

STUDIES IN THE MINOR PROPHETS.

II. JOEL.

JOEL may be ranked as the second, in order of time, of that higher school of Jewish prophets whose special mission it was to reveal the nature of the kingdom of God. The school had its beginning in Jonah, in whom we see the struggle between the old and the new, and whose prophecy is almost forced from his lips against his will. In Joel the sense of struggle has subsided, and the new regime has become regnant. The wavering prophet of Galilee, who had been so loth to proclaim the advent of the higher spiritual kingdom, is succeeded by a man who lives and moves and has his being in that realm, and who may be called distinctively the prophet of the Divine Spirit. The step from Jonah to Joel is indeed a stride.

Of the man Joel himself we know absolutely nothing. Probably at no time was there very much to know. The outward lives of gifted souls are not commonly eventful lives; their history lies beneath the surface, and consists of experiences which are foreign to the ordinary annalist. We know *what* Joel was, but we can scarcely tell *who* he was; we have a vivid impression of his personality, but we have no mould of his figure. The very age in which he lived is uncertain; it is unmarked by dates, unindicated by contemporary references. It is chiefly, indeed, from the absence of these references that we are able, conjecturally, to assign him an epoch. It is natural to conclude that, had Joel lived in the latter days of Isaiah, his writings would have given evidence of the imminence of the Assyrian domination such as the writings of Isaiah give. The fact that in his prophecy there is no such indication seems to warrant the inference that he belonged to an earlier day. He is not afraid to dwell on horrors; he rises to his highest

power in depicting the miseries of his nation ; yet, in the catalogue of these miseries, he does not place the Assyrian invasion. It is probable, therefore, that Assyria had not yet revealed herself in her threatening aspect towards Judea, probable also that the national sufferings depicted by Joel were the sufferings of an age of peace and prosperity. Such a period of peace and prosperity will be found in that epoch which immediately followed the days of Jonah. The long reign of Uzziah was a lull between two storms, a deceitful calm intervening between the disintegration of the Jewish empire in the past and her approaching captivities in the future. We know, from other sources, that it was an age of corruption and decay ; but the corruption and the decay were not on the surface, and therefore were not seen. Nothing was seen but glitter and glory. The empire had extended its conquests far and wide, and its enemies had bowed before it. The Nineveh, which Jonah had denounced, and which in the past age had threatened to rival the Jewish commonwealth, if not to conquer it, seemed to have sunk again into obscurity. The prospect was unclouded ; foreign aggression was repelled ; foreign competition was distanced ; and Judea lifted up her head amongst the nations as the kingdom favoured of Heaven.

Yet it was just at this period and no other that the voice of prophecy assumed its most pessimistic tone. Joel lived in an age of prosperity, but his utterances are gloomy and foreboding ; there is not a note of joy in all his musings on his day and generation. It is only when he turns his eyes to other days and generations that we catch some tones of gladness. He has no sympathy with the present ; his life is divided between the future and the past. Everything in the passing hour pains him ; he finds refuge partly in the hope of a brighter dawn, and partly in the memory of a glorious sun which has set. It is not often

that in a single mind these progressive and conservative tendencies are so blended. There are poets who dwell in the future, and there are poets who have their Utopia in the past; but the one poetic impulse is apt to exclude the other. In Joel the two are one. We are not surprised to find him dwelling with delight on the advent of a coming age of glory; in *that* he was the mouthpiece of his nation, whose eye was ever straining into the future. But, in addition to this truly Jewish tendency, Joel displays another, and in some sense an opposite one; he not only looks forward, but he looks back. Rarely does Judaism manifest the desire to regain the garden of Eden by retracing her steps; her goal, for the most part, is the future kingdom of God. But, in Joel, we find a strange exception to the rule. It is not difficult to read between the lines in the words, "The land is as the garden of Eden before them, and behind them a desolate wilderness"; they shew clearly that his thoughts were resting upon the contrast which the life of his own day presented to the pristine life of humanity. The very recognition of the fact that beyond Eden all was desert (Joel ii. 3), reveals the tendency of a mind impelled on one side at least by conservative influences. Nay, in the 25th Verse of the same Chapter, we see that even his hope for the future had in it a conservative element: "I will restore to you the years that the locust hath eaten." The words are the utterances of a man who, even in his strainings into futurity, cannot consent to let the past go. He longs for a better day, but not for such a day as the world has never seen. He looks for a bright future, but not for a future which shall be wholly revolutionary. He craves a restoration of the paradise lost; he seeks a heavenly country in which the fruits and flowers of the garden of Eden shall revive. He cries to the future to give him back the past, to restore the years, to revivify the freshness of early days, to let

him feel once again the experience of joy in pursuits and pleasures which have long lost their charm.

All this, as we have said, indicates a pessimistic view of the present; and it is worth while to ask what was the ground of this pessimism. The cause of Joel's despair is indicated under the figure of a plague of locusts, producing and accompanied by famine and drought. The locusts are described under the image of a hostile army; but there is so little indication of any national idiosyncrasy that we can hardly view the image as pointing to any outward foe. It rather seems to us that the locusts are figurative of two inward experiences—gnawing care, and unsatisfied desire. We are confirmed in this persuasion by the language of a prophet nearly contemporaneous with Joel. In Amos viii. 11, we read: "Behold, the days come, saith the Lord God, that I will send a famine in the land; not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, *but of hearing the words of the Lord.*" It is evident from this utterance that the Judea of the days of Joel was beginning to discover that there were other calamities in the world than those of fire and sword; that the human mind and heart might themselves be the seat of invisible battles, and that the direst of all famines might be felt in a land and in an age in which the corn and wine of outward luxury abounded. Indeed, there are not wanting in this prophecy of Joel traces that the work of the locusts was intended by him to represent the gnawing care of prosperity and the unsatisfied desire left by a life of luxury. So far from being eager, like his successor Isaiah, to be delivered from the invasion of outward foes, he is anxious above all things to be freed from the locusts of peace—the corruptions of luxurious ease. Isaiah pointed with gladness to the time when men should beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning-hooks; Joel in express terms longed for the day when they should beat their ploughshares

into swords and their pruning-hooks into spears. They had a different goal of national glory, because they were living amidst opposite circumstances. Isaiah lived in a time when political clouds were beginning to gather over the Jewish horizon, when Assyria was becoming oppressive and Babylon assumed a threatening aspect; he foresaw for his country an unsuccessful military struggle, culminating in her captivity and dismemberment; and he naturally thirsted above all things for the peaceful life of the agriculturalist and the affluence of unimpeded industry. But in the days of Joel the political clouds had not yet appeared; the sky was clear, the promise unclouded. Assyria had not yet become formidable, nor had Babylon lifted its head above the nations. The soil of Judea was yielding its rich produce, and there was no foreign foe to divide the spoil. Men tasted of the vineyards and were glad, so glad that they forgot the Giver in the gift. They became corrupted by the abundance of the things they possessed. They grew effeminate, luxurious, debauched. They lost the masculine vigour of the national character; they parted with the energy which had made them great. In the days of old they had been impressed with their individual helplessness, and had leaned upon the arm of Jehovah; this had been the secret of their strength; their power had grown out of the fact that they had felt themselves to be Divine instruments. But now all was changed. Men had grown rich and self-conscious. The presence of Jehovah had ceased to be recognized as a necessity; they felt they could do without it. They could dispense with the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night, for they had now learned their own importance. They were no longer a nation of children, fighting at tremendous odds with Amalekites and Philistines. They had become themselves Philistines. They had studied how to use the means and appliances of existence, and

had mastered the art of turning all circumstances to their advantage. They could cultivate their own lands, sail in their own ships, make their own merchandise, frame their own laws. Accordingly, they had become self-dependent and self-reliant, and with their self-reliance there had come a loss of individual and national aspiration. They reposed under their vine and fig tree, and forgot their responsibility and their destiny. They were Epicureans before the days of Epicurus. They sated themselves with luxury until their very satisfaction lost its charm. They became a prey to that heaviest of all cares—the sense of having nothing to care for; they became victims of that most parching of all thirsts—the desire of having something left to desire. The locusts which devoured their substance were the offspring of their own abundance.

This, then, was the world upon which Joel looked—a world perishing in its own abundance, dying of luxurious peace. Hence Joel had a message for that world which was just the opposite of the subsequent message of Isaiah. He felt that, in the circumstances of his age, the only cure for his countrymen was war. He saw that peace was killing them, that luxury was destroying them, that plenty was starving them; and he cried out in accents of genuine alarm, “Beat your ploughshares into swords and your pruning-hooks into spears.” He perceived that what they wanted was action. Repose had been their bane, they needed to be roused from the lethargy of false content, from the misery of having nothing left to work for, to hope for, to pray for. And so Joel’s call to his countrymen was a call to action, to the sword and the spear. He felt that their true strength would only be found in conflict with the opposing forces of life. His cry to his own century was the cry of Thomas Carlyle to ours—“work.” He preached the gospel of force, and he desired for every man the necessity of exerting force. He told them that

a life of ease was inimical to their education, inimical even to their true rest ; and his best wish for them was the advent of such circumstances as would break their long repose and reveal the front of battle.

And yet we must look deeper, for this does not exhaust the Gospel of Joel, nor does it constitute his essential mission. His essential mission was to proclaim the advent of the Spirit. Let us observe very carefully the connexion between Joel's view of the national misery and his mode of seeking for the national cure. He finds his countrymen oppressed with the cares of prosperity, victims to the gnawing anxiety which ever follows an exaggerated self-consciousness, and victims to that undefined thirst which our modern life calls ennui. It is quite clear to Joel that the calamity is an inward one ; the gnawing care and the unsatisfied thirst have not their source in anything external. They are not caused by outward scarcity, by physical privation, by straitened circumstances ; they exist in spite of outward abundance and in defiance of physical prosperity. As, therefore, they do not come from without, Joel feels that they cannot be removed from without ; they have their source within the mind, and they must therefore have their remedy within the mind. Men whose hearts are burdened by care in the very midst of their prosperity must conclude that the care lies *in* their hearts, and must look for the cure in the renovation of their hearts. Accordingly it is highly significant that the hope which Joel sees for the nation is a spiritual hope, a renewal of the mind itself. He calls his countrymen to the sword and the spear, but he knows well that neither the sword nor the spear, nor any outward change of circumstances, will suffice to give them peace without the Spirit. He knows that the thing which makes them weary is not the world outside, but the unrest of their own souls ; and he sees that their only hope of deliverance is in the impartation of a new life which

shall make them inwardly strong. His prophecy of comfort, therefore, is not one of changed circumstances, of valleys exalted and mountains brought low; it is the prophecy of a spiritual revelation. "I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh; and your sons and your daughters shall prophecy, your old men shall dream dreams, your young men shall see visions: and also upon the servants and upon the handmaids in those days will I pour out my Spirit."¹

We all feel that the prophetic voice is true to experience. We are made conscious every day and hour that what we want most of all is vision. We need not so much "a changed cross" as a changed view of it, and we can only get that by fresh light. The prayer of the psalmist, "O send out thy light and thy truth," is no less wise than devout. He uttered it when he was passing through a season of calamity, when he went mourning because of the oppression of the enemy. Yet he did not ask for changed conditions, did not even pray that his enemy might be destroyed; he simply asked for light. He realized the experience of the prophet Joel that what man really wants in calamity is the advent of a new spirit, bearing into his bosom a sense of strength and repose. He felt, as the Prophet felt, that the true help must come from within; and, therefore, his prayer was for a vision of the Divine Countenance: "Send out thy light and thy truth; let them lead me."

But let us now look more closely at Joel's prophecy of the Spirit. The first thing which strikes us in it is its almost Pauline universality. Every word of the message breathes liberality. The Spirit is to be *poured* out; the metaphor suggests the plenteousness with which the rains of heaven are showered upon the thirsty earth. It is to be

¹ Joel ii. 28, 29.

poured out upon *all flesh*; not simply on the kingdoms of Israel and Judah, but upon the life of universal humanity. It is to be poured out in a variety of forms in proportion as it is to touch a variety of souls; it is to come to the old men in dreams, to the young men in visions, to the servants and the handmaidens in the power of prophecy. And when we turn to the third chapter of Joel we see how strongly the prophetic spirit of his day had become pervaded with this breadth of sympathy. In the book of Jonah we find that a message of pardon is sent to heathen Nineveh, but it is only sent as the supplement to a stern command. The voice of Jehovah to Nineveh had been the voice of an autocratic Ruler, demanding immediate submission; and it had only become the voice of pardon when that demand had been met. But, in the third chapter of Joel, we are struck by a development in the prophecy of Divine favour to the heathen. Jehovah there speaks to the Gentile nations, no longer as an Autocrat but almost as a Father. He who had sent Jonah to proclaim, "Yet forty days and Nineveh shall be overthrown," now actually condescends to plead with the gathered nations in the Valley of Decision. The transition from commanding to pleading is a transition towards the spirit of Pauline universality. It is the germ of the true kingdom of God, which was to be rooted and grounded in the love of universal man. We catch dimly and through a mist it may be, yet in colours that cannot be mistaken, the approaching rays of that Gospel sun which already, behind the clouds of human error, was unconsciously lighting every man. It was shining as yet in darkness, but the darkness ever more and more was coming to comprehend it. The Divine message which, on the lips of Jonah, had been only the proclamation of pardon to a humbled heathen city, assumed, in the prophecy of Joel, the voice of a tender Father reassuring and pleading with his children in the valley of their own humiliation, and

exchanging the command to obey for the prayer to be reconciled.

But in this prophecy of Joel there is a second very important element premonitory of a new dispensation. Jehovah goes down to meet the nations in the *valley* (Joel iii. 2). The idea is manifestly that of Divine condescension; it marks the advent of a time when God was to bend to the necessities of his people, and when the leading principle of the theocratic kingdom was to be the establishment of empire on a basis of ministration. Now it is in strict consistency with this coming of God into the valley that the revelation of the Spirit in Joel ii. 28 is made through the humblest social instruments. No one can read that prophecy and fail to be struck with the fact, that Joel labours to exalt those whose position would naturally be considered subordinate. The Spirit is to be poured out upon all flesh; but its largest measure is to be given to the weak things of the world. The members of the human family who are to be selected for its highest manifestation are not the heads of the household, but the sons and the daughters. The dreams which, commonly and naturally, are assigned to the ardour of youth, are to be vouchsafed to the old; the visions—those ordered intellectual fabrics in which men express an insight into the true realities of human life and its chief end—which are most frequently possessed by the mature experience of age, are to be given to the young. The spirit of prophecy itself is to be vested not so much in the kings and priests of the world as in its bondsmen and handmaidens. The whole picture suggests the exaltation of the valleys, the lifting up of things that are lowly, the glorifying of the broken and contrite heart.

We must remember that this picture belongs to the palmiest days of the Jewish empire, to the days when the land of Palestine was basking in its brightest outward sunshine. It is at such times that a nation is most apt

to learn the insufficiency of self-preservation to constitute a basis of happiness. It is when men have been allowed without stint or measure to drink of the cup of prosperity that they awaken to the knowledge of its inadequacy. As long as it is above their reach, it is believed to be the main ingredient of happiness; the moment it is brought down and tasted, it is found to be unsatisfying. That the age of Uzziah should be the first to awaken to the aspiration after a ministrant life, the first which sought to equalize in some measure the different ranks of society, is not wholly inconsistent with the laws of human nature. The most powerful of all influences for the production of human brotherhood is the conviction that a man's life "consisteth not in the abundance of the things he possesseth." To reach that conviction, we must first have the abundance; for it is personal experience alone which can prove it to be true. The age of Uzziah had enabled the Jewish nation to realize the fulness of possession. Not equal to the age of Solomon in political splendour, it surpassed it in personal luxury. Men had grown rich by commercial enterprise, and they had spent their riches on themselves. In spending their riches on themselves they had found, to their astonishment, that their life did not lie there. We do not say that such a discovery was a revelation to the Jewish people of where their life *did* lie. Dissatisfaction is at best but a negative experience, and men who find themselves unfilled by selfish pleasures are not thereby of necessity impelled to seek for unselfish joys. Yet the dissatisfaction with self, negative though it be, is the first step to the creation of a new and a higher consciousness. The second step may not at once be taken by a collective nation, but it will assuredly be taken by individual souls in that nation. Every age has men who overleap it and transcend it, and who, in the very act of transcending it, are the prophets of its future self. The reign of Uzziah was such an age, and

Joel such a man. His experience was partly in sympathy with the present, and partly in anticipation of the future. He felt in his own person the national dissatisfaction with the pleasures of selfishness, and to that extent he was the man of his time; but he felt also the cure for the dissatisfaction, and so became the man of the coming time. If the disease was self-exaltation, the cure must be found in self-abasement. A new ideal of human life must be sought and pursued. The servants and the handmaidens must become exalted in the thoughts of humanity. Ministration, service, work for others, the voluntary subjection of the individual will to goodness, must become man's path of life, if his life was to be a path of happiness; and as such new gifts demanded a new spirit, their advent must be preceded by the outflow of a fresh flood of spiritual influence.

Such is Joel's prophecy of the Spirit's advent, and such are the human wants which in his view its advent is required to remedy. Let us mark the development which the doctrine of the Spirit's influence has undergone between the days of Joel and the days of Genesis. In the book of Genesis there is recognized a relation between the Spirit of God and man's spirit, but it is a relation of strife: "My Spirit shall not always strive with man." There is felt to be a want of harmony between the movements of the Divine Life and the movements of the human soul, a middle wall of partition which prevents the healing waters from mingling with the earthly fountain. But, in the prophecy of Joel, humanity seems to have taken a bound. We no longer read of the Spirit's striving, but of the Spirit's outpouring. The middle wall, of partition is broken down, and the waters which are under the heavens have ceased to be divided from the waters that are above them. The spirit of man has begun to look upon the Spirit of God not as an antagonistic element, but as the complement of his own nature and the fulfilment of his own ideal. The Divine

Life is seen to be the help of *his* life, the source of his revelations and the secret of his prophetic insight. We do not say that, even yet, the union between man's spirit and God's Spirit has been fully recognized. Even Joel has not got beyond the outpouring upon the flesh, or external nature of man; and there is something higher than that. The power of prophecy, the gift of divination, the experience of visions and of dreams, are indeed marks of the Divine favour; but they do not reach the innermost life of man. The innermost life of man is the heart, and the crowning work of the Spirit is the regeneration of the heart; the divine nature in the human soul only reaches its full development when it manifests itself in moral purity. But if the intellectual life of the Spirit is not its full development, it is assuredly a stage of that development. The intellect is the road to the heart, and lofty thought the prelude to noble action. In predicting the advent of a spiritual vision, of spiritual dreams and of spiritual prophecies, Joel beheld the outer court of the tabernacle which was to lead into the holy of holies. He saw the approach of a new ideal of humanity, which itself implied a higher thought of God. He perceived voluntarily what Jonah had been forced to see, that prophecy was about to enter on a new stage of its existence, in which the gift of the soothsayer would be exchanged for the power to trace the spiritual laws of the universe; and if in that vision he did not yet behold the ultimate heights of the life divine, he beheld at least the slopes of that mountain whose inevitable culmination was the kingdom of God.

GEO. MATHESON.
