

*SHORT PAPERS UPON THE PROPHET
JEREMIAH.*

NO. 4.—JEREMIAH'S LABOURS UP TO THE FOURTH YEAR
OF JEHOIAKIM.

IN our last paper we had reached the beginning of the evil reign of Jehoiakim. The thirty-one years of prosperity which the Jews had enjoyed under Josiah had come to an end. They had been intended for a great purpose, for they gave the nation its final opportunity of repentance. And this opportunity lasted for a whole generation. Those who were children when Josiah mounted the throne formed the body of the nation — its middle-aged men and women — when he died. And they had grown up with everything in their favour. They had an able, good, and pious king; wise and religious statesmen, like Shaphan and Maaseiah; a holy high priest in Hilkiah; and many prophets, such as Urijah, and Huldah the wife of Shallum, and above all, Jeremiah. But these prosperous times did not last for ever. The history of the downfall of Judah seems intended clearly to teach us that men's characters are formed during ordinary, quiet, and even prosperous, times. Then comes trouble, to prove the nature of the work which has been going on. So it was in Josiah's days that the Jews made their choice; and then Jehoiakim came to winnow them, and make the good better and more decided in their goodness, and to make the bad and evil more openly and confessedly bad.

There is danger of our forgetting this, because tranquil times make so little show in history. We chron-

icle wars, pestilences, famines, and crimes. Mercifully these are but the exceptions, and men spend most of their lives in a routine too commonplace to merit the notice of the annalist. In the Bible, Nebuchadnezzar seems to follow immediately upon Sennacherib. Really there was more than a century between them; and it was during this uneventful century that Judah made herself unworthy of the Divine favour. It was because the Jews had become an immoral people, and the bands of society had been loosened during its era of prosperity, that when the hosts of Babylon appeared, the nation had neither strength for resistance, nor counsel and statesmanship for right and safe guidance.

Still the efforts of Josiah and Jeremiah had raised up a large number of pious men; and, though the nation for a time fell, yet these men, the elect of the people, were so good and noble that, after undergoing a process of still further refinement in exile, they were able to reconstitute the Jewish nation upon a far higher platform of intellectual and religious life than it had ever attained to before. No nation has a more glorious episode in its history than that of the Jews under the Maccabees. No nation but the Jews could have produced from its peasants men fit to record and perpetuate our Lord's teaching. Though there is much frivolity mixed up with the teaching of the Talmud, it bears emphatic testimony to the fitness of the Jew for the office for which these long centuries had trained him—that, I mean, of conveying a spiritual religion to the world.

And this refining process began when Jehoiakim ascended the throne. Early in his reign Jeremiah preached the remarkable sermon described in my last

paper. It only hardened the king's mind; and soon punishment came. In the thirty-second month of Jehoiakim, called by Jeremiah (Chap. xxv. 1) his fourth year, counting by the dates, but in the beginning of the Book of Daniel his third year, because the actual time was less than three full years, Nebuchadnezzar appeared at Jerusalem, carried Daniel and other princes of the blood-royal captive to Babylon, and plundered the Temple of some of the holy vessels, which he took with him to Babylon as trophies of his success. But it was only a hurried visitation, just enough for a warning, but not enough to inflict any serious evil upon the nation. For Nebuchadnezzar was not yet king. Though he had command of the army, it was as general by virtue of his father's appointment; and news of his father's illness made him anxious to return home, in order to secure the crown. Babylon, as we have previously seen, had for generations been subject to Nineveh, but after a long period of unrest and perpetual revolt had at length achieved its independence, and Nabopolassar had probably been made king, as one of Babylon's most skilful warriors. But probably many other nobles considered that they had equal claims. Even the successful reign of Nebuchadnezzar did not secure the throne for his family. Evil-merodach, his son, was murdered after a reign of two years, and thenceforward a succession of usurpers held the reins of power, and rapidly brought the empire to ruin. Nebuchadnezzar, therefore, gave the Jews easy terms, and prudently hastened homewards; and so this slight chastisement served simply as a warning. When in Josiah's days Jeremiah had told them that "a lion, a destroyer of nations, was rising from his lair to hunt

for prey" (Chap. iv. 7), the wise men of Jerusalem had said it was a metaphor, a figure of speech. Now they had seen the lion; and Nebuchadnezzar was a man of such extraordinary and commanding genius, that they must have been powerfully impressed by his personal presence.

There were those in Jerusalem who took the warning to heart, but not so the king. After a period of seven years Nebuchadnezzar came again, and Jehoiakim met with the fate which Jeremiah had predicted for him: his body was cast out without burial, to be the prey of jackals and vultures. Whether the conqueror put him to death, or he was slain in battle, or slunk away wounded to perish in some obscure hiding-place, or died of pestilence or of a broken heart, we do not know. He simply passes away unnoticed, with no one to lament or bewail him. And the time was one of too great trouble to make a mere formal mourning. Jehoiakim had proved himself neither a statesman nor a warrior, and no one felt his death as a loss. Three months afterwards the best and noblest of Judah's children were being torn from their homes. The young king Jeconiah, Nehushta the queen-mother, the royal household, all the mighty of the land, and its skilled artificers and craftsmen, were commanded to emigrate to Babylon, as Nebuchadnezzar had now marked out the huge proportions of that mighty city, was building its walls, and was anxious to people its vast solitudes.

It was a hard fate to leave home and country to swell the conqueror's pride. But we are told in Chapter xxiv. that God removed them to Babylon for their good. Even the newness of the city, and the large number of people there, torn like themselves from ruined homes,

would make it more easy for them to settle down. And Jeremiah gave them wise counsel and advice. He bade them make up their minds for a lengthened stay. They were to build houses in the districts allotted to them, and plant gardens, and marry, and turn every opportunity to good account (Chap. xxix. 5-7). Such quiet citizens, "seeking the peace" of the place where they dwelt, would soon secure the favour of the magistrates and rulers. And besides, the misery of exile mainly consists in the want of occupation. People mope about, and fall a prey to listlessness and ennui. They waste their little capital on their daily wants, and so sink into poverty. Employment and activity are the remedies for this, and the exile quickly changes into an immigrant, with his energies in full employment and his heart filled with hope. And as Babylon was a great commercial town, the Jews soon became there a very thriving community.

To encourage them the more, Jeremiah, in the twenty-ninth chapter, gave them the promise of God's watchful care over them, and of their final return, though after so long an interval but few who were then alive could hope to see their country again. He explained, moreover, the reason of their removal. They were the elect of the nation picked out for a great purpose. Judah could never perish, for it had the promise that in it all nations of the earth should be blessed. And that promise was to be the inheritance of those poor exiles going with such sinking hearts to Babylon. They need not envy those permitted to remain behind with Zedekiah, the new king. He and they were but as refuse figs, too utterly valueless to be worth removal, and left at Jerusalem only to grow worse and worse,

till they were swept away. Eleven years afterwards Nebuchadnezzar returned to execute this purpose, and though a few were at this last hour deemed worthy of removal to Babylon (Chap. lii. 15), for God's mercy is never exhausted, yet the most part perished. Even those who fled into Egypt found no escape. The Jews who so flourished afterwards there were the descendants of later immigrants. It was these poor exiles carried away with Jeremiah, who now formed the Jewish Church; and Ezra and Nehemiah, and the Maccabees, and the learned Jews of Alexandria and Leontopolis, were their seed.

We must not, however, suppose that they had no troubles at Babylon. When we call to mind that Nebuchadnezzar shut Jeconiah up in prison for thirty-seven years, though he was but a boy when his father rebelled, we get some idea of the ruthless character of the man. Daniel, a near relative, no doubt often interceded for Jeconiah, but he remained in confinement, and with his prison garments unchanged, till the cruel conqueror died. This was what we might expect from one who, when his wise men could not tell him not merely the interpretation, but also his dream itself, ordered their general massacre (Dan. ii. 12, 13). Two of the exiles, named Zedekiah and Ahab, were actually burned to death, as Jeremiah tells us (Chap. xxix. 22), though the three Jewish Youths escaped this fate. Under so barbarous a king the exiles must often have had much to suffer. But the wise advice of Jeremiah made them valuable citizens, and saved them much misery.

But what may perhaps seem strange is that, for the seven years preceding the death of Jehoiakim and the exile, the Jews, both bad and good, were deprived of

the benefit of Jeremiah's personal presence and teaching. They had the help of his written prophecies, and special care was taken for this by the writing of Baruch's roll. But during what seems to us a very critical time the prophet's own work was suspended, as we shall see by briefly tracing his ministry.

It was, then, in the first year of Jehoiakim that he preached his famous sermon in the Temple, threatening them, if unrepentant, with the fate of Shiloh. The people would have put a summary stop to such predictions, but the princes stood firmly in his defence, and his life was saved. And even Jehoiakim, though he yet put Urijah to death, spared Jeremiah. Probably he had a degree of respect for his father, Josiah, and remembered that the prophet had been his chief friend and counsellor. He had grown up, too, at Jeremiah's feet, and had been wont to see him in old happy days an honoured teacher in his father's house, at whose inspired words all bowed the head in reverence. He could not so quickly turn round, and destroy all that his father had loved and honoured. But his treatment of Urijah showed that predictions of chastisement would meet with stern repression. When Urijah fled, the king's anger was by no means pacified. He sent into Egypt no less a person than El-nathan, his father-in-law, to ask of King Pharaoh Urijah's extradition; and Pharaoh gave him up. Why quarrel over a prophet? And he was brought to Jerusalem, tried, condemned to death, and his body cast into the grave of the common people.

Undaunted, Jeremiah continued his ministry for three years, and two symbolic acts, of which we have the record in Chapters xviii., xix., shew us what was the

nature of his teaching during this time. In the first he goes to the potter's workshop, situated probably in that very part of the Valley of Hinnom which was bought long afterwards to bury strangers in with the bribe given to Judas Iscariot for betraying his Master. As he watched the work go on, he saw the potter take a piece of clay, and fashion it into a vessel. But it does not answer to his wishes, and so he squeezes the clay together again, and dashes the lump back upon the wheel, and moulds and reshapes it, till finally his purpose is accomplished. The Jews were a lump of clay selected to fulfil a certain definite use and end. If they took willingly the necessary shape and form, well and good; if not, God, by the hand of Sennacherib and Nebuchadnezzar, would crush them into a shapeless mass, and then, dashing them upon the wheel, would form them anew. So at Babylon their institutions were all crumpled up, and the kingly power never emerged from its overthrow. Other portions of their institutions did outlive the crushing, but, as a whole, the nation had to begin again. It is a lesson which Churches, nations, individuals, would do well to learn. Their safety is to be found in carrying out God's purpose. If they so do, they are secure. If not, they will be crushed together, and become mere material. And it does not follow that God will always use the same material for effecting his purpose. He did use the Jews again. He has not used the Churches of Asia Minor, or of Egypt, or Constantinople again. They lie neglected, like hardened dirt-stained pieces of clay. Others have taken their place; but they too may be cast aside, if they do not yield themselves so as to take that shape which God wills.

And this sterner lesson is that taught by Jeremiah's second symbolic act. He took a vessel of earthenware, and going out in solemn procession to the Valley of Hinnom, he brake it there, in the presence of "the elders of the people, and the elders of the priests." Now the clay can be used again, and may take a better and a nobler form each time that it is crushed together and dashed back upon the wheel. So under God's chastening hand a man or a nation may grow better and better, as God moulds it into more complete conformity with his will. Not so the finished vessel. Hardened in the fire, its shape must remain unchanged; and when broken, its shreds are cast aside as worthless refuse into the dustheap.

Now, these two symbols belonged to different parts of the Jewish people. Those carried to Babylon were the soft ductile clay, fit to be fashioned again for higher and nobler use, and destined to come forth from that fiery furnace with a higher stamp upon them than that which they had borne hitherto. Zedekiah and the people of Jerusalem were the misshapen vessel of earthenware, because their characters had grown hard and fixed; for they had rejected God's loving chastisement, had refused his mercy, and persisted in their sins. And so, too worthless to preserve, too vile for ornament, too ill-made for use, too hard to remould, the potter tosses them aside among the refuse; and there they must lie, crushed and broken into fragments.

In the two following Chapters (xx., xxi.) we find Pashur, the deputy high priest, naturally very indignant when, from the valley of Ben-Hinnom, Jeremiah went to the Temple, and preached his sermon about Jehovah breaking to worthless fragments those who will not

heed his calls to repentance. Pashur made the very commonplace mistake, which people so generally make, of supposing that, because God planted the Jewish nation "wholly a right seed," and endowed the Jewish Church with extraordinary privileges, that therefore the Church and nation were precious absolutely, and sure of lasting favour. Really, privileges preserve a man or Church or people only if they are used: unused, they do but bring severer punishment (Luke xii. 47); and the candlestick, which might have stood high beside the altar, is removed when no longer it can serve to give light (Rev. ii. 5).

The Jewish Church was noble and precious, but it existed only for use; and it was in great need of Jeremiah's warning, because it was not doing its duty. But Pashur thought only of the dignity of the Church itself, and this Jeremiah had outraged; and so he inflicted upon him the legal forty stripes save one, and put him for a night in the stocks. This contumely deeply affected Jeremiah. In Chapter xx. he pours forth the complaints of a spirit deeply lacerated and torn. The son of a high priest, he had lived to endure, at the hands of an inferior official, the punishment inflicted upon people who were disorderly or ill-behaved in the Temple. And apparently it was followed by imprisonment. For soon after, in Jehoiakim's fourth year, when God willed that Jeremiah's prophecies should be gathered into a roll—and, without some such provision, they would probably have perished in the destruction of Jerusalem—the Prophet sends Baruch to the princes, saying, "I am shut up: I cannot go into the house of the Lord" (Chap. xxxvi. 5). And well the princes foresaw what would be the effect of the

presentation of the roll upon the king's mind; and so, before they took it to him, they managed to hide both Jeremiah and Baruch in some safe place, whence probably they escaped into Babylonia (see Chap. xiii. 4-7), and spent there most of the intervening period; till once more, in the eleventh year of Jehoiakim, the Prophet's voice, after seven years' silence, was again heard in the streets of Jerusalem.

But Baruch's roll meanwhile was doing the Prophet's work. Silently, but surely, the leaven was reaching first one and then another; and when at length the removal to Babylon came, those carried away with Jeconiah were, to a large extent, true-hearted and faithful men; and so the promise became their own, and the eyes of God were upon them for good in a heathen land, while those left in Jerusalem, on ground so hallowed, perished miserably.

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THE EPISTLE TO TITUS.

CHAPTER I. VERSES I-11.

THE Letter addressed to Titus was as follows. *Verse 1.*—*Paul, a servant of God, and moreover an apostle of Jesus Christ*—If a writer had been personating St. Paul in the second century, he would not have deviated in this remarkable way from the customary designation given by St. Paul to himself. The phrase resembles that chosen by St. James, and by St. John in the Apocalypse, but was never exactly adopted by the Apostle of the Gentiles on any other occasion.—*with special reference to the faith of the elect of God, and to their full recognition of the truth that*