

WAS "THE WEEPING PROPHET" A
PESSIMIST ?

"PROSPERITY is the blessing of the Old Testament, and adversity of the New" is the sententious declaration of Lord Bacon, and with equal assurance some modern writers assert that the Jewish Scriptures are optimistic, those of the New Testament pessimistic. In this paper we shall examine the first of these statements. It is based sometimes on the fact that in the very forefront of the sacred literature of the Hebrews we meet with the expression, "And, behold, it was very good." But, then, a few pages further on we have the story of the Fall, which, with its consequences, Schopenhauer tells us, reconciled him with the Old Testament. E. von Hartmann, in his pessimistic history of religious philosophy, deduces from Hebrew monotheism this tendency towards optimistic views of life ; so that even the pessimistic author of Ecclesiastes leans towards an easy-going Epicureanism which tries to make the best of life. We willingly admit this statement ; in accepting prosperity as a Divine gift in case of obedience to the law, and adversity as a moral discipline or a type of Divine displeasure, the Jewish mind is saved from pessimistic despair : so that, on the whole, as a modern Jewish writer puts it, "Joyousness is the predominating characteristic of Judaism." Yet with some of the utterances of the Book of Job before us, and certain passages in Ecclesiastes and the "resignation Psalms," not to mention others, we cannot accept the sweeping statement that "all Jews are optimists."

For what is optimism ? According to Voltaire's definition of it in *Candide*, the book which contains the most witty criticism, as well as the most merciless condemnation of the optimism of Leibnitz, it is "the rage to maintain

that all is well when one is ill at ease." Such is not the outcome of Hebrew thought as reflected in the Canonical books. On the contrary, there is a kind of transient pessimism in the Book of Job, where it dwells on the insolubility of life's problem, and the difficulties of belief in a moral government of the world; nothing but the overpowering consciousness of the absolute power of the inscrutable Deity saves the writer from despair. Ecclesiastes has been called by an avowed pessimist the Catechism of pessimism, as the author speaks here in a "sardonic tone of persiflage," peculiar to the higher forms of pessimistic literature. But his pessimism, such as it is, differs widely from the "*blasé* pessimism" of the modern school of continental pessimism or the intellectual pessimism to which Matthew Arnold gives expression in the following lines taken from his "Empedocles on Etna":

I alone
Am dead to life and joy, therefore I read
In all things my own deadness.

Still, there are expressions which bear some resemblance to the ironical self-introspective pessimism of the moderns in their painful efforts to "escape from brain-weariness." The Psalms here and there are full of sadness and sorrow, so that some of them have been classed as "threnodies of lamentation" on account of their resemblance to the Lamentations of Jeremiah. In Jeremiah, the most tragic figure in the most tragic period of Jewish history, we have a typical representative of Hebrew pessimism. He is "the weeping prophet." "Oh that my head were waters, and mine eyes a fountain of tears" (Jer. ix. 1, 10). "Let mine eyes run down with tears night and day, and let me not cease, for the virgin daughter of my people" (xiv. 17). He is the "illustrious mourner" portrayed by Michael Angelo with downcast eyes and gloomy meditation, brooding over the sad fate of his people. In his individual

character—"Is there any sorrow like unto my sorrow?"—in his prophetic mission as "the evening star of the declining day of prophecy," in his acts and sufferings as a patriot, and in his reflections as "the first religious thinker" with bitter sorrow gnawing at his heart, we have a complete study of Hebrew pessimism. And this, moreover suggests further comparison between Semitic and Arian, Oriental and Western, ancient and modern forms of pessimism, as one of the leading modes of thought in the present day.

The characteristic features in Jeremiah's individuality are a passionate intensity and stern veracity mingled with pathetic, almost feminine, tenderness, a capacity for indignant invective, with occasional fits of diffidence and self-distrust which make him, as a "human document," one of the most engaging figures in history. In the "confession of Jeremiah" and the memorials of his life contained in his own writings, supplemented by his friend and faithful disciple Baruch, we have, as Professor Cheyne says, a most "fascinating psychical problem." Gentle in his general bearing, he becomes at times vehement when harassed by open and secret dangers; as a young man disillusionized at his birthplace Anathoth, the city of priests, by the sight of priestly corruption, later on arriving at Jerusalem, like Luther at Rome, he is struck with horror by worse sins perpetrated at the sacred shrine, the centre of piety, at the very threshold of the Holy of Holies; in the further course of his restless career a natural disposition to pessimistic views gathers strength. He is 'the man who has seen affliction' (Lam. iii. 1). But his pessimism never becomes that of rage and resentment, as in Schopenhauer, it is modified by the religious sense of dutiful resignation to the Divine will. His feeling of utter loneliness in the crowd of unsympathetic countrymen saddens his soul, and with the quick sensibility of a refined

mind he shrinks from contact with the crimes and sins he witnesses in the city, in the court, in the sanctuary. What he sees and suffers, however, does not produce a sour misanthropy. Unlike Schopenhauer, he does not dwell with savage delight on the depraved worthlessness and abject meanness of his fellow-men. His enemies furnish him with sufficient ground for scorn and distrust, and the depressing influences of his environment produce occasionally doubts and misgivings as to his own mission, as when he apostrophizes the Divine Author of inspiration in those strange words: "Wilt Thou, indeed, be unto me a deceitful brook, as waters that are not sure?" (xv. 18, R.V., margin).

But from such temporary attacks of sceptical pessimism he recovers quickly and listens to the reassuring voice, which bids him stand forth as a "brazen wall" against all opposition and assures him of Divine support (*ib. vv. 19-20*). In the palace and in the temple, or as a prisoner among the officers in the courtyard, he boldly denounces the mischievous political Chauvinism of the hierarchical faction, as well as the aggressive formalism of religious bigotry. With equal severity he denounces the semi-heathenism of the populace, mixing up pagan rites such as the worship of the "queen of heaven" with the service of Jehovah. Yet all the while his tender love for his misguided countrymen remains unimpaired. Now and then he is carried away by his feelings, and in a moment of great stress, like Job, curses the day on which he was born, perhaps, as Kautzsch suggests, in the night of his incarceration (see chap. xx. 7, 29, and 14 *seq.*). It is the result of momentary aberration of mind; the paroxysm of grief passes away and sanity returns; he does not from his own sad experiences deduce Schopenhauer's general maxim that man's highest aim should be "the extinction of the will to live." There is a higher and a lower element in Jeremiah, as in all high-wrought natures;

there are the two voices, one of despair, and one of hope, but it is the latter which prevails in the end. He may despair for a moment of human nature, the vision of national decay and his own misery may cloud his judgement; but neither the one nor the other will prevent the revival of faith in his own mission and the destiny of his race. The savage contempt for his contemporaries expressed in the deliberate utterances of Schopenhauer have no counterpart here. In his gentle tenderness and timid shrinking the martyr soul of Jeremiah suffers "as a lamb"; he gives vent to his grief: "My bowels, my bowels! I am pained at my very heart; my heart is disquieted within me: I cannot hold my peace," he cries, amid scenes of woe and destruction. "For my people is foolish, they are sottish children, and they have none understanding: they are wise to do evil, but to do good they have no understanding" (chap. iv. 19 *seq.*, cf. viii. 20 *seq.*). When Schopenhauer saw a picture of the Abbé Ramé, the restorer of the Trappist order, he turned away from it with a gesture indicating pain, exclaiming, "That is grace!" It is the grace of resigned suffering he lacked, and which Jeremiah possessed in abundance.

We will next consider Jeremiah as the patriotic prophet, "the prophet as poet," giving vent to "the agony of the expiring nation," raising the Cassandra cry of warning, and threatening "the sword, famine, and pestilence" with painful iteration. He is the prophet of ill, suspected of treason by his countrymen, who, after the fulfilment of his gloomy vaticinations, gives expression to "the national mourning." In this he is not altogether unlike a modern pessimistic poet, Leopardi, bewailing the misfortunes of his beloved Italy, "the Niobe of nations." For twenty-three or twenty-four years he is the most prominent figure in the Jewish state, and from the beginning of sorrows to the end of the fruitless struggles for national independence he

remains the firm adversary of the dangerous *Welt-politik* of the leaders in Church and State and the uncompromising opponent of that torquous policy which leans now on this, now on that foreign alliance, alternately "drinking the bitter waters of the Nile and the Euphrates." But in vain. He might weep, but he could not ward off the final doom. It is to him that the Chronicler ascribes the dirge on the death of Josiah (2 Chron. xxxv. 25); it is he who utters the pathetic cry over "the young usurper Jehoahaz" when carried away into Egypt: "Weep not for the dead, neither bemoan him: but weep sore for him that goeth away; for he shall return no more, nor see his native country." So in his "watch songs" he laments the terrible devastations of his native land by the Scythian incursions. When the blow comes which he had foreseen, when the court, the nobles, the priests and court prophets, as well as the flower of the people, were carried away to Babylon, he utters the piteous cry: "O land, land, land!" over the country, which strangers have taken in possession. When, after the futile attempt to break the foreign yoke under the *roi-fainéant* Zedekiah, city and temple are destroyed, and the ploughshare of captivity passes over the soil of the land he loves so ardently, Jeremiah, according to the current tradition incorporated in the Septuagint superscription, indites those sad poems ever since styled "the Lamentations of Jeremiah," though in the Hebrew canon neither his nor any other author's name is mentioned. Yet even the higher criticism notes a psychical plausibility in this traditional theory, though some of the contents of the book could not from internal evidence be ascribed to his penmanship. Probably his own contributions together with the rest, are, as Budde suggests, a development of the "Kinoth"—(קִנּוּיֹת) 2 Sam. i. 17, 2 Chron. xxxv. 25, Amos. v. 1)—originating in the *Leichenlied*, or funeral wails of the women who make lamentations (see Chron. ix. 17). And this suggestion finds some

support in the Greek title of Lamentations, *θρήνοι*, corresponding to the German derivative *Thräne* = tear, ascribed naturally to the "weeping prophet," and contemporary of the events to which they allude.

Whoever was the author (or authors) of these threnodies, later on improved upon, as is surmised on good grounds, by "literary craftsmen" to adapt them for liturgical use, their general tone is quite in keeping with the rest of Jeremiah's writings, and the question arises whether, in view of this, his contemporaries were right in regarding him as a confirmed pessimist. Does he belong to that sad but noble brotherhood who learn in sorrow what they teach in song, and that section of it in particular, who give emphatic expression in their poetic strains to the *dolore universale*, like Leopardi, whose poems were used in the darker days of German history as the book of devotion for pessimists? For nowhere is the pessimism of the patriot who despairs of human nature and social and political reform more touchingly expressed than in his lyrics. Here self-pity and the lonely sorrow of the man, out of harmony with nature, with himself, and his family, afflicted with bodily suffering and mental distress, find their expression, as, e.g., in the following lines addressed to Italy, then, like Judea, under the yoke of the foreigner:—

Weep, Italy; right well thy tears may flow,
Who'st other nations born
To excel in thy prosperity of woe!

Here he resembles the Hebrew poet. But not so in another of his poems, when, rising in revolt against the appointed order of things, like his contemporary Byron in *Cain*, he arraigns in strains of bitter irony the higher powers for permitting the evil that is under the sun:—

Perchance these playful gods our toils and pains,
Bitter experiences and ill-starred love
Decreed as sport unto their leisure-hours.

Still less so when he declaims against the cruelty of Nature and its Author—

The whole creation yearns
 For rest from pain, accursed where'er it turns,
 Where'er it refuge seeks!
 Thy will was law to thee
 That youthful hope should be
 By life deluded, and life's course should run
 Replete with cares; that death should be the one
 Defence 'gainst ills; this the now destined bourne
 The immutable decree
 Thou set'st to life.

In Jeremiah the tones of hopefulness are heard ever and anon among the wails over national misfortune; the advent of the King of righteousness is celebrated immediately after the last notes of the funeral dirge over Jehoiachin have died away. So, too, "A voice is heard in Ramah, lamentations and bitter weeping; Rachel weeping for her children; she refuseth to be comforted for her children because they are not," but it is suddenly put to silence by another voice: "Thus said the Lord, Refrain thy voice from weeping, and thine eyes from tears . . . for there is hope for thy latter end," etc. (xxx. 15, 16). Like the great Italian singer in the *Divina Comedia* traversing the glooms of the Inferno and Purgatorio to reach the lofty heights of the Paradiso, the Hebrew poet in a kindred spirit, disturbed, too, like Dante, by the state of his native land, and distressed beyond measure, recovers from prostrate despondency, and, "making pearls of tears," sees the glimmer of hope in the utter darkness (xxix. 10 *seq.*). It may be too much to say, as Löhr does, in his comment on the third chapter of Lamentations, that here the dirge of mourning becomes a triumphal song of "ethical optimism," still it may be said with perfect truth that the writings of Jeremiah generally reflect a kind of mitigated pessimism, chastened by religious resignation and hopeful patience. It is this which differentiates the melancholy muse of Judea from the black,

cruel despondency of modern pessimistic poetry—he does not despair of his country.

From Jeremiah, the last of the prophet-statesmen and social reformers, we turn to Jeremiah, the preacher of righteousness, living in a degenerate age of religious stagnation and in "a period of moral criticism during which pessimism, as in our day, played its part." Like the Greek cynic in an excess of austere moroseness, with lantern in hand searching the streets of Athens for an honest man, Jeremiah scours the streets of Jerusalem in search of *a man* (chap. v. 1), despairing of success in finding manly fortitude among prophets, like Hananiah, fallen from the high ideal of their office, and in the prevailing epidemic of oracular utterances, prophesying falsely, thus giving support to the priests, who bear rule by their means; looking in vain for a man among that seething multitude, the unreasoning crowd with its defective sense of morality more than satisfied with the low aims of its leaders in Church and State. "My people love to have it so." As an early supporter of the Deuteronomist reform, Jeremiah is disappointed by the barren results it yields in superficial observances of the letter of the law whilst violating its intrinsic principles. Jeremiah, attacking the Sopherim, as Socrates attacked the Sophists, lays bare the hollowness of their profession and sees the secret spring of moral degeneracy in the classes and the masses to be in the heart which he declares to be utterly deceitful and desperately wicked (chap. xvii, 9). Personal feeling adds a sting to his bitter criticism in facing a hostile crowd, headed by designing demagogues, so that with unmeasured complaints like Savonarola in the Duomo under similar circumstances, he launches forth in severe imprecations on the Holy City; like him, too, he foresees and predicts the coming destruction, the helplessness and hopelessness of its deluded inhabitants arising from the consciousness of guilt (chap. xviii. 12). Here for a moment moral and religious

pessimism predominates, but only for a moment, The prophet recovers, and tender appeals to the people follow, urging them to return to their allegiance with a promise from Jehovah of national, consequent upon moral, regeneration. If we compare this with the eudaimonistic pessimism of von Hartmann, i.e. ancient Semitic with modern Arian pessimism, we find, no doubt, as the lapse of time should lead us to expect, a wider range of view in modern modes of thought and severer demands on human nature accordingly. For in Hartmann's system, where all intellectual and moral development culminates in the full conviction of the worthlessness of existence, and in which the cultivation of virtue leads up to a voluntary renunciation of life as the finale of the "world-process," the total aim of "cultured piety" consists in a noble effort to rid this unhappy universe of the curse of conscious being so as to enable it to relapse into the undisturbed calm of non-existence.

National self-preservation, not self-extinction, is that which the Hebrew thinker aims at. This may be a more narrow conception than that of the German pessimist, who also is a social and political reformer as well as an ethical philosopher whose patriotism, however, is made subordinate to cosmopolitan idealism. Hartmann's philosophical system is the outcome of a confluence of Oriental and Occidental ideals with an infusion of Christian sentiment and Hellenic speculation, it is transcendental, intangible and impracticable, and, moreover, logically inconsistent with the progressive spirit of the West. The directness of aim, resting on strong and simple faith in the continuity of life with a clinging to the facts of existence—existence, that is, regarded as a blessing in itself—individually and collectively and the anticipation of a final emerging of the creature from the bondage of corruption and the reconstruction of the theocracy constitutes the more practical view of Jeremiah, gaining in concentration

what it lacks in breadth. The "teleological optimism" of Hartmann ends in the sleep or dream of non-existence. It is this which differentiates Semitic from Arian, Hebrew from German pessimism. The former aims at amelioration, the latter at annihilation; both demand moral and religious reform, the one in order to ultimate reconstruction, the other in order to final destruction. As von Hartmann himself shows in his analytical history of religious philosophy the tragical-heroic melancholy and reflective tendency of the Germanic mind, as reflected in Teutonic myth, throw a veil of sadness over the brightness of the moment, so that it prefers to dwell regretfully on its evanescence rather than the possession of momentary bliss; hence its cheerful devotion even unto death, its willingness to sacrifice personal inclination to the painful performance of duty as the condition of a progressive realization of religious, ethical idealism. The heroic martyrdom of Jeremiah is of a different order. He is ready to live or die for his nation if in so doing he can restore its autonomy and cultus, the reign of justice and righteousness. Both in practical politics are patriotic, and both are religious thinkers and moralists with lofty aims. They differ, one being a weeping philosopher in theory whilst practically advancing national interests in a period of national development, the other a weeping prophet struggling in sorrow and suffering amid a national catastrophe. The one preaches a gospel of despair, as the corollary from the tenet that the Absolute is impersonal and impotent, to avoid final extinction; the other declares the message of hope since it holds fast on its belief in a personal and all-powerful Deity who can and will effect a final restitution.

If we compare Jeremiah's "sense of tears in mortal things" with the gloomy view of life and nature contained in "the venerable ancestral religions of mankind in the far

East," which so much attracted Schopenhauer, or even with the mystic pessimism of Christian saints in the West, its overstrained *contemptus mundi*; its constant refrain of "sustine and abstine"; its solemn allusions to the *Dies irae*,—the advent of the world's destruction, as the precursor of heavenly felicity, we cannot fail to note the greater sanity of the weeping philosopher, if so we may call him, of the Hebrews. The Semitic seriousness of Hebrew poetry has little, indeed, in common with the bright naturalism of Arabian literature before Mohammed, still less with Persian cheerfulness, though Omar Khayyam and Haphiz have their sad moods and melodies. But it has still less in common with the *Weltflucht* of Brahminism in its acosmic emanation theory of re-entrance into the eternal identity, the universal self of absolute existence, or the theory of esoteric Buddhism, which cuts the heart-strings of life in its attempts to attain the bliss of Nirvana. For the practical outcome of both is the concentration of all ethical effort in passive pity for the world's woes and resigned inaction, resting in patient waiting for the world's redemption in the hope of its final extinction and finding rest from weariness in the grave of humanity. This, as will be seen, corresponds with the philosophy of modern pessimism, with its tendency to passive pantheism, accepting the same sombre view of the utter illusiveness and worthlessness of life which in the subjective poetry of the day manifests a hopeless, helpless lassitude sometimes real, at other times affected. Thus Lenau, in his hypochondriacal melancholy, is ever "gravitating towards disaster," whilst Leconte de Lisle seeks refuge from the incurable ills of life in the rarefied atmosphere of poetic art, as the only consolation in a decadent age telling us to "expect nothing, and hope for nothing, unless it be the reward of nothingness." Even George Elliot, who refused to be called a pessimist and professed to be a meliorist in her strong faith in

in the possibilities of human progress, makes Fedalma say:

There lies a grave
Between this visionary present and the past.
Our joy is dead, and only smiles on us,
A loving shade from out the place of tombs.

All this is in complete contrast with the recurring strains of hopefulness in the Hebrew lyrics. Even the most "passionate plaints" of Jeremiah never reach the defiant tone of the pessimism of indignation, nor do the sorrows of Jeremiah approach anything like the self-commiserating larmoyant moanings of the modern lyrics of pessimism. Jewish theism sets a limit to despair, faith takes the place of fatalism. There may be a few isolated passages like this, "Can the Ethiopian change his skin," etc., which tend in the direction of fatalistic despair. But in most instances the gloomy description of quiescent ease is followed by a brighter picture of future deliverance.

If, as is sometimes asserted, pessimism acts as a refining influence on heart and mind, curing the modern world of the vulgarity of sated optimism, there is here at least a point of contact between Old Testament pessimism and that of our own day. But the former is more balanced in avoiding the fallacy of extremes, neither overestimating earthly possessions with optimistic extravagance, nor yet turning away soured and embittered from the world of actualities with pessimistic moroseness. It uses the valley of tears as a well, life as a school of virtue, assigning to sorrow and suffering their proper disciplinary value. If "sufferance is the badge of all our race," as Shylock complains—a complaint fully justified by the anti-Semitic policy of modern Russia and Roumania—this at least has an ethical value in cultivating the sense of solidarity and unselfish benevolence, and strengthening the bonds of mutual sympathy among the members of the persecuted race, "pain," as a modern

Roman Catholic writer on the subject remarks, being "the true school of national sentiment."

In the same way, if we compare the sad realism of Jeremiah with the realistic materialism of modern fiction professing to give a "naturalistic" presentment of contemporary life, as in the case of Zola, Sudermann, and to some extent in Thomas Hardy, we observe the same contrast. They paint society in its naked ugliness and moral deformity, thus producing disgust at the base facts of life. With scientific method they attempt to trace all the evil propensities to inherit ancestral passions, or transmitted tendencies. They dwell with painful detail on "the dust and ashes of things," "the cruelty of lust and the fragility of love," the impotence of man in battling with the persistent forces of evil. But, as Joubert, speaking of the romances of his day, truly says :

Misfortune to be beautiful and interesting must come from Heaven, or, at least, from above. Here it strikes from below, it comes from too near; the sufferers have it in their blood . . . tragedy paints misfortune, but of a fine tone and fibre, calamities of another age, and another world . . . here misfortune is present with us, it lasts for ever; it is made of iron rudely wrought; it strikes horror. Catastrophe is all very well; but nobody likes to hear of torture . . . in spite of all the fine qualities that are labelled and paraded before us it is most true to say that we are looking rather at vulgar people than melancholy events.

Not so in the picture of social corruption given in the writings of Jeremiah. Here gleams of light relieve the gloomy picture, out of the grave of buried greatness rise new national aspirations. Here the prophet, as the precursor of Zionism, sees the Jewish state rise out of the ruins on which he sat weeping, inspired by a full assurance of a coming social regeneration. "Between sorrow and joy the difference is but as between a gladsome, enlightened acceptance of life and a hostile, gloomy submission, between a large and harmonious conception of life, and one that is

stubborn and narrow," says Maeterlinck in *Wisdom and Destiny*, "it is only the lofty idea, the untiring, courageous, human idea that separates gladness from sorrow."

As a human document, depicting his own trials, and as the representative of his race describing those of his people, Jeremiah maintains the higher standpoint here indicated by the modern poet-thinker. In the third chapter of Lamentations, where the individual speaks in the name of the nation personified, he not only describes its sufferings as the consequence of national sins, but also its final recovery, thus giving voice to the mourning of the pilgrims at the wailing-wall of the ruined temple, and yet at the same time filling their hearts with patient hope. "It is good that a man should hope and quietly wait for the salvation of the Lord."

M. KAUFMANN.