

HOSEA'S CHILDREN.

HOSEA II. 23.

I HASTILY appended a note to NIGER'S article on "*Immanuel*," in the last number of this Magazine, which seems to be worthy of, and perhaps to need, a little expansion. According to him Isaiah summed up the burden of his prophetic message in the significant names he gave to his three children—Mahershalal-hash-baz, Shear-jashub, Immanuel; that is, *Speed-spoil Hasten-booty, A-remnant-shall-return, and God with us*. This interpretation of the biographical facts imbedded in the earlier Chapters of the Book of Isaiah, though familiar to Commentators and approved by the highest authority, is, it appears, new and strange, and a little dubious, to many who yet read the Bible with intelligence and attention. Certain teachers and preachers of the Word even, to whom I read NIGER'S brief essay, met it with inquiry, if not with incredulity. Their doubts, when sifted, came to this; that they knew of nothing like it in the history of other Prophets. It was to meet this difficulty that I adduced the case of Hosea; for I thought that if I could adduce another instance of a Prophet who, like Isaiah, had three children to whom he gave significant names which summed up the burden of *his* prophetic message, no closer parallel could be desired or conceived. Hence the Note which I am now about to expand.

Many years before Isaiah prophesied to the southern kingdom of Judah, Hosea prophesied to the northern kingdom of Israel. This northern kingdom was even more sinful, corrupt, and idolatrous than the sister kingdom of Judah, and, by its sins, provoked an earlier

doom. Its moral and spiritual condition was as low, and as hopeless, in the days of Hosea as was that of Judah in the later days of Isaiah. In substance, therefore, the message of Hosea to Israel was identical with that of Isaiah to Judah, though he cast it into a different form. *He also* had to warn the people to whom he was sent that, as the necessary and inevitable consequence of their corrupt and godless estate, they had exposed themselves to the judgment of God and to the anger and cupidity of man; that, weakened by their iniquities and divisions, they would be unable to resist the invading hosts of Assyria, and would be carried away captive by them into a strange land. And *he also* had to assure them that, in the strange mercy of God, they should be purged from their sins by the miseries of their Captivity; and that, being purged, they should be restored to the land of their fathers, to serve the God of their fathers once more, and to start on a new and happier career.

This prophetic message, both in its aspects of warning and of comfort, he faithfully delivered to the sinful people, urging them to repent and amend, and above all to hold fast their trust in Jehovah even when his hand was heaviest upon them. But, like Isaiah, he was not content with delivering his message in words; he also delivered it in those symbolic actions which, to an Oriental race, spoke louder than any words. Like Isaiah, and by the immediate direction of Jehovah, he embodied his message in the significant names he gave to the children that were born to him.

In the first Chapter of the Book which bears his name we are told what those names were, and what they meant. In Verse 4 we read of his firstborn :

“And the Lord said unto him, Call his name *Jezreel*; for yet a little while and *I will avenge the blood of Jezreel* upon the house of Jehu, and will bring the monarchy of the house of Israel to an end.” Now Jezreel was the name of that open and fertile plain (better known to us by its Greek equivalent *Esdraclon*) in the midst of the northern kingdom which has been the scene of most of the great battles fought in Palestine from the days of the Judges to the days of the Crusaders. It was also the name of a royal city which stood on a “commanding site near the eastern extremity of the plain, a spur of mount Gilboa,” the city in which Ahab and Jezebel held their court, practised their foul idolatries, and committed many murders as insolent as that by which they gained possession of Naboth’s vineyard. This city of Jezreel, like the plain of Jezreel, was steeped in human blood. “Here Joram died of his wounds; here Ahaziah was mortally smitten; here Jezebel met her ghastly fate;” and here “all that remained of the house of Ahab, and all his great men and his kinsfolk and priests fell” under the avenging sword of Jehu. “The blood of Jezreel” was, therefore, the blood shed by Ahab and his cruel masterful wife; the blood shed in their unhallowed crusade against the prophets of Jehovah and against as many of the people as would not bow the knee to Baal; and especially, perhaps, the blood of Naboth—the judicial murder, the typical crime, which appears and reappears in the prophetic writings of Israel with a ghastly and terrible pertinacity.

But why was this blood to be “avenged upon the house of Jehu”—Jehu, who had been very zealous against the guilty house of Ahab, cutting them off from

the face of the earth? Partly, no doubt, because in smiting the house of Ahab Jehu had shewn a ferocity, a thirst for blood, like their own: but, mainly, because the descendants of Jehu were now falling into the very sins of Ahab; because under their rule idolatry was once more lifting up its head, and Jehovah Himself was "only a Baal" to them, only one of many masters;¹ because there was "no truthfulness and no love, and no knowledge of God in the land, but cursing, and lying, and robbery, and adultery."² And how should a people be strong who are guilty of such sins as these? how should a dynasty stand which fostered such sins as these, and set an example of all iniquity? The blood-guiltiness of Ahab's house was to be avenged on the house of Jehu because that house, called to avenge the crimes of Ahab, was reproducing and sanctioning them.

When Hosea called his firstborn *Jezreel*, then, he meant the name to recall the blood shed, the guilt incurred at Jezreel, the blood that cried for vengeance from plain and city, and to warn the people that its cry would be heard, that guilt so heinous *must* receive the doom it had provoked and deserved.

But he meant far more than this. He meant, by a kind of pun suggested by this Name, to imply that the sinful people to whom he proclaimed an impending judgment had lost their power, their preëminence, with God. In the Hebrew *Jezreel* is pronounced *Is-re-el*, and sounds so like *Is-ra-el*, that the Jews to whom Hosea was sent would at once catch the play of sound, and understand that they were no longer deemed worthy of the name of which they were so proud; that instead of being named after *Is-ra-el*, the

¹ Hosea ii. 16.

² *Ibid.* iv. 1. 2.

“prince with God,” they were rather to be called Iz-re-el, to bear the name of the wicked city in which Ahab and Jezebel had rioted in murder and lust, and Jehu had cut them off with a savage cruelty not unlike their own, the doomed city over which there now hung the cloud of Divine anger and judgment.

The word *Jezebel*, again, has a double significance. It means *God scatters* and *God sows*. No doubt there is here a reminiscence of the fertile plain on which so many battles have been fought. So fertile was it that the Hebrews called it *God's sowing*. But as the sower *scatters* his seed in the soil, the word came also to mean *God's scattering*. And when Hosea used the word in a prophecy of judgment, there could be no doubt in which of these two senses he used it. He meant it to denote, as a people so quick to detect the omens in words would instantly discern, that they would be driven out from the land of their fathers, and *scattered* in a strange land.

How much, then, and how much of Hosea's prophetic message, would the name of his firstborn convey to men to whom the prophet was as familiar a figure as the preacher is to us, and who were accustomed to ponder on the meaning of his symbolical actions and pregnant words! Here was a child named *Jezebel* on purpose to call their attention to the meaning of that word, and to illustrate a prediction which had fallen from the Prophet's lips. Who can doubt that, as they considered the Name in connection with the prophecy, they would see in it all that we have seen and more? They would at least find in it a prediction that the blood shed at Jezebel was to be avenged by a judgment which would destroy their monarchy, and bring their

kingdom to an end ; a prediction that *Is-ra-el* was to be degraded into *Iz-re-el*, the prince with God into a guilty outcast from his favour : and a prediction that they were to be *scattered by God* for their sins, in heathen and hostile lands.

From Verse 6 of the same Chapter we learn that, after an undefined interval, a second child, a daughter, was born to Hosea, concerning whom he received the command : "Call her name *Lo-ruhamah* (*i.e., Not-pitied*), for *I will no more have pity* upon the house of Israel, and much less will I forgive them." It is easy to see why, if Hosea wished to convey an effective and emphatic warning to Israel, he should call his little daughter *Not-pitied*. For the Jews had often been warned, often been threatened with a terrible judgment for their sins, and yet no final, no exterminating doom had fallen upon them. There had always been some loophole of escape ; and, sooner or later, they had found and taken it. *They* had repented and turned to the Lord for a time, or their kings had repented and carried out a partial reformation of public manners. And God had always been very good, and easy to be entreated. What reason was there to fear that He would not be as easy with them in any coming peril, and have compassion on them, and forgive their sins ? "There is this reason," replies the Prophet, "Your name henceforth, like that of this child, is to be *Not-pitied*. Do not delude yourselves with vain hopes. God will no more have compassion—what you mean by compassion—on you ; much less will he forgive your sins, and turn aside the retribution you have provoked by them." And so, in addition to the name *Iz-re-el*, which implied their fall and guilt and danger,

this new name, *Lo-ruhamah*, is fastened upon them to denote that there was no refuge for them even in the mercy of God itself.

That would be a hard saying to them, and well-nigh incredible. It was their boast, and continued to be their boast down to Apostolic times, "The people of the Lord, the people of the Lord, are we." And could God forget the people whom He had chosen for Himself, the seed of Abraham, the heirs of the Covenant, and abandon them to the tender mercies of the heathen which were so cruel? If we turn to Verses 8 and 9 of this first Chapter we shall see how even this last refuge is closed against them by the Prophet. For there we read that, when poor little *Not-pitied* was weaned—which, according to the Oriental custom of that time, would not be till she was three years old—another child was given to Hosea, of whom it was said, "Call his name *Lo-ammi* (*i.e.*, *Not-my-people*); for *ye are not my people*, and, as for Me, I will be none of yours." Not only would God shut up his bowels of compassion toward them; He would also reject them, and cast them down from their pride of place as a sacred nation, a chosen and peculiar people. They should no longer be able to boast themselves, "The people of the Lord are we," or to rest in his covenant with them. They had violated that covenant; and henceforth God, instead of knowing them as *My-people*, would know them only as *Not-my-people*.

Now, if we try to conceive the scene that passed before the men of Israel for some seven years in the house and family of the Prophet, we shall understand, I think, how those among them whose spiritual apprehension was not wholly blunted would feel as if a

grim circle of doom was closing in upon them, and every possible loophole of escape being stopped up. Here was a man, whom they confessed to be a man of God, for ever warning them that, as the natural and inevitable outcome of their guilt, a day of terrible retribution was at hand, on which God would cast them off, delivering them into the hands of their sins, and refusing to have mercy upon them. Here was a man whose very children were pressed into the service of his prophetic errand, set no less than himself for signs and portents in Israel; and as his children are born to him, he gives them names, and that by the immediate direction of Jehovah Himself, which are full of the most ominous significance. The names of Hosea's children are also the names of those who affected to be, who, despite all their sins, prided themselves on being, the children of the living God. And God calls them no longer *Is-ra-el*, but *Iz-re-el*,—not *Prevailing-with God* that is, but *Scattered-by-God*; no longer *Pitied*, but *Not-pitied*; no longer *My-people*, but *Not-my-people*. Every door of hope was closed and made fast against them; and they were left, in their guilt, to their doom, unpitied and rejected by the God who was their Strength and their Shield.

This is the dark side of the picture: but is there no bright side to it? We have seen *the warning* of the Prophet embodied in the names of his children; but where is that assurance of mercy and redemption which he was also commissioned to deliver? If we would see how these significant Names were made to convey *the promise* of Hosea's message, as well as its warning, we must turn to the second Chapter of this

singular Prophecy. Mark how it opens (Verse 1): "Say ye unto your brethren"—*i.e.*, Let the men of Israel say one to another—" *Ammi*, and to your sisters *Ruhamah*." In the former Chapter the people had been taught to call themselves *Lo-ammi* (*Not-my-people*) and *Lo-ruhamah* (*Not-pitied*). Now they are to drop the negative ("Lo") prefixed to their names, and to call themselves *Ammi* instead of *Lo-ammi*, *Ruhamah* instead of *Lo-ruhamah*,—*Pitied* instead of *Not-pitied*, and *My-people* instead of *Not-my-people*.

It is instructive and pathetic to note how this great change was to be brought about. Not by escaping their doom, but by bearing it; not by evading the threatened judgment, but by enduring it, was that great change of character to be effected which carried with it a change of position and name. In their Captivity they were to recognize and renounce the sins by which they had alienated themselves from the life of God: they were to repent and to turn to Him with full purpose of heart.¹ In the valley of tribulation they were to find a door of hope.² In the darkest moment of their distress God would speak "comfortingly unto them."³ And then, in that day, the very day on which they really and sincerely turned to Him, God would turn to them in loving-kindness and in mercies, as He had already turned to them in righteousness and in judgment.⁴ And God being reconciled to them, all things would be at peace with them, all things would become theirs. In a charming parable,⁵ Hosea sets forth the sympathy of Nature with the friends of God, and describes her as adding

¹ Chapter ii. 6-13.

⁴ Verse 10.

² Verse 15.

⁵ Verses 21 and 22.

³ Verse 14.

her importunate supplication to the supplication of Israel for a gracious heaven and a fruitful earth. Restored from captivity to a wasted land, Israel needs corn and wine and oil, and craves them. The corn and wine and oil depend on the bounty of the earth, and beseech it to yield its kindly nourishment and genial warmth, that they *may* refresh and gladden Israel. The earth depends upon the heavens, on dew and rain and sunshine, and beseeches them to shed their kindly influences upon it. The heavens, in their turn, depend on God, and beseech Him to speak the quickening word, to give the command for which alone they wait. And God listens to this universal prayer. He speaks the word, and the heavens drop fatness, and the earth yields her increase, and the corn and wine and oil offer their nourishment and refreshment to the restored and reconciled Israel, who still bears the name Iz-re-el indeed, but now bears it in its better sense, and thinks of herself as one *sown*, but not as one *scattered*, by Jehovah.

Thus, despite their iniquity, and through the very judgments which punished it, the Divine promise¹ was to be fulfilled: "Nevertheless the number of the children of Israel shall be as the sand of the sea, which cannot be measured nor numbered; and it should come to pass that instead of its being said unto them *Not-my-people*, it shall be said unto them, *Sons-of-the-living-God*."

All this brighter side of the Prophetic Message is summed up, in the most wonderful way, in the last Verse of this Second Chapter; nay, more, in this single verse—and there are few Verses even in the

¹ Chapter i. Verse 10.

Bible itself so crowded with significance—Hosea sums up *all* that he himself had said, all that he had been teaching for some seven years. It is God whom he represents as speaking these weighty and matterful words: “And I will *sow* (an allusion of course to the meaning of Jezreel—“God’s sowing”) her (the impersonated people of Israel) unto me (sow, and no longer scatter); and *I will have pity* upon *Not-pitied*; and I will say unto *Not-my-people*, *Thou art my people*; and she shall say to me, *My God*.” Obviously, so soon as we can read the Verse aright, we find in it the names of all Hosea’s children and the whole significance of his prophetic message. On the one hand, we are reminded of the time in which Israel was scattered for their guilt among the heathen, the time in which God refused to pity them, or to acknowledge them for his own; and, on the other hand, we are reminded of that better time in which, instead of being *God-scattered*, *Unpitied*, and *Not-my-people*, they were called *God-sown*, *Pitied*, and *Sons-of-the-living-God*, when the heavens smiled upon them, and the earth gave them her increase, and all the forces of Nature, once so hostile, were at peace with them.

It is impossible, I think, to study this chapter in Hosea’s autobiography without admitting that Isaiah was not alone in giving prophetic names to his children, and that NIGER’S interpretation of the biographical facts imbedded in the earlier Chapters of his Prophecy is very probably the true interpretation.