

JEREMIAH: THE MAN AND HIS MESSAGE.

VI. GOD.

As man's God is, so is man himself—there is no more accurate standard of measurement than this. It applies to nations: the station and degree reached by any people in the scale of humanity may be determined by discovering what kind of deity they worship. And it applies to individuals: the statement about God in a man's creed may not, indeed, be a very accurate index of his character, but, if the conception of God which he carries about in his secret mind can be discovered, everything else about him can easily be deduced from it.

If this be true of men in general, it is specially true of prophets. No measurement of the stature of a prophet's mind, or of the power of his message, is so decisive as that supplied by his conception of God. A man was a prophet just because he discerned God in the universe around him more clearly than other people. That man is a prophet who, if religion did not exist, would be able to invent it. The prophet was taken possession of by God and became in his whole life the servant of this inspiration. Yet there were great differences in the impressions made by the inspiring Divinity on different prophets; and the purpose of this paper is to trace out the image of God which was reflected on the mirror of Jeremiah's mind.

Jeremiah's God is the God of Nature.

“He hath made the earth by His power, He hath established the world by His wisdom, and hath stretched out the heavens by His discretion. When He uttereth His voice, there is a multitude of waters in the heavens, and He causeth the vapours to ascend from the ends of the earth. He maketh lightnings with rain, and bringeth forth

the wind out of His treasures.”¹ In this quotation emphasis is laid on the gift of rain; and, if any one of the divine operations in nature specially affected the imagination of Jeremiah, it seems to have been the process by which rain is gathered in the atmosphere and then distilled in showers to water the earth. Of course in the Orient, where rain is so precious, this was natural; and we must remember the delicate and dazzling beauty imparted by a shower to the fields and woods of an Eastern landscape.

Although, however, there are here and there in Jeremiah remarkable sentences inspired by the perception of God's presence in the beauty of the world, it cannot be said that in this respect he even approaches some of the other prophets and psalmists. His temper was naturally too sombre, and his spirit was too heavy-laden with the burden and the mystery of all this unintelligible world, to permit the impressions of external nature to play freely on his mind. He cannot drag himself sufficiently away from the scenes and the problems of practical life to enjoy thoroughly the peace and the exaltation which other men of God in Old Testament times enjoyed as they looked upon the face of the earth or the face of the sky. Not infrequently his allusions to the presence of God in nature are charged with a polemical purpose. Thus he has a sublime outburst in which he speaks of God placing “the sand for the bound of the sea by a perpetual decree, that it cannot pass; and though the waves thereof toss themselves, yet can they not prevail; though they roar, yet can they not pass over it”; but this picture is painted merely to emphasize the contrast between the sea, which, in spite of its stormy nature, obeys the control of the Heaven-appointed boundary, and the revolting and rebellious heart of his fellow-countrymen, whose passions acknowledged no control. His most striking passages on God in nature occur

¹ Ch. x. 12.

in his polemic against idolatry. He ridicules the idols, because they can do nothing: they cannot even move, but require to be carried; they are upright as the palm-tree, but cannot speak; they are put together with hammer and nails. "Be not afraid of them; for they cannot do evil, neither also is it in them to do good." "But the Lord is the true God; He is the living God and an everlasting King; at His wrath the earth shall tremble, and the nations shall not be able to abide His indignation."

Jeremiah's God is the God of Israel.

If Jeremiah has not the eye for the glories of nature possessed by some of the other writers of Scripture, he is surpassed by none in setting forth God's love to His chosen people. Jeremiah's was a hidden and brooding nature; he was full of suppressed fire and passion; he was without wife or children, and the whole force of his affections was given to his country. Sometimes his love took the form of jealousy and indignation, but it was love all the same; and it enabled him to understand the love of God and to be the organ through which the divine heart found expression. No prophet, unless it be Hosea—also a nature of the brooding and passionate type—equals him in the lyrical tenderness of outbursts like this: "Yea, I have loved thee with an everlasting love; therefore with loving-kindness have I drawn thee"; and he is never weary of repeating the story of the ancient time of what he calls the espousals of Jehovah and Israel, when Jehovah "brought forth His people out of the land of Egypt with signs and with wonders, and with a strong hand, and with a stretched-out arm, and with great terror, and gave them the land which He had sworn to their fathers to give them, a land flowing with milk and honey." No prophet is so conscious of the splendid chance which Israel thus obtained, because to be

thus brought nigh to God was to be close to "the fountain of living waters"; and, had the nation realised its privilege, it would have been like "a tree planted by the waters, and that spreadeth forth her roots by the river, and shall not see when heat cometh, but her leaf shall be green, and shall not be careful in the year of drought, neither shall cease from yielding fruit."¹

The notion that God had made a special choice of Israel and felt for that nation a peculiar love may appear to us inconsistent with what we now know of God's love for the world. Some may even consider it on a level with what all nations have believed about their deities at a certain stage. But in Jeremiah there is a noble universality. Jehovah is no fetish, confined to a limited territory; Jeremiah calls Him "the King of nations," and "the God of all flesh." He himself was conscious of being ordained by Jehovah a prophet to the nations; and he actually sent divine messages to the kings of nations outside his native land. It is true that these were messages of judgment; but he expresses the most poignant sympathy with the woe about to befall some of Israel's bitterest enemies; he teaches that the providence of God presides over the movements of even the most distant peoples; and here and there he drops a hint, sometimes in very unlikely places, of the purpose of God to bring even His most stubborn enemies within the empire of His grace.²

Jeremiah's God is the God of Morality.

The notion that Israel was specially beloved of Heaven was capable of another perversion: the divine choice might be conceived as a piece of favouritism, and it might be thought that the object of it was to ensure the safety and happiness of Israel at all hazards and under

¹ Comp. also xii. 7 ff.

² xlvi. 47; xlix. 39.

all conditions. This was the heathen idea: the deity of a nation was bound on every occasion to defend his own; his wrath might, indeed, be feared if the offerings brought to his temple were curtailed, but, when these were forthcoming in due number and with the proper ceremonies, he was bound to exert himself on the side of his worshippers. Within the Hebrew people itself the same belief was too common. Jesus had to complain of it in His day: His contemporaries believed that they would enter in a body into the Messianic kingdom simply because they were the children of Abraham. In Jeremiah's age also the same delusion was prevalent. His fellow-countrymen superstitiously repeated the words, "The temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, are these"; they believed that in every case Jehovah must defend His own territory and save His own people; Zion was inviolable; in short, they were Jehovah's favourites, and in no case would He desert them.

It was the life-work of Jeremiah to explode this superstition. None could believe more passionately than he in the divine choice of Israel; but this choice had a definite purpose, and this was not to keep Israel safe and happy in all circumstances, but to produce a holy nation. Jehovah abhors sin; Jeremiah says that the single purpose for which the prophets were sent from age to age was to repeat in the ears of the people in God's name, "Oh, do not this abominable thing which I hate." On the other hand, God delights in lovingkindness, judgment and justice. To create, then, a nation which would abhor sin and practise the virtues of lovingkindness, judgment and justice was the purpose of Jehovah's choice.¹ But, if this purpose was frustrated, and if Israel turned out to be a nation which delighted in sin and trode lovingkindness, justice and

¹ xliv. 4 ; ix. 24.

judgment underfoot, then there was no reason whatever why God should waste His love upon them. On the contrary, His love would be changed to indignation, and even for their own sake He would have to visit them with the whips and scourges of calamity.¹

This had actually taken place. The burden of Jeremiah's entire prophecy is the utter frustration of the Divine intention through Israel's backsliding; therefore, he says, the love of God is changed to anger and fury, His protection is withdrawn from the holy land and the holy city, and the Gentiles are even summoned by Jehovah to execute His vengeance on His own chosen people.

In vain the people answered that they paid to Jehovah in His temple the due number of sacrifices and duly observed all the rites of worship. This was a heathen plea, but to Jehovah ritual without righteousness is nothing: "I spake not unto your fathers, nor commanded them in the day that I brought them out of the land of Egypt, concerning burnt-offerings or sacrifices; but this thing I commanded them: Obey My voice, and I will be your God, and ye shall be My people; and walk ye in all the ways that I have commanded you, that it may be well with you; but they hearkened not, nor inclined their ear."

These revolutionary truths Jeremiah was instructed to exhibit before the people in a concrete form in one of those symbolic actions of which he was fond.² He was told to go down to the potter's house, and there God would cause him to hear His words. So he went to the potter's house and saw the artist work a work on the wheel; but the vessel was marred in the hands of the potter, who thereupon, reducing it to a shapeless mass, remade it a different vessel as it seemed good to him. Then spake the Lord in the prophet's consciousness: "O house of Israel, cannot I do with you as this potter? saith the Lord; behold, as the

¹ iv. 4; vii. 20; v. 9; ix. 9.

² Ch. xviii.

clay is in the potter's hand, so are ye in Mine hand, O house of Israel." By superficial readers this has been supposed to teach the most outrageous fatalism: that God can make or mar the destiny of everyone as He pleases, wholly without respect to human will or character. But, in fact, what it teaches is exactly the reverse; it is that God is not bound by His decree or promise to bless and favour any, if they depart from Him. So the passage proceeds: "At what instant I shall speak concerning a nation and concerning a kingdom to pluck up and to pull down and to destroy it, if that nation against whom I have pronounced turn from their evil, I will repent of the evil that I thought to do unto them; and at what instant I shall speak concerning a nation and concerning a kingdom to build and to plant it, if it do evil in My sight, that it obey not my voice, then I will repent of the good wherewith I said I would benefit them." God's promises are attached to moral conditions, and, when these conditions are not fulfilled, He claims the right to revoke them.

The God of Jeremiah is the God of Salvation.

The words just quoted appear to contain the final doom of Israel. The intention of God in Israel's vocation had been frustrated; therefore the promises were revoked, and Israel was abandoned and cast away. In Jeremiah there are many passages to this effect: "I have taken away My peace from this people, saith the Lord, even lovingkindness and mercies"; "Though Moses and Samuel stood before Me, yet My mind could not be toward this people; cast them out of My sight, and let them go forth."¹ These were words of fearful menace, and they were followed by events which confirmed them and proved from whom they had proceeded. The throne was overturned, the capital sacked, the temple burnt, the country desolated, the popu-

¹ xvi 5; xv. 1.

lation carried away captive. It seemed the end of the history of Israel; apparently Jehovah had finally cast off His people.

It is precisely at this desperate moment, however, that Jeremiah's most characteristic teaching about God comes in. It may have excited surprise that Jeremiah's teaching about God should have been delayed so long in this series of papers. It is by his conception of God that a prophet is made. Ought not, then, his doctrine of God to have the first place in any account of his theology? There are prophets in whose thinking this is certainly its natural place. It is so, for example, in the case of Isaiah. His prophetic activity began with an overpoweringly sublime vision of the divine glory, and this incident set its mark on every page of his writing; his entire theology is deducible from his conception of God. With Jeremiah, however, it is different. He also has a sublime conception of God, but it is not primary in his system of ideas. The sins and the needs of the world in which he lives are with him primary, and God comes in as the power who is to put the world right.

The same contrast may be observed between other pairs of thinkers. The theology of St. John, for example, as the prologue to his Gospel indicates, begins in the seventh heaven, and only takes up man by the way; St. Paul, on the contrary, always begins on the ground, however high he may subsequently soar: it is from man's need that he is led up to Heaven's grace. In modern times a theologian like Calvin begins far up in the sovereignty of God, whereas a thinker like Chalmers starts from the disease of human nature and ascends to heaven in search of a remedy.

Now the point at which Jeremiah most urgently required God was where the case of Israel was most desperate, and this point was reached when his own predictions of evil were all fulfilled. But it is just in this valley of the shadow

of death that the voice of Jeremiah is heard uttering its most lyrical word and its most musical note—a word and a note in which is contained the magic of all revelation. For the God of the Bible is neither the God of nature, nor the God of Israel, nor the God of morality—though He is all these—but He is, above and beyond everything else, the God of salvation. “O the Hope of Israel, the Saviour thereof in time of trouble”—this is Jeremiah’s formula for this truth; but one of the psalmists has given it perfect expression: “He that is our God is the God of salvation.”¹

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THE SPEECHES IN THE CHRONICLES.

THE article of Dr. French² in the August number of the EXPOSITOR seems to call for some notice on my part. He has, it is true, neither substantiated his own position nor shaken mine; but in a cumulative proof, consisting of a large number of independent arguments, there are naturally some which are less forcible than others, and of these he has made the most. His paper is essentially an attempt to invalidate the conclusions reached by me in my previous article,³ by arguing that I have exaggerated the marks of the Chronicler’s style in 1 Chr. 29, and unduly minimized those in 1 Chr. 17. As there may be some readers to whom it may not be apparent why this attempt fails, I have thought it proper to examine his article in some detail, and to consider *seriatim* the principal objections raised in it. My reply will at the same time afford me the opportunity of stating more distinctly some of the points noticed by me

¹ Ps. lxxviii. 20.

² Whom I regret in my previous article to have inadvertently neglected to designate by his legitimate title.

³ EXPOSITOR, April, 1895, p. 241 ff.