

The Parables of Zechariah.

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III.

THE PARABLE OF THE CARPENTERS (CHAP. i. 18-21).

THE first vision of Zechariah is one of imaginative power and literary grace. This second one does not, in these respects, come up to the first; the execution being too brief and bald. Yet there is in it a grim realism, which, when we have allowed it to make its full impression, conveys a no less powerful lesson.

I. When the curtains of revelation were again drawn back, to disclose the symbols in which the mystery of God was being unfolded to the mind of the youthful prophet, he beheld four horns. This is all he says, being too sparing of description. But, as in the foregoing vision he certainly meant, when he mentioned horses, to imply that there were riders upon them, so here behind the horns our imagination is intended to supply the animals to which they belong. The horns were not detached or quiescent, but the weapons of rude and violent strength, pushing behind them. When the prophet asked "the angel who talked with him" what these horns were, the reply was, "These are the horns which have scattered Judah, Israel, and Jerusalem." They were images of the destructive attacks to which the native land of the prophet was exposed. The number four may perhaps most naturally be understood to refer to the four cardinal directions, and to mean that the country was menaced on every side.

If we inquire more closely what enemies were suggested to the prophet by the four horns, various views may be taken. Some have supposed that here we have, as in the visions of Daniel, a sketch, partly retrospective and partly prospective, of the four great world-powers with which successively the people of God came into collision—the Babylonians, the Persians, the Greeks, and the Romans.¹ Or, if the mind of the prophet may more reasonably be supposed to have been occupied with the heathen powers by which the country was beset in his own day, we may think of such nations as the Egyptians and Edomites

¹ Thus Pusey, *Minor Prophets*.

on the south, the Moabites and Ammonites on the east, the Philistines on the west, and on the north the Syrians and the Chaldeans.² If we wish still more to localise the prophet's anxieties, we find in the history of the time that there were numerous enemies in the immediate vicinity, intent on crushing out the life of the little community to which he prophesied.³ But, as he says expressly that the horns denoted the powers that had scattered not only Judah and Jerusalem, but Israel also, we probably do best to think of the four great powers to which in point of fact the overthrow both of the northern and southern kingdoms and their subsequent sufferings were due, namely, the Assyrians, the Egyptians, the Babylonians, and the Medo-Persians.⁴

More important, however, than the exact identification of the several heathen powers is the indication of their character and behaviour in the image under which they are symbolised. The horn is, in Scripture, an image of pride, of strength, and brutal destructiveness; for it is both the ornament of the animal which carries it and its weapon of war. To lift up the horn is, therefore, to bear oneself with arrogance; and to push or charge with the horn is to attack with violence. Horned animals are liable to excesses of blind rage, when they charge with irresistible fury and trample their victims with implacable stubbornness. There is scarcely any situation more dreadful in fact, or more distressing even to imagine, than to be caught in some spot where escape is impossible by such an infuriated beast, and to be gored and stamped in its madness. This was the situation in which, in the imagination of the prophet, the people of God seemed to be; and it was not one enemy they had to face; for they were beset on every side.

His was not the only mind to which this image had suggested itself in the face of violent opposi-

² Thus Hitzig, *in loc.*

³ Ezra iv. 7-10.

⁴ Thus Wright, *in loc.*, Wellhausen deletes the words "Israel and Jerusalem."

tion. Thus in Psalm xxii. the sufferer says, "Many bulls have compassed me; strong bulls of Bashan have beset me round."¹ But we know from history that in Zechariah's case it had a special justification. He had himself endured the exile in Babylon; and Babylon was, therefore, to him the representative heathen power. Now, all that we know of Babylon, either from Holy Writ or from the monuments of its history brought to light by the spade of the explorer in our own day, confirms the accuracy of this representation. If the horn means pride, this was perhaps the leading characteristic of Babylon. She called herself, says Isaiah, the lady of kingdoms, and as if she were the very Deity, she said, "I am, and none else besides me";² and the tone of her own records, preserved in her libraries of brick, is one of self-worshipping arrogance. If the horn denotes cruelty, this also was characteristic of Babylon. On her own walls are depicted horrors which now make the blood run cold, but to her kings were matters of boasting; and the records of Israel in the Captivity are saturated through and through with the cruelty and scorn with which the souls of the exiles were filled. There was something monstrous about the civilisation of Babylon, as if the spirit in it had been not that of a man but a beast. Yet, whilst its power lasted, it was irresistible, and it swept over the countries as a flock of infuriated buffaloes sweeps across the prairies. Woe to the creature that comes in its way!

Not much, if at all different, from that of Babylon, was the spirit of the other enemies by whom Israel was surrounded; and the soul of the prophet, in fear and trembling, saw them aiming, like four powerful and cruel horns, at the body of the little community in which his heart was bound up.

It was the tenderness of his love for his country that caused the dangers to which it was exposed thus to take shape in his brain and haunt his dreams. There were many of his fellow-countrymen to whom the representation would appear an exaggeration. To them the weal of the community was a vague and distant idea; their own "ceiled houses" were the objects of their care by day and the subjects of their dreams by night. So it is

¹ Cf. also Ps. lxxviii. 30.

² Especially chap. xlvii., in connexion with which compare Dr. G. A. Smith's excellent chapter on Babylon, *Isaiah*, vol. ii. chap. 12.

always. The average man's interests and anxieties are limited to his own person, his family and his business, all beyond being vague to his mind. But, where sympathy has been widened by culture or any other cause, joys and sorrows assume shape and substance which to the undeveloped heart are hardly intelligible; and, when the love of God and the love of man have widened the horizon, and the cause of righteousness has become a passion, the perils which threaten Church and country will haunt the imagination, as these charging horns disturbed the dreams of Zechariah.

It would not be difficult to name a quartette of evils menacing our own country, and the cause of Christ at the present time, which will affect the heart which is at once awake and sympathetic exactly as the young prophet was affected by this vision. There is Unbelief. This danger changes its form every few years; yet it is always with us. At present it comes in the shape of doubt as to whether, when so many of the phenomena of the universe, which science is daily bringing more fully within our ken, can be explained by the action of the mere inherent properties of matter, the universe as a whole cannot be explained in the same way, and God be put aside as an unnecessary assumption; or, arriving from another angle, it assails the mind with the question whether Christianity be not only one of many religions, all of which are mere products of man's own mind, and whether the Bible ought not at last to be relegated to a place among the other sacred books of the world whose authority the growth of knowledge has exploded. There is Indifference, an enemy even more formidable. In certain sections of the population human nature seems to have lost its instinct for God and its native dread of death, judgment, and eternity. With some this is the result of prosperity; in the excess of their temporal occupations and possessions the spirit, with its aspirations, has been extinguished, and life has become a thoughtless round of amusements. With others the same result is due to grinding poverty: their time is so occupied, and their powers are so exhausted with the bare struggle for existence, that they have no strength or leisure left for the cultivation of the better nature. Meantime excessive luxury and excessive poverty confront one another in deadly enmity; and the air is ringing with the war of class with class. There is

Impurity. It poisons life and conversation in the country, and it walks shameless in the city; it is decimating our army worse than a great war; it is coming back into our literature from which the great authors of the Victorian Age expelled it; it is invading the theatre in forms so cynical that even the defenders of that institution are expressing their alarm. To complete the quartette, there is Drunkenness—an evil so vast and so detestable, so ruinous to man and so dishonouring to God, that the happier generations of the future will wonder how the common sense of humanity, not to speak of the heart of the Christian world, could ever have endured it.

There are many in whose hearts the mention of these and similar evils awakens no response; but it is only if such things have reality for us, haunting our imagination, exciting our anxieties and fears, even disturbing us in the watches of the night, that we have any part in the spirit which threw this vision on the screen of Zechariah's dreams.

II. The keen sense of the dangers to which the country was exposed, though not felt by all the prophet's fellow-countrymen, was doubtless shared by a number of them; and the imagery in which he set it forth would appeal to their sympathies. This was not, however, the truly prophetic message. It was not to bring home their misery to his fellow-citizens that Zechariah was sent, but to utter a watchword of hope; and this is why I have called this the parable not of the Horns, but of the Carpenters.

After he had seen the horns, the Lord showed him four carpenters, who were come to fray¹ them and to cast them out. The word rendered "carpenters" would be more exactly rendered "smiths"; and some light is perhaps cast on the origin of the vision by the fact that in Eastern countries, where even are employed for draught purposes, animals which happen to be dangerous, on account of the tendency to gore, are taken to the smith to get the points of their horns filed or broken off.² It is no such partial mutilation, however, that is here intended, but a complete deprivation of the power to injure.

It is doubtful what importance we are to attach to the number four in this case. It may mean in

¹ This word does not mean, as might be supposed from the connexion, to file or saw away, but to frighten.

² Pressel, quoted by Wright.

general that God is at no loss for instruments to carry out His purposes: let the enemies of His people multiply, yet He is able in equal proportion to multiply their deliverers. But, if Zechariah had special enemies of God's people in view when he spoke of the four horns, he may also have had special agents of Providence in view when speaking of the carpenters. Thus, if he was confining his attention to the circumstances of his own generation, the four carpenters may be Zerubbabel and Joshua the high priest, Ezra and Nehemiah—the four outstanding figures in that period of the history. Or, if his regards were taking a wider sweep, then the smiths might mean the various conquerors by whom the powers which had oppressed Israel were subdued. Nebuchadnezzar shattered the power of Assyria, Cyrus that of Babylon, Cambyses that of Egypt, and Alexander the Great that of Persia.³ But it will be observed that, if the latter is the interpretation, the carpenters do not come forth out of Israel, but are outsiders employed by Jehovah for a temporary purpose.

It is more important, however, to observe the nature of the force by which the enemies are subdued, as this is set forth in the parable.

It is the force of Man. The carpenters advance to frighten and drive away the horns—man against beast. The pride, cruelty, and animal violence of Babylon and the other heathen powers appeared to be irresistible; but, in spite of their superior bulk and strength, animals are no match for men. "Every kind of beasts, and of birds, and of serpents, and of things in the sea, is tamed, and hath been tamed of mankind."⁴ Body appears to be stronger than spirit, but in reality it is not so. The higher and finer powers of human nature always in the long run win the victory over the lower and coarser. Intellect, conscience, love may be trodden down for a day by the bestial violence of persecution; but they are always on the way to ultimate sovereignty. This was what Daniel saw when in his vision the empires represented by the four beasts yielded at last to the kingdom of the Son of Man. And this is our Christian faith.

Another idea represented by the carpenters is Skill. Indeed, the word means "skilled workmen"; and the reason why they are able to overcome the superior strength of the horns is because they meet blind fury with trained skill. The forms in which evil embodies itself age after age have to be

³ Wright.

⁴ Jas. iii. 7.

circumvented by wise planning and patient working. Mere enthusiasm is not enough ; even truth is not enough ; though both are invaluable. It is the well-laid plan, combining the strength of all who are willing to help and directing it to the point to be assailed, that carries the day. Our own century has afforded many examples of this. The slave trade appeared to be rooted in human nature and even in the Bible, when a few thinkers in advance of their age began to attack it ; the first apostles of emancipation were overwhelmed with ridicule ; the movement was entangled for many a day in the mean details of subscriptions, committees, public meetings, and so on ; but gradually the public mind was saturated with conviction, the public conscience was conquered ; and at last, before the irresistible force of public opinion, wrong had to give way. It was by the facts, the clear arguments, the organisation and the indomitable perseverance of Richard Cobden, that the abolition of the Corn Laws was carried. In the revival of last century Whitefield was the orator of the movement, who drew the crowds, but it was by the wisely-conceived and patiently-developed method of Wesley that the movement was made a permanent power in the world. Christianity itself might have been like water spilt upon the ground, had not its truth been propagated, and its influence guided, and its life fostered in the Christian Church. And, although this organisation has sometimes been a hindrance instead of a help, Christianity will never be able to live or to prevail without it.

One more idea represented by the carpenters is Courage. It is no easy thing to meet the onset of

the wild animal and shiver its weapon of attack. There is risk in it ; and there must be swift and sure blows. The gigantic evils of the world are not to be overthrown by pusillanimous hearts. Those who engage in this conflict must be ready both to receive and to give knocks. "For that the leaders took the lead, for that the people offered themselves willingly, bless ye the Lord," is the commencement of Deborah's song.¹ It is the beginning of all good and successful enterprises. Sometimes the leaders hesitate to take the lead against wrongs and abuses : they are afraid of giving offence and of injuring the position which they have already acquired ; and, for similar reasons, the rank and file may be afraid to follow, even when the leaders are willing. But, when the leaders lead and the people willingly offer themselves, it is marvellous what can be done. Many an evil that looks formidable only requires to be faced and taken by the beard, and it will turn and flee. A handful of resolute men, who know their own minds and will not flinch, can revolutionise any society. Nothing is so prophetic as honest work. As we go on, new horizons discover themselves. Those who only muse and talk often despair ; but those who are up and doing are always hopeful. Our religion is an optimism, grounded not on sentiment or on empirical observation of the tendencies of society, but on the eternal nature of goodness and the will of God. We do not ignore the malignity of evil or minimise the portentous forms in which it is embodied ; but we believe in One who can fray it and cast it out.

¹ In the Revised Version.

Requests and Replies.

Salt losing its Savour.

MATTHEW v. 13.

I asked an eminent man of science, "Is it possible for salt to lose its savour?" He replied, "I know of no *natural* process by which it can do so. It can only do so by being *chemically* changed, and when that is the case, of course, it is no longer salt—it has become something else."

We are told that in eastern lands rock-salt has been found that has by exposure to the atmosphere lost its saltiness. Is not this simply because the salt has been *removed*—not *changed*—and only the earthy matter with which the salt was mixed left behind?—W. B.

THE comparison in the above passage seems to refer to the use of natural or rock-salt, which according to Tristram (*Travels*, p. 296) is now obtained by Arabs at Jebel Usdum, or the salt mountain at the south end of the Dead Sea, and used by them, and also sold in Hebron and Jerusalem. Such salt contains a variable percentage of gypsum and earthy matter, sometimes so considerable as to form a large proportion of the mass. When dissolved for use, the "savour" or active property of the salt is in the solution, while the earthy residuum, though more or less resembling the original substance, is insoluble and tasteless,