the men themselves we know little. In the prophecy of Jeremiah our interest centres in the man.

His office was a sad one. Slowly, step by step, Judæa was sinking down to national ruin. Hezekiah and Isaiah had tried to arrest that ruin, but on Hezekiah's death the corruption of the people burst forth into open riot and excess during the early years of the child Manasseh. In his later years that king's repentance may have somewhat arrested the national decay. At all events, Judæa had become a prosperous little nation again when Josiah ascended the throne. It had had a long period of rest, but evidently, though not so defiantly wicked as at first, it had not really changed its ways. And God was pleased once again to give it a louder call to repentance, and his instruments this time also were a king and a prophet, both young, both earnest sincere men; but the king, active, eager, high-spirited, resolute, impetuous; the prophet, desponding, melancholy, shrinking ever backward, working without hope, yet beneath this feeble exterior having a will more determined and unyielding than that of the king himself.

It was a critical time when Jeremiah was called to be a prophet. Men were congratulating themselves upon the salvation of the nation, just as we are wont to congratulate ourselves upon the revival of religion among us. It was the thirteenth year of Josiah, and for three years the young king had been doing his utmost to reform and purify the Church. He was but eight years old when he succeeded his father, and after a pause of ten years he set himself in his early manhood to bring the people back to the worship of the true God. He was thus in the full tide of his enterprise when three years afterwards God called Jeremiah to take part in the work. As he speaks of himself

when the call came as a *child*, or, more exactly, a *lad*, he was probably somewhat younger than the king. And thus it was two youths—a king aged twenty-one, a prophet aged sixteen or seventeen—who set themselves to the great work of reforming the Jewish nation and restoring it to its true place. Nor did they work in vain; for though the people hardened themselves in their sins till the chastising armies of Babylon came, and for a time quenched the national life, yet the return from Babylon and the piety of Ezra and his companions was their doing. Could Jeremiah have seen the long train of forty-two thousand exiles returning to their wasted land, to rebuild city and temple, saddened as he would have been at the thought of the hundreds of thousands that had perished, yet he could not have felt that his labour had been without effect. Painful as would have been the comparison between the victorious host of warriors led by Joshua to the conquest of Canaan and the weary exiles, defending themselves by prayer, and coming home to a country empty and desolate, he would yet have felt that they carried the same great hope with them, and, equally with Moses and Joshua, were the ministers of God's high purpose. The salvation of man was bound up with the return from Babylon, and that return was Jeremiah's work.

Let me first say a word about his parentage, and then proceed to his call to the prophetic office.

We learn that Jeremiah's father was a priest named Hilkiah, and that his birthplace was Anathoth. This was a village situated about three miles to the north of Jerusalem, and was inhabited entirely by priests and their families. For it was not the Jewish custom for the clergy to dwell everywhere, dispersed over the

whole land, as it is with us now, but they were gathered into a few towns, where the property and the fields round to a certain distance belonged to them. Their business was to go in turns to Jerusalem, to minister there, whilst the duty of teaching religion to the young was left to the heads of every household. (Exod. xiii. 14; Deut. iv. 9, vi. 7, 20.) They performed this duty so ill that the nation was ever lapsing into idolatry; but after the return from captivity synagogues were established in every city, and in them prayers were offered, and the Scriptures read, and sermons preached, every Sabbath day. And from this time there was no more lusting after idolatry. It was the teaching of the synagogues which kept the Jews firm in their allegiance to one God.

Both Clement, bishop of Alexandria, and Jerome tell us that Jeremiah's father was the high priest Hilkiah who found in the temple the book of the Law (2 Kings xxii. 8); and there is much to confirm this tradition. Jeremiah is always treated with so great respect, even by bad kings and princes, that in spite of the scourging given him by the deputy high priest Pashur and his being put in the stocks, we discern plainly that there was much of dignity and rank about him. His prophetic office alone would not have ensured him such deference. And if his father was thus the high priest, we should have the interesting picture of the youthful king accompanied in his tour round the cities of Judah by the even more youthful son of the chief pastor of the Church, both earnestly striving to win the nation back to purity and holiness, and to the worship of that God in whose service alone purity and holiness are to be found.

But before Jeremiah undertook so serious a duty, he was solemnly called to it by God. We may suppose him often deeply musing upon the condition of the Jewish people. Three years previously the Book of the Law, probably the original copy laid up in the ark, had been found in the general search caused by the repairs of the temple. Its discovery and the public reading of it had produced an extraordinary effect upon both king and prophet. All men talked of nothing else. Especially the twenty-eighth Chapter of Deuteronomy—containing such vivid pictures of the effects of siege and famine, and threatening the destruction of both nation and city in case they fell into idolatry—must have strongly affected them. They had so fallen. Was there still hope, or must the nation's sin be purified by suffering? At all events, they would repent and make a solemn covenant with Jehovah, by which they bound themselves to put away their idols and observe all the ordinances of the Mosaic Law (2 Kings xxiii. 3). This national act greatly impressed Jeremiah, and the Book of Deuteronomy evidently became his favourite study. As Hilkiyah's son, he would have constant access to it, and his writings abound with words and phrases, and even whole sentences, taken from it. From this discovery of the Book of the Law we may date that inner working of Jeremiah's mind which prepared him to be Jehovah's prophet.

Again and again, we may be sure, had Jeremiah meditated upon the subject, and felt his heart moved to join the king in his work. Yet when the call came it was in a way he did not expect. The word of Jehovah came to him and told him that even before his birth, God, in his Divine foreknowledge, had set him

apart for this very duty, and ordained him as "a prophet unto the nations." And he shrank back in alarm. "Alas, O Lord God!" he says, "behold, I cannot speak: for I am a child." How could he, a timid lad, go and deliver God's message as one in authority? He might have helped the king, and laboured under his direction. He was called to be a co-ordinate power, with the spiritual authority vested in him, as the secular authority belonged to the king.

It was this independent authority which so often made the post of prophet no easy office nor free from danger. Manasseh, determined to rule alone, had put to death every prophet who had spoken in Jehovah's name in his father's days, and the people had looked on with apathy or even with approval. Everywhere around him Jeremiah saw "upon the skirts of their garments the blood of the souls of the poor innocents" (Chap. ii. 34). But it was not fear which made the young priest shrink back; it was the sense of his unfitness for so high an office: and therefore God did not reprove his backwardness, but encouraged him, and gave him noble promises of help, and touched his mouth, as the sign that henceforward his words were consecrated to Jehovah's service.

In my next paper I shall say a few words upon the two visions which followed upon Jeremiah's solemn appointment to his office. In this I shall content myself with pointing out the remarkable contrast which exists between his call and those of Isaiah and Ezekiel. At an age equally youthful with that of Jeremiah, Isaiah beheld a vision which to this day wraps our minds in astonishment. He saw in the temple a lofty throne floating in the air, whereon the Deity seemed to sit,

while flowing garments of light and glory descended from it, and filled with their brightness the whole space around. Above and at each side were seraphim, beings with bodies as of transparent fire, each with six wings; with twain whereof each covered his face, in awe of the Divine majesty; with twain each covered his feet, acknowledging thereby the imperfection of his nature and of his services; and with twain each did fly, ready with instant motion to obey the commands of God. And all joined in the hymn of praise, "Holy, holy, holy, is Jehovah of hosts : the whole earth is full of his glory."

Equally sublime is the vision which Ezekiel saw when he was appointed to be a prophet ; but it has all that mysteriousness and intricacy and fulness of detail which so often make his predictions more than human intellect can fathom. He was a captive, living in exile in Babylonia ; and as he walked on the bank of the river Chebar he seemed to behold a whirlwind approaching him from the north, but it was a whirlwind of blazing fire. Flames shot out from it on every side, while in the centre was an appearance of the colour of deep-blue steel, forming the nucleus whence these flames issued. As it drew near, four living creatures came forth, each four-sided, and having on each side four wings, so that they were perfect and complete, view them which way you would. Each one, moreover, had four different faces, on each side one; on the right hand that of a man and that of a lion, representing intelligence and courage; on the left that of an eagle, gifted with the piercing vision which penetrates into all mysteries, and that of the ox, the type of patient strength labouring in God's service. They had wings, but needed not to use them, because wherever they willed to go, thither of their

mere will they went. Beneath were wheels, or rather globes, turning round every way, bright and sparkling as beryls, and obedient to the thought of these glorious beings, moving without effort, of their own accord; while upborne by them was a throne, whereon sat the Most High.

In Jeremiah's vision there is no splendour, no gorgeous imagery. All is calm, simple, quiet, but full of meaning and purpose. And such was the whole man. As we study his acts and words we shall find just one great principle underlying all his conduct, and that was to do his duty. Never was man more conscientious; and however timid his feelings, however anxious and mistrusting he might be, foreboding only failure, hopeless, despondent, yet neither his own fears nor the threats of others could turn him away from doing that which he knew he ought to do. And so at his call. Though he shrank back from it in dismay, yet no sooner did he understand that it was God's will than he yielded himself, reluctantly indeed, yet thoroughly, to the Almighty's service. And it is in this that the interest of his character chiefly lies. He was not one of those men of genius who move mankind by special and extraordinary gifts. On the contrary, he was in most things on a level with ordinary men. Yet he was the man whom God chose to be his messenger at a time of more than ordinary difficulty and danger. And Wisdom was justified in him, as in all her children; for he brought to God's service the best of all offerings, namely, the simple wish to do whatever in him lay to obey God's commands. He was single-minded and self-denying, and in his singleness of purpose lay the secret of his strength.

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