

EZEKIEL : AN IDEAL BIOGRAPHY.

II.

THE prophet returned from the marvellous apocalyptic vision which had met his gaze on the banks of the Chebar, to the surroundings of his home-life. But the character of that life was altered, and his spirit was full of strange conflicting emotions, overwhelmed with the greatness and difficulty of the work to which he had been called. The thoughts that stirred within him were too great for utterance, and for seven long days he sat among them, as the friends of Job had sat (Job ii. 13), in unbroken silence. From that silence he was roused by another word of the Lord spoken to his inmost spirit. The work of a prophet was to speak and not to keep silence. The watchman of Israel was not to be as a dumb dog, as one who was blind and saw not the signs of the times (Isa. lvi. 10) ; but to stand upon his tower and give warnings of the coming judgments (Hab. ii. 1). There rested on him the tremendous responsibility of being answerable for the death of the impenitent who were so because they were unwarned. It was not for him to let the wicked go on in his wickedness, or the righteous fall from his righteousness, and yet hold his peace. What we call the temper of *laissez faire* was, of all tempers, the most alien from a prophet's calling. So only could he "deliver his soul," save his own life from the judgments of the wrath to come, if he bore his witness and gave his warnings without faltering.

It would appear, however, that this awakened sense of responsibility did not lead to any immediate action. It

brought with it rather the sense of the need of a fresh contact with the Divine Power which had called him to his work. As Elijah went to Sinai to learn something of the future that lay before him (1 Kings xix. 8), so to Ezekiel there came the message, "Arise, go forth into the plain, and I will there talk with thee." And so there was another vision of the glory of the Lord, before which he fell prostrate in adoring awe; and another revelation of the manner in which his prophetic work was to be accomplished. It is remarkable that he was not directed to any immediate utterance. The silence which had been before rebuked was now commanded. He was to keep silence even from good words and let the fire burn within him, consuming heart and flesh, seeming for a time to shatter even intelligence itself, and to lead to strange unconventional startling acts which might well lead men to doubt his sanity. But then the silence which he was to keep was to be more eloquent than speech. Its immediate result was that when the exiles among whom he lived saw him no longer sitting among them as one about to speak, but shutting himself within his house, they were irritated and piqued, and sought to compel him to break that mysterious intolerable silence. They broke into his house, and put hands upon him as if to drag him out into the public place of concourse, that they might hear his message. But for them there was as yet no message. As by a Divine constraint his "tongue clave to the roof of his mouth," and they found their efforts fruitless. Doubtless this reticence had the effect of stimulating curiosity, and the feeling, What will he do next? must have been uppermost in their minds. He knew, in his secret soul, that the silence was but for a time, perhaps relatively for a long time, but that in due course his mouth would be opened, and then, whether they would hear, or whether they would forbear, the "house of rebellion"

should hear his message from the Lord God of Israel. Meanwhile his teaching was to be dramatic rather than prophetic; an acted parable. Men were to gaze in wonder at what we can scarcely describe otherwise than as so many *tableaux vivants* of strange and terrible significance.

In so acting Ezekiel was following in the footsteps of the prophets who had preceded him. Isaiah had for three years laid aside the "rough garment" (Zech. xiii. 4) of the prophet, and put the shoes from off his feet, and had walked, like an Eastern dervish, "naked and barefoot" with nothing but a linen cloth tied round his loins (perhaps not even that), as a witness to men who were trusting in an Egypto-Ethiopian alliance, that this was the condition to which their allies should be reduced by the conquests of Sargon and his Assyrian armies (Isa. xx.). Ezekiel's master, Jeremiah, had dramatized his predictions by breaking the potter's vessel in the valley of Hinnom (Jer. xix. 1-10), by appearing in the presence of the ambassadors of the confederate kings who were stirring up resistance to Nebuchadnezzar with yokes and bands upon his neck (Jer. xxvii. 2), by his long journeys to Mesopotamia with their mysterious significance, which, by the very fact of his absence from Jerusalem, must have attracted the attention and roused the wonder of his people (Jer. xiii. 1-11). Ezekiel was now to develop the same methods of teaching in a yet more startling form. I see no reason, with the induction from these precedents before us, for accepting the hypothesis that in what follows we have only the narrative of a dream, or an allegorical symbolism, unconnected with any objective fact. If it is urged, in favour of that hypothesis, that the prophet narrates journeys to Jerusalem which were confessedly "in the visions of God," as in the trance of ecstasy (Ezek. viii. 3, xi. 1, 24), the answer is obvious, that the very fact that the prophet so described them proves that he knew how

to distinguish one form of prophetic teaching from another, and that the absence of any such description shews that he is recording not a dream or vision, but an objective reality.

The mode of action was indeed sufficiently startling. The Jews of Tel-Abib had been expecting him to speak, had even tried to constrain him. And instead of this they had to watch the successive actions of one who seemed, as it were, stricken with dumbness. The first tableau of the series was found in his taking one of the tiles or slabs of clay which abounded in all Chaldean buildings, and designing on it, with a graver's tool, the outlines of a city in which those who looked on it could not fail to trace the representation of Jerusalem. And, just as we see in the slabs which have been disinterred from the ruins of Koujunyik and Khorsabad, he was to portray the siege of the city, the army of the Chaldeans encamped against it, the earthworks rising to a level with the wall surmounted by soldiers discharging their arrows and javelins at the defenders of the city, the battering rams ready for action. For a further indication of the fact that relief from any quarter, Jewish insurgents or Egyptian allies, was out of the question, he was to place a flat sheet of iron, such as was used for baking cakes of bread, in front of the representatives of the besieged city, as the symbol of the impassable barrier, interposed by the Chaldean armies to the passage of any such helpers. This pictorial prophesying was, however, not all. The spectators might think, buoyed up as they had been by the assurance of soothsayers and false prophets, that the siege would be but a short one, ending in the defeat of the besiegers and unattended by severe privations. As an acted protest against that delusive hope, Ezekiel was to go through a series of actions which remind us more of the life of an Indian faquir or of St. Simeon Stylites than of such ideas

as we commonly associate with the thought of a prophet of Israel. His normal attitude (for we are of course compelled to make allowance for inevitable exceptions) was to lie flat on the ground, as one crushed beneath the overwhelming burden of sin and its punishment, gazing at the symbolic delineation of the siege, with outstretched hand. And this was to continue for not less than four hundred and thirty days, during which those who looked on it were to understand, in the absence of all tidings from Jerusalem (the state of siege obviously precluding the despatch of any such tidings), that the operations of the Chaldean troops would drag on their weary length through many months and bring about the most horrible extremities of suffering. The actual duration of the siege was from the tenth day of the tenth month of the ninth year of Zedekiah's reign, to the seventh day of the fifth month of the eleventh year (2 Kings xxv. 1-9), or over 570 days; but the prophet, with the characteristic Hebrew fondness for round numbers, and especially for numbers that had a symbolic significance, represented its duration by two periods amounting altogether to 430 days. The number was that which the records of Israel gave as that of the years of the sojourning of their fathers in the land of Egypt (Exod. xii. 41), and at least led men to contemplate the contrast between the Exodus in which that sojourning had ended, with all its bright hopes, and the miserable outcome of the life of the people since that period in the siege and capture of Jerusalem. Of the subdivision of the 430 days into the two unequal portions of 390 for Israel and 40 for Judah it is not easy to speak with any very definite precision. Possibly, still keeping to round numbers, the 390 years were intended as a rough measurement of the period from the rebellion of Jeroboam (B.C. 975) to the reign of Zedekiah (B.C. 599), that kingdom, in spite of the deportation of the Ten Tribes by Salmaneser, being still

thought of as having an ideal existence. Its whole course had been one of apostasy and corruption; it had represented ten tribes, while Judah represented only two, and therefore the punishment which was now falling on the latter was thought of as mainly due to the guilt of those ten tribes, each of them receiving as in the "forty stripes save one" of later Jewish practice (2 Cor. xi. 24) all but the full measure of its chastisement. The forty days assigned to Judah had, in their turn also, both a historical and a symbolical significance. The prophet would seem to have looked back to the beginning of Josiah's reformation as the starting-point of a new period of trial, and the forty years that had passed since them (approximately from B.C. 634 to B.C. 594) were therefore the measure of the guilt of wasted opportunities and multiplied transgressions. Historically the number forty, always the favourite round number of Israel, threw men's minds back upon the record of other transgressions and other punishments; the forty days of the waters of the flood, and of their subsidence (Gen. vii. 12, viii. 6), the forty days of the exploration of Canaan by the spies under Caleb and Joshua, and the forty years of the wandering in the wilderness (Num. xiv. 34).

The next stage in the series of dramatic teachings was even more startling. His neighbours of Tel-Abib, who were building their hopes on the speedy overthrow of the Chaldean power, were to learn to what extremities of famine their countrymen were exposed in Jerusalem. The prophet was seen to make his own bread, a strange coarse mixture of beans, lentils, vetches, with a small portion of the better cereals like wheat and barley, a compound probably such as we heard or read of as the food of the people of Paris during the Franco-German war of 1870-71. The daily ration of this wretched food, hardly eight ounces, was to be accompanied by an equally scanty portion of water. The staff of bread was to be broken in Jerusalem, and in

the words of Leviticus xxvi. 26, which had been impressed so strongly on the prophet's mind, they were to eat their bread by weight and drink their water by measure, with care and with astonishment (Ezek. iv. 9-16). The symbolic action of Ezekiel had almost taken a more startling and repulsive form. The terrible threat of Rabshakeh (Isa. xxxvi. 12) would seem to have come into his thoughts as certain to find their fulfilment in the horrors of the siege, and a strange over-mastering impulse in which, after the manner of the Hebrew prophets, he had recognized a Divine command, had led him to think that he must dramatically represent even that crowning wretchedness, and so pollute the miserable portion of his food in the very act of preparing it. Against that impulse, however, the instincts of nature, and the sense of his consecration as a priest, alike protested, and he learnt to feel, recognizing that feeling also as a Divine intimation, that he might be spared that element of suffering, and fall back upon a mode of preparation which, however repulsive to us, has never, in the absence of other material for fuel, been uncommon in the East.

In the next *tableau* of the series we trace the influence of Isaiah's imagery, with which the recollection of Rabshakeh's words would naturally associate itself, in describing the Assyrian invasion as the work of "a razor that was hired," shaving off the hair and the beard, which were the emblems of a man's comeliness and strength (Isa. vii. 20). The same instrument was, indeed, to serve as sword and razor. As a priest Ezekiel had been trained in the Levitical rule which forbade the priest to make baldness upon his head, or to shave the corners of his beard (Lev. xxi. 5); and he himself, in his ideal restoration of the worship of the Temple, emphasizes that prohibition (Ezek. xlv. 20): and yet the people saw him transgress that rule. With the ready apprehension of men accustomed to these forms of para-

bolic imagery, they could scarcely fail to discern the significance of the act itself and of those that followed. The destruction in various ways of the hair thus cut off would symbolize for them the desolation wrought by pestilence and famine within the city walls, by the sword of the Chaldean invaders, by the exile of the remnant that survived the horrors of the siege. It may be inferred, indeed, from the fulness of the prophetic reproofs which accompanied these acts that at this point the silence of the prophet was broken, and that he himself explained the meaning of his acts, and told those who gazed on him and listened to him, of the iniquities and abominations which had brought these punishments upon them, the evil arrows of famine, and pestilence and blood and evil beasts, which were to make them a reproach and a taunt, a proverb and an astonishment among the nations. (Ezek. v. 1-17).

Among those iniquities the prophet, who had grown up amidst the surroundings of Josiah's reformation, and under the teaching of Jeremiah, naturally assigned a foremost place to the worship of the high places, which had gradually become more and more identified with idolatry. Mountains and hills and rivers and valleys, the green trees and the thick groves of terebinths, had all been defiled with the orgiastic revels of their worshippers, and the incense smoke had risen to the vault of heaven; and so the prophet, stamping in the excess of his indignation, poured out his words of doom (Ezek. vi. 1-11). The sword, the famine, and the pestilence should do their dread work, and every place that had been desecrated by that evil worship should be covered with the carcasses of the slain. In that worship Ezekiel rightly saw the fountain head of all other evils; but, like other prophets, he felt himself also stirred to a righteous wrath by the social corruption which was eating into the heart of the nation's life. Pride and violence had budded and blossomed and borne their evil fruits. The

buyer had rejoiced in his hard bargains, and the seller had mourned as he parted with the inheritance of his fathers (Ezek. vii. 10-13). Men had trusted in the silver and the gold which should not be able to deliver them in the day of the Lord's wrath (Ezek. vii. 19). The land was full of bloody crimes, as it had been in the days of Isaiah (Ezek. vii. 23). They set up their graven images, as if they were things of beauty and of majesty, and trusted that they would deliver them; and therefore He whom they had scorned would bring in the "worst of the heathen" upon them, to possess their houses, and robbers should enter into the secret place of his sanctuary. In their panic terror they should be the victims of false hopes, and blind fears, and misleading counsellors. "Mischief should come upon mischief, and rumour upon rumour." They should seek a vision of the prophet, and should find none. The oracular utterances of the priests, and the counsel of the ancients, should alike fail. King and princes should alike mourn and be clothed with desolation, and the hands of the "people of the land" (the population of peasants and artisans) should be troubled. They should be judged according to their deserts, and at last they should know that He who thus judged them according to their deserts was indeed the Lord (Ezek. vii. 24-27.)

It lies in the nature of the case that this prophetic utterance was written or delivered towards the close of the long dreary period of dramatic action. The tongue of the prophet was no longer cleaving to the roof of his mouth. And it is accordingly significant that the next note of time in the collection of his writings (Ezek. viii. 1) carries us to a point which closely approximates to the end of the four hundred and thirty days, even if it were not, as, on the supposition of some inequalities or intercalary days in the Babylonian calendar, it easily may have been, absolutely identical with it. A year and two months, *i.e.* according

to our computations, 425 to 427 days, had passed since the first vision on the banks of the Chebar. We note, however, the intimation, intended perhaps to indicate that the period had not quite expired, that Ezekiel was still in his house, and that the elders of Judah sat before him, roused, perhaps, by that outburst against the mountains of Israel, to a more intent and expectant watchfulness. And then there fell on him a state of ecstasy which had scarcely a parallel in the history of any prophet before him. The hand of the Lord was again strong upon him. The glorious theophany which he had seen on Chebar was again manifested to him. The form of a hand (the symbol of Divine agency) was stretched out to lay hold on him; and then, whether in the body or out of the body he could not tell, lifted up between the earth and the heaven, he was carried, with the swiftness of thought, in the visions of God to Jerusalem (Ezek. viii. 1-4). With all the accuracy of a priest's memory he identified each spot which he thus beheld in the ecstasy of clairvoyance, and what he describes as having met his gaze, belonging, as it does, to the closing years of the reign of Zedekiah, when Nebuchadnezzar was about to make his final attack on the rebellious city, may help us to gauge the depth of its apostasy, and serve as an illustration of the section of the prophecies of Jeremiah which belongs to the same period. It is clear that the last traces of Josiah's reforming work had vanished, and that the confluent polytheism of the days of Ahaz and Manasseh had appeared in all its enormities. A closer survey of what met his gaze will help us to trace each form of the apostate ritual to its source.

(1) The prophet stands, so it seemed in his vision, at the door of the inner gate, "the gate of the altar, which looketh towards the north." It was probably the court of the brazen altar which Ahaz had removed from its old position and reserved for purposes of divination, when he brought

in the great altar after the pattern of that of Rimmon at Damascus (2 Kings xvi. 11). When Ezekiel had ministered in that court, the worship of the God of Israel had reigned supreme in it. Now he saw a rival *cultus* installed side by side. For him the horror of the contrast was intensified by his seeing there, what others did not see, the vision of the glory of the Lord as he had seen it in the plain, in its unutterable splendour; and side by side with it, receiving the homage which was no longer given to the God of their fathers, the "image of jealousy," *i.e.* as he himself explains it, the image "which provoketh to jealousy" (Ezek. viii. 3) as claiming the worship in which the jealous God, jealous because loving, could admit no rival. What that image was we are not definitely told. Havernick, who assumes that Ezekiel found himself in the temple while the people were celebrating a great Thammuz, or Adonis, festival, conjectures that it was the unseen image of that deity, laid, as one slain, upon a bier, over which, as in Verse 14, the women wailed and wept. Looking, however, to the fact that the Thammuz ritual is mentioned afterwards as something distinct and new, and that the obvious purpose of the prophet in recording this vision is to note the variety of idolatries that met his gaze, it seems more likely that "the image of jealousy" was that of "Astarte, queen of heaven, with crescent horns," which we know from Jeremiah vii. 18 to have been the dominant *cultus* of Jerusalem at this period, followed by women of all classes with a wild fanaticism, and at least sanctioned by their husbands. Like the earlier worship of Baal and Ashtoreth it was essentially Canaanite or Phœnician in its nature, and its prevalence at this period was probably connected with the Tyrian alliance, to which king and people alike were looking with eager expectation as a defence against the attacks of Nebuchadnezzar (Jer. xxv. 22).

(2) The next scene that met the gaze of the clairvoyant was yet more startling. In one of the crypts or cells of the temple, such as those mentioned in Jeremiah xxxv. 4; 2 Kings xxiii. 11; 1 Chronicles xxviii. 12; there was a secret and darker *cultus* carried on as with closed doors, so that the prophet could only become a spectator by enlarging an opening in the wall and so gaining entrance. The idol-worship which met his gaze was apparently Egyptian in its character. "Creeping things and abominable beasts" were "pourtrayed upon the walls," and seventy men, ancients of the house of Israel, high in position and authority, a very Sanhedrin, as it were; of idolaters, were there, their number implying that they were the representatives of other apostates like themselves, offering incense to their idols. In that "chamber of imagery" there was a pattern instance of what was passing, as "in the dark," in the house of many a man high in reputation (Ezek. viii. 1-11). The mention of one of the seventy by name gives an historical precision to the narrative, and emphasizes the extent of the corruption. Of "Jaazaniah the son of Shaphan" we know nothing personally; but the latter name is prominent in the contemporary records of Josiah's reformation (2 Kings xxii. 8-12), and two of his sons, Gemariah (Jer. xxxvi. 12, 25) and Abikam (Jer. xxvi. 24), were among the protectors of Jeremiah. Possibly therefore the name of Jaazaniah is recorded by Ezekiel in his grief and horror at the apostasy of one whose family had been conspicuous among the God-fearing patriots of the time. The prophet knew enough of him and of his fellows to trace their idolatry to its source. They had come to believe that Jehovah had forsaken his people, and no longer knew or cared whether they worshipped him or not (Ezek. viii. 12).

(3) From this scene Ezekiel turned to another more open form of idolatry. At the gate of the Lord's house looking towards the north, there were women weeping for

Thammuz, after the manner of those of Phœnicia. Of that worship we can hardly speak without recalling Milton's lines, in which he speaks of one of the nobler rebel-spirits in Pandemonium as one

“ Whose annual wound in Lebanon allured
The Syrian damsels to lament his fate,
While smooth Adonis from his native rock
Ran purple to the sea, supposed with blood
Of Thammuz yearly wounded. The love-tale
Infected Zion's daughters with like heat:
Whose wanton orgies in the sacred porch
Ezekiel saw when, by the vision led,
His eye surveyed the dark idolatries
Of alienated Judah.”

Par. Lost, i. 446-457.

The “love-tale,” like that of Adonis and Aphrodite among the Greeks, was that of a beautiful youth beloved by a goddess, and dying early by a violent death, and thus symbolizing the brief duration of human joys, or elemental forces, the transitoriness of the brightness of the dawn, or of flowers born only to blossom and to die.¹ It would seem from the position which the ritual occupies in Ezekiel's ascending scale of abominations, that the lamentations were followed by even more corrupt orgies than those which accompanied the worship of Astarte.

(4) The two forms of evil that remained to be described were apparently connected with Zarathrustian worship, and are traceable to the intercourse with Elam and Media which had already begun to influence the belief and practice of Israel. At the door of the inner court of the Lord's house, turning their backs upon the Sanctuary, and their faces to the East, were seen twenty-five men (possibly the number, like that of the seventy elders, is representative,

¹ Readers of Plato will remember how he compares a surface knowledge or a counterfeit virtue to “the gardens of Adonis,” small baskets or boxes in which flowers were planted that grew up and perished quickly because they had no depth of earth (*Phædr.* 2, p. 276, B). A reference to such gardens has been found by Lagarde and other scholars in Isa. xvii. 10.

as answering to the High Priest and the heads of the four-and-twenty courses), worshipping the dawning light of the sun.¹ Their idolatry reached its climax when they were seen, after the manner of the ancient Sabians and the later Parsees, to be holding over their mouths a branch of the sacred *Hom* tree, probably pomegranate or tamarisk,² as an act of homage or as a charm against demons (Ezek. viii. 15-17).

To the heart of the priest-prophet, as to the mind of Jehovah, it was no light matter that these successive *tableaux* should represent the religious state of the people. How was the evil to be remedied or punished? Was it possible to assert the righteous law of retribution and yet to preserve a remnant of the people as witnesses to the truth, who, like the seven thousand in the time of Elijah who had not bowed the knee to Baal, were yet faithful found among the faithless? The answer to those questions was found in the symbolic visions that followed.

E. H. PLUMPTRE.

THE GOSPEL TO THE GREEKS.

(*John* xii. 20-36.)

II. THE PARADOX.

“He that loveth his life loseth it; and he that hateth his life in this world shall keep it unto life eternal.” (Verse 25.)

THIS paradox, under slight variations, was often on the lips of our Lord; even in our brief record of his teaching we

¹ It may be that this also connects itself with the Thammuz ritual. Adonis, in one aspect of the mythos, was a sun god.

² I follow the interpretation of most modern critics. By others the word is taken as proverbial, “They put a branch to wrath,” *i.e.* “they add fuel to the fire”; or, “They put the sickle to their nose,” *i.e.* injure themselves in their defiant insults to Jehovah.