

JEREMIAH: THE MAN AND HIS MESSAGE.

II. HIS TIMES.

THE great difficulty in reading the prophets is that our knowledge is so limited of the times in which they lived. They were not philosophers, teaching abstract truths, but reformers speaking to contemporary circumstances. Their message came out of life and returned to life again. Jeremiah prophesied for fifty years, his half century being nearly bisected by the year 600. Beginning in the thirteenth year of Josiah, his activity extended through the remaining eighteen years of the reign of that prince, and through the reigns of the four succeeding kings—Jehoahaz, Jehoiakim, Jehoiachin and Zedekiah. But it is doubtful if to the mind of the ordinary reader of the Bible these names, with the exception of the first, mean much or suggest any very definite events. Yet with the events of these reigns the teaching of Jeremiah is closely intertwined, and, the more exact our knowledge of them, the more intelligible will his pages become.

One circumstance, indeed, to a certain extent, renders such preparation for reading his prophecies superfluous. To Jeremiah, it may be said, there was only one event during his long life. This was the destruction of Jerusalem. In the introductory vision of the seething pot,¹ this was already indicated: the mouth of the pot was turned towards the south,² and its boiling contents were to be poured out over the land. This, he was told, signified that an evil from the north was to burst over the country. The north, in the prophets, always means Mesopotamia; and the warlike tribes of that region were, he was informed, to set their thrones at the gates of Jerusalem and at the gates

¹ i. 13 ff.

² In verse 13, "towards the north," ought to be "away from the north."

of the cities of Judah. This image of invasion never left the mind of the prophet, and, as time went on, it became more and more definite, till at last he was able to announce quite distinctly that the city was to perish; and he even specified the details of the calamity. It reminds us of how our Saviour announced His own sufferings and in His communications to His disciples added touch after touch of detail.

Now, if any man in any age were aware that his country was to be invaded by a cruel and irresistible army, and the place of his abode destroyed, the fact could not but colour his habits of thought and utterance. But the place whose destruction Jeremiah foresaw was Jerusalem—a city whose very dust was dear to the hearts of its inhabitants; the holy city whose temple was the sanctuary of the most High—and the destruction of Jerusalem involved the ruin of the country and the exile of its inhabitants. It looked like the end of religion itself, and of all the hopes and promises which Israel had inherited.

That this foreboding should have taken such rooted hold of the mind of Jeremiah is the more remarkable because at least the commencement of his ministry might have appeared to be an epoch of unusual hope. The throne was occupied by good King Josiah—a prince whose tender years and early piety remind us of our own Edward VI.—and, just about the time when Jeremiah's public ministry began, the king carried out on an extensive scale a reformation of the most sweeping description. The ancient law-book had been discovered in the temple, and the reading of it had revealed to the king the vast discrepancy between its provisions and the actual state of things in the kingdom. But he resolved—and the good men by whom he was surrounded seconded him—to restore everything in exact accordance with the Mosaic pattern. Accordingly every vestige of the foreign

religions with which Manasseh had defiled the house of the Lord was swept away; the worship at local sanctuaries, with which so many immoralities were connected, was strictly prohibited; and the priests who had ministered to idolatry were degraded. It looked as if a new era of pure religion and morality had dawned, and a young prophet like Jeremiah might have been expected to be the mouthpiece of the movement, praising the reforms and predicting an epoch of prosperity which they would inaugurate.

We look into the pages of Jeremiah, however, in vain for anything of the kind. Now and then, indeed, he promises that his countrymen, if they make haste to repent, shall dwell in their own land; but such gleams of hope are rare, and they are swallowed up in monotonous floods of denunciation. Even at this early stage, he asserts, God had forbidden him to intercede for his people—they were past praying for—as He did subsequently again and again.¹ Apparently he perceived that the reforms of Josiah, however well meant on his part, were superficial, and would not permanently hold the will of the people.

So it turned out. As in the history of our own country at the Restoration, when the strong hand of Cromwell was removed, the English nation rushed back, under the guidance of Charles II., into the pathways of indulgence, so, when at an early age Josiah was cut off in the battle of Megiddo, and a few months thereafter his son, King Jehoahaz, was carried captive to Egypt, the party which had been opposed to the reforms of Josiah obtained the upper hand; and in Jehoiakim, the new king, they had one thoroughly in sympathy with their spirit. The floodgates of idolatry and immorality were reopened and the godly party driven to the wall.

Of course a man like Jeremiah was summoned by such a state of affairs to lift up the voice of warning more

¹ vii. 16, cf. xi. 14; xiv. 11; xv. 1.

loudly than ever. But he met with determined opposition. Having appeared one day in the court of the temple, when many worshippers were present from the cities of Judah, and predicted that, unless they repented, ruin would overtake the holy city and the sanctuary itself, he was stopped by a popular tumult, and would have lost his life, had not some of the better-disposed princes intervened and by timely words of moderation saved him from violence.¹ On another occasion he was not so fortunate. The governor of the temple smote him and put him in the stocks.² Whether the smiting was merely an angry blow, or a regular legal infliction of forty stripes save one, we cannot tell, but Jeremiah was treated as a blasphemer, because he had suggested that the temple could be destroyed.

In consequence of such proceedings he appears to have been unable to continue his public work. He took advantage of the opportunity of retirement to commit to writing the prophecies delivered by him up to this date; and he got his young secretary and friend, Baruch, to read them aloud in one of the chambers of the temple. They were listened to by a distinguished audience, and made so profound an impression, that those who had heard them endeavoured to bring them under the notice of the king, apparently in the hope that he might be turned from his evil ways. He agreed to listen to the reading of the manuscript, but, after he had heard a few pages, he snatched it from the hand of the reader and, slashing it with a penknife which he had in his hand, tossed it into the fire and ordered Jeremiah and Baruch to be arrested.³

Against this daring act of impiety three who were present ventured to utter a remonstrance, but the rest, it is ex-

¹ Ch. xxvi.

² Ch. xx. It is well known that Jeremiah's prophecies are not in chronological order. Buchanan Blake's volume (*How to Read the Prophets*) on Jeremiah is useful, as it gives the prophecies in the order of time.

³ Ch. xxxvi.

pressly said, "were not afraid, nor rent their garments." Evidently the majority of those near the person of the king were in sympathy with the profane course which he was pursuing. The priesthood, as we can see from every part of the Book of Jeremiah, were as a body on the same side. But his bitterest opponents, strange to say, were themselves prophets. "False prophets," we call them now, but of course they did not so call themselves, nor were they so called by their contemporaries. They were called "men of God" and were supposed to possess the prophetic inspiration and foresight. They opposed Jeremiah face to face, pretending to have received revelations contradictory of the oracles delivered by him. The inviolability of the temple was the central article of their creed, and they looked with holy horror on the man who ventured to say that the shrine of God Almighty could fall into human hands. In this belief they may have been sincere, but their views were shallow, and they were afraid to utter disagreeable truths. They healed, as Jeremiah says, the hurt of the daughter of Zion slightly and said, "Peace, peace," when there was no peace. The great prophet was prejudiced against them; but there can be no doubt that his general estimate of their character is correct, and he says expressly that from the prophets of Jerusalem profaneness had gone out into all the land.¹ Thus priest and prophet, instead of being examples and pillars of religion, were its deadliest enemies. Nothing could more sadly prove the hopelessness of the age.

Jeremiah and Baruch escaped the myrmidons of Jehoiakim sent to arrest them; but probably they had to remain in hiding. Jehoiakim, meantime, continued to pursue the downward path, and at last the end came. The Babylonian power had risen to predominance in Mesopotamia, and Nebuchadnezzar, its prince and warrior, carried everything

¹ Ch. xxiii, 15.

before him in Western Asia. Jehoiakim became his vassal ; but, attempting to throw off the yoke, lost both his throne and his life in the attempt ; and his successor, Jehoiachin, after a reign of only a few months, was carried away captive to Babylon along with the flower of his subjects.

Zedekiah succeeded to the throne. He was a mere puppet of Babylon and obtained his seat by a solemn promise to be loyal to his suzerain ; yet he also after a few years began to dream of independence and to form a combination with the petty kings of the surrounding countries, to cast off the galling yoke. Thereupon the crisis so long foreseen by Jeremiah came rapidly near. The prophet ventured into the very palace to remonstrate, as John the Baptist long after ventured into Herod's ; and Zedekiah was impressed, as Herod was, but, like him, he was the slave of the public opinion by which he was surrounded ; and the ruling classes were intoxicated with dreams of revolt and liberty. Subsequently Zedekiah again and again held private interviews with Jeremiah and sent to ask his prayers ; but he had not force of character enough to follow the advice he received from the prophet.¹

At length the moment long dreaded arrived ; the Chaldean army encompassed the city, and a siege of eighteen months began. It was raised for a time, indeed, by the appearance of an Egyptian army on the southern frontier ; and, as Nebuchadnezzar had to turn to meet this enemy, the besieged hoped that the danger was past. The king sent to Jeremiah to inquire if this were so ; but the prophet sternly answered that undoubtedly Nebuchadnezzar would return and complete the work which he had begun ; and he advised the king to surrender and so save the city.²

At this time Jeremiah one day happened to have business to attend to in his native town of Anathoth, and was pass-

¹ xx. 1 ; xxxvii. 17 ; xxxviii. 14 ; cf. xxi. 1 ; xxvii. 12.

² xxxvii. 4 ff.

ing through the gate of Jerusalem with the purpose of proceeding thither, when he was arrested on a charge of deserting to the Chaldeans, and after being beaten—perhaps again with rods—was cast into prison. The king, hearing of it, set him at liberty; but the feeling against him continued to be bitter. Those who called themselves the patriotic party represented to the king that his gloomy vaticinations were weakening the courage of the defenders of the city. This view was not destitute of a show of justice, and they pressed it on the king so strongly that he agreed to yield up the prophet to their will. Accordingly Jeremiah was cast into a horrible dungeon,¹ where he would soon have perished, had not a friend of his in the palace, an Ethiopian eunuch, named Ebedmelech, interceded with the king on his behalf, who gave directions that he should be lifted out of the dungeon and kept in more lenient custody; and there he remained till the city was taken.²

This event took place at last, after the garrison and the inhabitants had suffered the extremities of starvation. Then ensued the sack of the city, when the fierce soldiery, long baulked, rushed on their prey and enacted those scenes of cruelty and lust which are described with awful realism in the Book of Lamentations. The city was reduced to ruins; the temple was set on fire, after its treasures had been rifled; the king escaped, but was captured, and, after his sons had been slain in his sight, his eyes were put out, and he was carried away, along with many of his subjects, to exile in Babylon. Only the poorest of the people were left behind; and one Gedaliah was set over them.

Jeremiah, in common with the rest of the more distinguished citizens, was led away from Jerusalem in irons; but the conqueror had heard of the attitude maintained by him during the siege and gave orders that he should be well treated and should have the option of either going to

¹ Ch. xxxvii. 1 ff.

² Ch. xxxviii.

Babylon or remaining in the Holy Land. He elected to do the latter, and accordingly became associated with Gedaliah, who was a friend of his and with whom he would have co-operated in shaping the poor remnant of his fellow-countrymen into something like a nation. But very shortly Gedaliah fell under the blow of an assassin, and the remnant over whom he had been placed, in a panic lest they should be held accountable by Nebuchadnezzar for the murder, resolved, in the teeth of the advice of Jeremiah, to flee to Egypt. Thither they carried the prophet, and his subsequent activity consisted in ministering to them in the city of Tahpanhes, where they had obtained a settlement. The last glimpses afforded of him in Holy Writ are in strict harmony with his previous life: he is still reproving sin, and the opposition to him is more sullen and determined than ever. There is too much likelihood in the rumour handed down by tradition that at last, in a popular tumult, he met with a martyr's death.¹

Such was Jeremiah's extraordinary career. Never surely was there a life of such unrelieved gloom. Like Newman, in our own century, he was early convinced that it was not the will of God that he should marry. He was an ascetic: "Thou shalt not go into the house of feasting, to sit with them to eat and to drink," was a voice he had heard from the Lord; and even from the solemn charities of burial he was equally to abstain.² We are glad to find that he was the owner of a bit of land in Anathoth, and that he had a few loyal friends, especially those of the house of Shaphan.³ Was ever a man who loved his country placed in a position like his, when, instead of cheering on his fellow-countrymen to resist the enemy by whom the city was invested, he had

¹ Ch. xlv.

² Ch. xvi. 1-9.

³ Ahikam and Gemariah, sons of Shaphan, Michaiah and Gedaliah, grandsons—xxvi. 24; xxix. 3; xxxvi. 11; xxxix. 14.

to advise the king in secret and the people in public to surrender, and after the fall of the city received special marks of favour from the conqueror? What a contrast to the position of Isaiah, who, when the enemy was at the gates of Jerusalem, sustained the fainting courage of the garrison within the walls and had his prophetic career crowned by a miracle of deliverance which he had predicted.

Yet, if ever there was a loving and patriotic heart, it was Jeremiah's. At any moment he would willingly have sacrificed his life for his country; and he may be said to have died for her many deaths. No wonder he often broke down under the burden of his destiny. There do not exist in literature passages more pathetic than those in which he complains of his lot. "Oh, that mine head were waters," he cries, "and mine eyes a fountain of tears, that I might weep day and night for the slain of the daughter of my people." He often wished he were out of all the strife and trouble: "Oh," he cries, "that I had in the wilderness a lodging-place of wayfaring men, that I might leave my people and go from them." He felt that the part which he had to play was clean contrary to his nature: "Woe is me, my mother, that thou hast borne me a man of strife, and a man of contention to the whole earth; I have neither lent on usury nor have men lent to me on usury; yet every one of them doth curse me." Sometimes he resolved that he would give it all up: "Then I said, I will not make mention of Him nor speak any more in His name." Sometimes he was so sad and dead-beaten that he wished he had never been born: "Cursed be the day wherein I was born; let not the day wherein my mother bare me be blessed. Cursed be the man who brought tidings to my father, saying, A man child is born unto thee, making him glad."¹

Jeremiah is "the man of sorrows" of the Old Testament;

¹ ix. 1, 2; xv. 10 ff.; xx. 9, 14 ff.

and in not a few respects he strikingly resembles the Man of sorrows of the New. Both were without honour in their own country and in their own house; for, as the people of Nazareth attempted to cast Jesus down from the hill on which their city was built, so the men of Anathoth plotted against Jeremiah's life; and, as he says, even his brethren and the house of his father dealt treacherously with him.¹ Both were opposed by the representatives of religion in their day—Jeremiah by the priests and prophets, as Jesus by the Pharisees and scribes. Both wept over the city of Jerusalem with passionate love, and the zeal of God's house did eat them up; yet both were considered traitors to their country and blasphemers of the temple; both were scourged; and, if the tradition already quoted is true, both were put to death by their own countrymen. Jeremiah lacked the sunshine of Jesus, the social sympathies, the power of forgiving enemies, the soaring and unflagging hopefulness. Yet his faith was remarkable: when the Chaldean army was in the country, he redeemed a field at Anathoth, to show that he still had faith in the country's future, as at Rome, when Hannibal was at the gates, the field on which his camp stood, being put up to auction, was bought at an undiminished price.² Jeremiah did not doubt, even at the worst, that the promises of God would yet be fulfilled. Sad as are the pages of his book, there are in it a few chapters—like beds of lilies floating on the surface of a lake of tears—hardly surpassed even by Isaiah in his loftiest and most hopeful moods. And, although Jeremiah himself would perhaps hardly have credited it, to few lives is the great word of Christ more applicable: "Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone; but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit." Like the life of Jesus that of Jeremiah seemed a tragic failure; but his influence

¹ Ch. xi. and xii.

² xxxii. 6 ff.

experienced a glorious resurrection ; and the secret of its profound and permanent power lies in the pain and pathos of his life, which can never cease to move the heart of humanity.

JAMES STALKER.

THE FORESIGHT OF FAITH.

THE difference between the eternal vision of God and the temporal outlook of man has been compared to one standing on a hill with the landscape in its length and breadth before him, and another crossing the plain in a swiftly moving train, on whom the landscape breaks part by part. This ingenious illustration, after it has served its purpose to show the relation of eternity and time, may be utilized to suggest that we also have an eternal kinship. We retain what we have seen after it has vanished ; we anticipate what has yet to be seen before it appears. It is the present which is not yet ours, since it is only being transferred to the exposed plate of experience—the past and the future are carried in our consciousness. One faculty of our mysterious nature records, as by an automatic register, the experiences of yesterday, so that not one deed, or word, or thought is lost—not one but can be reproduced by some commonplace spell, the crowing of a cock at early dawn, or the fragrance of dried rose-leaves in some old-fashioned drawing-room. Another pictures with minute prophetic power the experiences of to-morrow, so that the distant horizon is golden with inspiring illusions, or black with brooding anxieties. We are the slaves of memory and imagination, but in the conflict for the control of the soul imagination is easily victor. Hope rather than repentance is the instrument of salvation.

Imagination is the faculty which represents the future,