

Only as men steadfastly follow where Christ goes before will they win the eternal benediction of the open eye; for it is only the heart which is pure of earthly aims and hopes that shall at last reach the perfect vision of God.

B. WHITEFOORD.

JEREMIAH: THE MAN AND HIS MESSAGE.

III. IDEAL.

SOMETIMES the prophets, besides teaching by words, resorted to symbolical actions, for the purpose of emphasizing their messages. They would appear in public in some peculiar situation or attitude which attracted notice; and, when they were asked to explain what their singular behaviour meant, they obtained the opportunity of pressing home the truth. Thus a prophet might be seen lying on his side for months on the ground, like an Indian fakir, because he wished to enforce a truth which this attitude symbolized.

Jeremiah never did anything so *outré*; but he was fond of this realistic mode of teaching, and he is often seen practising it. His chosen symbols do not, as a rule, strike us as being happy or imaginative; on the contrary, they are generally extremely prosaic. But this may have been intentional. As the prophet Habakkuk, a man of the highest poetic endowment, as his book proves, took a board and set it up in the market-place, with only two or three words written on it, in which the pith of his prophetic message was expressed, so the very bluntness and plainness of Jeremiah's images may have been intended to suit dull minds, which needed to have instruction thrust under their very eyes.

Among the most successful of his efforts in this line was

his adventure with the Rechabites.¹ These were a tribe of nomads, who had maintained themselves in the country ever since the Conquest, when they entered the Land of Promise along with the Israelites, who had picked them up on their way from Egypt. Only once in subsequent centuries had they come into prominence, when their chief, Jonadab, was closely associated with King Jehu in his reforms; this was three centuries before Jeremiah's time. Jonadab had proved a new founder of the tribe, and had imposed more rigorously than any of his predecessors the ascetic rules by which the life of the wandering community was regulated; they were to drink no wine, to plant no vineyards nor possess them, to sow no seed and build no houses. The presence of an invading army in the land in the days of King Jehoiakim, however, drove them for refuge inside the walls of Jerusalem, where doubtless their peculiar physiognomy and manners caused them to be much remarked; and, under inspired guidance, Jeremiah took advantage of the interest thus excited to read his fellow-countrymen a lesson.

Having made the acquaintance of the strange visitors, he invited them one day to meet him in one of those rooms in the temple-area where sacrificial feasts used to be eaten. Perhaps he provided them with a feast; at all events he laid before them bowls of wine and invited them to drink. But at once they drew back and with dignity but firmness declined: "We will drink no wine; for Jonadab, the son of Rechab, our father, commanded us, saying, Ye shall drink no wine, neither ye nor your sons for ever; neither shall ye build house, nor sow seed, nor plant vineyard, nor have any; but all your days ye shall dwell in tents; that ye may live many days in the land where ye be strangers. Thus have we obeyed the voice of Jonadab, the son of Rechab, our father, in all that he hath charged us, to drink

¹ Chap. xxxv.

no wine all our days, we, our wives, our sons, nor our daughters; nor to build houses for us to dwell in; neither have we vineyard, nor field, nor seed; but we have dwelt in tents, and have obeyed, and have done according to all that Jonadab, our father, commanded us." They went on to explain that their presence in Jerusalem, under a roof and within the walls of a city, was not in accordance with their own will, but a measure forced upon them by the appearance of the Babylonians in the country.

Of course Jeremiah had neither wished nor expected them to partake of the wine which he had provided; he was certain that they would resist the temptation to break their principles. What he wished was to bring out their fidelity. Their ascetic habits were probably older than the Exodus of Israel from Egypt and the giving of the Law at Sinai; at all events three hundred years had elapsed since Jonadab had reinforced these regulations; yet time had in no way impaired their reverence for his memory or their loyalty to his precepts; and, even in circumstances of temptation, when one portion of their habits—their abode in tents—having been broken down by necessity, they might have been the more easily moved to let go another, and when the wine was proffered them by a man of God, they stood firm and were not ashamed of their singularity.

Jeremiah was impressed by their conduct, and he was empowered by God to assure them that, as a reward for their fidelity, they should not perish, but have a permanent place in the Land of Promise. They are met with down to New Testament times, and there is an Oriental tribe, even at the present day, which claims to represent them.¹

But Jeremiah's true design was an ulterior one: it was to set in contrast to the loyalty of these Rechabites the disloyalty of his own countrymen. In obedience to the word of a mortal man, these strangers had kept their vows

¹ See Streane, in *Cambridge Bible*, on xxxv. 19.

of abstinence for hundreds of years, and were still able to refuse any temptation to break them; but Israel had forgotten the law of God, and, yielding to the temptations presented by the nations among whom they dwelt, had completely forgotten the vows they had made to Jehovah.

In this incident we are brought very near to the secret of Jeremiah. The element ever present in his prophecies, whether it be prominent or concealed—the thing which explains both the character of the man and the career of the prophet—is the ideal which he had of what Israel ought to be. Around him was the Israel of the present, and he was keenly aware of its defects: it was as bankrupt in character, in resources, and in hope as it could well be—a nation contemptible and ready to perish. But this was not the Israel that Jeremiah saw. He saw it as it existed in the mind and design of God. He saw it as it once had been. He looked away from the present, back across centuries of weakness and dishonour, to a time when Israel corresponded with its ideal and had in its grasp a future of Divine promise.

Israel was the child of God.¹ A child resembles its father, and the father takes upon himself the responsibility of its welfare; no good father would willingly see his child in circumstances obviously beneath its birth and his own resources. Only, of course, if the child, when grown up, quits the paternal roof of his own accord and goes into a far country, he may there bring himself to poverty by his own ill-doing and have to feed on the husks which the swine do eat. Such a prodigal had Israel become; but Jeremiah was always thinking of the golden days when Jehovah's son was still in the Father's house and had not yet gone astray.

There is another relationship, however, which still better

¹ iii. 4, 19; xxxi. 20.

sets forth the connection between Jehovah and His people, and which Jeremiah uses far oftener—that of husband and wife.¹ In the relation of father and son there is no choice on the part of the inferior: a son has no choice of whether or not he shall have a father, or who his father is to be. But in marriage there is a choice on both sides. And this illustrates an important aspect of religion, in which there must be, on both sides, a definite personal choice. Jehovah chose Israel from among the nations by a sovereign and gracious act; from being a band of slaves in Egypt He created it a nation and made it His own. At the same time Israel chose Jehovah, abandoning all other gods to cleave to Him alone and pledging its loyalty and love forever. It is the part of the husband to provide for his wife a home suitable to his own rank and station, and there to cherish and protect her. The home provided by Jehovah for His bride was the land flowing with milk and honey, and He led her to it with a mighty hand. Jeremiah has continually before his eyes the vision of what the Holy Land might have been—how strong in its rulers, how happy in its inhabitants, how perfect in its peace—if the destiny then in Israel's hands had been realised. Gloomy as his genius is, it kindles into poetry as he recalls the promise of Israel's prime: "I remember," he introduces Jehovah as saying, "the kindness of thy youth, the love of thine espousals, when thou wentest after Me in the wilderness."² He hears the land and all its cities ringing before them with "the voice of joy and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride; the voice of them that shall say, Praise the Lord of hosts, for the Lord is good, for His mercy endureth for ever; and of them that shall bring the sacrifice of praise into the house of the Lord."³ Of course, however, the honour and happi-

¹ ii. 2; iii. 14, etc.

² ii. 2.

³ xxxiii. 11: common phrase of Jeremiah.

ness of home are altogether dependent on loyalty. If the wife proves unfaithful, peace and prosperity take wings and fly away. Israel had been unfaithful. This is a kind of imagery which we shrink from expanding in detail; but the prophets pursue it with extraordinary boldness, and Jeremiah especially employs it with a freedom which makes us shudder.¹ But it expresses with great force the nature of the sin of Israel, as disloyalty to divine love and as the throwing away of a magnificent destiny.

Another way in which Jeremiah expresses the same thought is by going back to an incident of the Exodus—the scene at the foot of Sinai, when, with appropriate solemnities, a covenant was made between Jehovah and Israel.² By this act the two parties to the covenant entered into union with each other, God assuring His people that they might in the future look to Him for all that was involved in the promise to be their God, while Israel undertook to render to God all the duties announced from Sinai as the conditions of this alliance. Never by any other covenant did such an ally bind himself to any people; never was there an alliance which ensured so many blessings. But of course a covenant holds only so long as both parties are true to their engagements. Israel, alas, had not been true, and so the covenant was dissolved. But the mind of Jeremiah dwelt for ever on that primitive era of divine possibilities.

In many other images he thought and expressed the same idea. Israel was an olive tree, beautiful and perfect, and it should have had a glorious development; but it had been blighted by some unhappy accident and so reduced to a stunted growth, without beauty and without fruit. It had been planted a noble vine, wholly a right seed, but it had changed into the degenerate plant of a strange vine.³

God all the time had not changed. Though his child had become a prodigal, these are the terms in which He speaks :

¹ ii. 20, 33; iii. 1, 3, 6-11.

² Ex. xxiv.

³ xi. 16; ii. 21.

“Is Ephraim a dear son? is he a pleasant child? For since I spake against him, I do earnestly remember him still; therefore My bowels are troubled for him; I will surely have mercy upon him, saith the Lord.” Though Israel has proved a faithless wife, Jehovah passionately invites her back. By the written word of inspiration He had constantly held up the ideal before His people; generation after generation he had sent to them His servants the prophets, “rising up early and sending them”¹ with this same ideal burning as a fire in their hearts. But the transgression of Israel was of very old standing. The period during which its life had corresponded to the ideal had been very short. Almost from the time when the Land of Promise was reached the process of degeneracy had commenced. The ideal only survived as the measure of the sin.

This ideal accounts for a great deal in Jeremiah, which at first awakens repulsion. It cannot be denied that many pages of this prophet are gloomy; the superficial reader tires of the monotonous and endless denunciation; you ask whether men can ever have been as bad as he makes them out to be, or at least whether they were all so bad. But this element in his writing assumes a totally different aspect when it is remembered what was behind. To quote a modern parallel, it has frequently been complained of Thackeray, that he unmercifully satirises woman, making her out to be worse than she is ever found in reality. But to this accusation the defence has been offered, that it was because the great novelist's conception of woman was so lofty and pure, that he was so indignant when she fell beneath the place for which nature intended her; the fierceness of his satire was only the reverse side of his reverence. Whether in Thackeray's case such a defence is just or not, something like it is undoubtedly applicable to

¹ Very common phrase of Jeremiah.

Jeremiah. It was because of what he knew Israel to be in the Divine mind and intention that its actual condition appeared to him so deplorable ; it was because he honoured his country so much that at the same time he despised and gloomily accused it. His faith has darkened his pages, but it elevated and transfigured his own character ;¹ and, if it had been found, in even a moderate degree, in his countrymen, the nation would have been saved.

It need hardly, however, be pointed out how completely the opponents of Jeremiah could have gravelled him, if they had been able to prove that the early history of Israel had been such as it is represented to have been by critics of the naturalistic school ; for, according to their teaching, the past contained no such ideal as Jeremiah imagined. Dr. Robertson, in his *Early History of Israel*, has demonstrated from casual allusions in the earliest literary prophets, Amos and Hosea, that they viewed the history of their race as it is represented in the Historical Books ; but this demonstration could be given with far greater fulness in reference to Jeremiah, because his conception of the early history is the framework on which the entire structure of his thinking hangs.

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¹ Duhm (*Theologie der Propheten*) says somewhat extravagantly, "Jeremia ist die edelste Persönlichkeit die Israel je hervorgebracht vor Christus."