

THE PROPHET AMOS.

II. THE PEOPLE OF ISRAEL.

In a former paper it was observed that the prophet's doctrine of Jehovah was a very elevated one. Jehovah, in the prophet's conception of Him, was a self-conscious Person, for He swore by Himself; He was all-powerful, His name was not the God of Israel, but the Lord of hosts; He not only possessed all power, but wielded it, being creator of all that exists in heaven and on earth, Orion and the Pleiades, the mountains and the wind, and being the mover in all the changes which we observe, turning the darkness into morning and making the day dark with night, giving and withholding rain, sending mildew, pestilence, overthrow, and earthquake. Further, He not only commanded the material forces of the universe, He ruled equally among the nations of the earth, bringing them from their ancient seats to new habitations, and sending them back again to whence they came, the nations around Israel as well as Israel; and even directing the powerful Assyrian, and making him the rod of His anger to afflict Israel from the northern border to the south, and to execute His judgments upon the nations who disregarded the common laws of humanity, whether in regard to Israel or among themselves: and His power was an all-pervading one, operating to effect His righteous ends in the top of Carmel and in the bottom of the sea, in hell and heaven. It is however upon the ethical or spiritual nature of Jehovah that the prophet chiefly insists. He upholds the law of righteousness and humanity, which is common to Himself and to men. To this is due that He

must chastise the nations and Israel alike, the latter doubly. And for the same reason all service of Him to be acceptable must be spiritual, that is, mental. Sacrifices of flesh are inappreciable to Him; He and they are incommensurable. It is interesting to know for certain that this teaching is as old as the first half of the eighth century. It is not uncommon teaching in the Old Testament, being found in the Psalms as well as in the prophets (Ps. xl. and l.); but the date of any psalm can hardly ever be fixed. Historical tradition lifts the doctrine into a much greater antiquity, putting it into the mouth of Samuel: "Hath the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the Lord?" (1 Sam. xv. 22.)

Though this prophet insists most on the idea of the Divine righteousness, and on a righteous life as true service of Him—"I will not smell in your solemn assemblies, but let righteousness run down your streets like water,"—it would be a mistake to suppose that Jehovah is a mere impersonated justice, or that righteousness among men is but a cold giving to every man his due. Jehovah is also good, for He brought up Israel from Egypt, and He raised up among the people prophets and Nazarites. He is not only good to Israel, He is compassionate: twice, in other words, many times, He repented Him of the evil He thought to do to Israel, and averted His judgment, moved by the consideration that Jacob was small (chap. vii.); and it is His pity for the poor of His people that sees so great an offence in the oppression of them by the rich. Neither is righteousness among men a mere cold civil or judicial rectitude of conduct. It embraces consideration for the poverty of the poor, for the sorrow of the wretched, for the human feelings of mankind in all their compass. It is no doubt interesting to observe the leading conceptions of particular prophets, what strikes them as the great attribute or characteristic of Jehovah's being, and corre-

sponding to this, what should be the great feature of men's service of Him; yet we are in danger when generalizing in this way of making particular prophets the exponents of merely a single conception, and failing to observe the many other conceptions, which, though less prominent, are present, either expressed or suggested. It is the manner of one writer to teach or suggest by examples, while another expresses his idea explicitly; but it may not always be a just inference that the second makes an advance upon the first. Amos says in Jehovah's name: "Also I brought you up out of Egypt, and led you forty years in the wilderness, to possess the land of the Amorite" (ii. 10), leaving the action to appeal to men's minds and suggest the affection in the mind of the Lord which prompted it; while Hosea speaks explicitly: "When Israel was a child, I loved him, and called my son out of Egypt" (xi. 1). Amos denounces those who sell the poor for money, leaving the denunciation to suggest to those who heard him that humanity should characterize their treatment of one another; but Hosea has the word that expresses the positive idea: "There is no truth nor mercy (*hesed*), humanity or goodness, in the land." Again Amos says: "I hate, I despise your feasts; go to Bethel, and transgress," leaving it to be inferred that Jehovah was altogether another from the people's conception of Him; while Hosea says plainly, "There is no knowledge of God in the land; I desire goodness and not sacrifices." The task of biblical theology is an exceedingly delicate one. The passion of the human mind is for distinctions and classification. Broad distinctions are rare in the Old Testament. The course of revelation is like a river, which cannot be cut up into sections. The springs at least of all prophecy can be seen in the two prophets of northern Israel; but the rains which fed those fountains fell in the often unrecorded past.

Corresponding to the idea of Jehovah is the idea of the

People. It is the god that makes the people; its unity lies in its having a god. The two conceptions are correlative, but in Israel at least the idea of God is the formative idea. Its God is not a reflection of its national spirit; on the contrary, its consciousness is expressed in the favourite figure of the clay and the potter (Jer. xviii.). Jehovah is the framer of Israel, and the mould in which He casts it is that of His own nature, the image He impresses on it is His own. Historical investigators are never weary asking where or when or how Israel came by its conception of Jehovah; but they fail to elicit an answer from history. They construe the history of Israel with the view of showing how its various turns must have suggested to the people the ideas which they had of their God. In this however they directly traverse the consciousness of the people as reflected in their Scriptures; for this consciousness persistently inverts the order of the evolutionists, and always explains events by the conception of Jehovah already possessed. And this is as true of the exodus as it is of the exile. The history of Israel ran a course very much like the histories of other peoples. The nation began as a confederacy of tribes, consolidated into a monarchy, split into divisions, and fell a natural prey to the great eastern empires. Other states did the same. The institutions of Israel, such as the monarchy or the priesthood, were just the institutions of the neighbouring peoples. The people was a Shemitic people, amidst others of the same family. How came Israel to entertain such exalted notions of its monarchy as we find in Isaiah vii.-xi., or of itself as a people in opposition to other peoples, as we find in Isaiah xlii., xlix.? What is the *differentia* in its consciousness from the mind of other nations? It cannot be doubted that it is the conception of Jehovah its God. This is the source of the whole of that imperishable ideal element which Israel contributed to Christianity and to the perfect religion

of mankind. Its institutions had little in them peculiar ; what gave them meaning was something anterior to them, something which already lay in the mind of the nation, and which it brought to the institutions or to the events, and which transfigured them. The kingship in Israel had nothing in it of itself to awaken such thoughts as we find connected with it, any more than the kingship in Moab. It was the preliminary thought that Jehovah was the people's King, and the human king His representative, on whom lay His glory, that gave the monarchy its elevation, and struck an ideal which found no satisfying limit short of making the representative king in some way an embodiment of Jehovah Himself—"God with us." And what made the people, or the prophets speaking for them, put forward the extraordinary pretensions above other peoples which they made was the consciousness that they were the people of Jehovah. It is always difficult to argue about God or gods, unless we assume more than we are entitled in argument to assume. When we speak of God or gods we mean the conception of God entertained by the people. Israel's thoughts of Jehovah their God were such that the fact of their being His people raised them, to their own minds, above all the nations of the world, and gave them a place in the history of the human mind that was unique. Jehovah's word incarnated in the flesh of the seed of Abraham was the Servant of the Lord, who should bring forth judgment to the nations. The self-consciousness of the religion of Israel is a phenomenon almost more singular than the religion itself. And this self-consciousness is reflected more vividly already in the prophecies of Balaam (of whatever age they may be) than even in the second half of Isaiah ; for Isaiah has still to argue with heathenism, but Balaam, the prophet of heathendom itself, acknowledges the uniqueness of Israel and its God.

The prophet Amos appeared at Bethel some time in the

reign of Jeroboam II., before the middle of the eighth century. The northern kingdom reached its highest splendour under the second Jeroboam. His long reign gave his great talents scope, and afforded time for his enterprises to consolidate. Along with great energy and military ability he appears also to have had self-control. In matters of ritual the usual verdict is passed on him, that he "did evil in the sight of the Lord." But men of great talents are not usually altogether destitute of reverence for the truth, and, whatever his motives were, he does not seem to have allowed himself to be drawn by the representations of his priest at Bethel to take any measures against the prophet. At an earlier period the preaching of Amos would have been a more dangerous thing than it appeared now. The history of Israel contained many examples of the power of the prophets to overthrow dynasties, and the priest of Bethel craftily recalled this fact when he said, "Amos has conspired against thee." But prophecy had undergone a change; the two last prophets of Israel no more use political weapons, but rely altogether on the power of the word of God. Whether the king perceived this or not, so far as he was concerned the prophet appears to have been unmolested. The time was one of great outward prosperity. The arms of Jeroboam had been successful everywhere; the old enemies of Israel had been defeated, and the old boundaries of the kingdom restored. Peace reigned, and with peace security. Men were at ease in Zion, and confident on the mountain of Samaria. Distant rumours of a mighty power operating on the Euphrates and coming into collision with Syria were too vague to cause alarm; the politicians were too glass-eyed to perceive that the barrier of the Syrian kingdom once broken by the Assyrian, nothing lay between them and that irresistible power. The prophet alone perceived it, and foretold that the kingdom of the North would speedily fall before the Assyrian invader.

Two or three things which the prophet refers to give us some insight into the religious condition of the country, and certain other things mentioned by him cast light on its civil and social state.

The worship of the North was not pure worship of Jehovah, but it was not strictly idolatry. It was worship of Jehovah under sensuous forms, mixed no doubt with many Canaanitish impurities, especially at the rural high places, and too often with conceptions of Jehovah which were proper rather to Baal than to Him. It is not quite certain how the calf-worship originated, whether it had its origin in Egypt, or was an old premosaic superstition revived, or had been borrowed from the Canaanites. Nor is it quite certain whether the calf or young bull was considered a representation of Jehovah in His whole nature, or only a symbol of some of His attributes. Such a worship, though impure, was different from formal Baal worship; though corrupt, it was not absolutely false. And one can imagine from the example of the Christian Church in many ages that there may have been real virtue and piety in spite of it in many hearts in the northern kingdom. Although religious opinions be the food on which religious life is supported, the latter has, like the natural life, the power of assimilating what is healthy, and rejecting what is hurtful. On many the corrupt doctrines of the Church in the middle ages exerted but little deteriorating influence; the religious taste instinctively put aside what was noxious. It is possible that to some minds in Israel the symbol of the calf had little significance; that, just as real corruptions, like saint worship, lose their meaning, and pass in process of time into mere æsthetic representation or adornment on sacred edifices, to many the images of the calves had little more meaning than the brazen bulls in Solomon's temple. Among the mass however this would by no means be the case, and in process of time the evil, as its manner is, overmastered the counteracting good.

As Amos represents the national mind of his day, it was very religious. The worship at the high places, and particularly at the national temple at Bethel, was sedulously practised with much outward impressiveness and eagerness on the part of the worshippers. Men were ready with free-will offerings in addition to those prescribed by law or custom. The stated feasts were carefully kept. Tithes were paid every three years, and sabbaths and new moons observed. As at Jerusalem, the service was accompanied with sacred music: "Take away from Me the noise of thy songs; for I will not hear the melody of thy viols" (v. 23). Men thought they were worshipping Jehovah. And there may have been true worshippers among them. Some pious hands may have helped to rear those altars, and some devout hearts may have bowed before them. It is always difficult to say what amount of corruption is needed to invalidate religious service. Corruptions that are hereditary and practised without anything better being known do not at least hurt the conscience like those into which men have of themselves declined. Nevertheless sin, even when unconscious, is sin. The sore at the heart of the people could not but affect all parts of the body. The sun that holds in equipoise the moral system of human life is God. As St. Paul teaches, the fountain of all evils is ungodliness. When men corrupt the image of God in their hearts, they forthwith proceed to the debasing of themselves, and then to such enmity and strife that the bonds of society are wholly broken. The law is illustrated in the history of northern Israel, though perhaps it was not till Hosea's days that full evidence of it appeared.

Some other conceptions of the people are referred to by the prophet which throw light upon their religious condition. He represents them as trusting to the fact that they were the people of Jehovah, and therefore as desiring the coming of the day of the Lord. The "day of the Lord" is one of

the most prominent prophetic conceptions. Some prophetic books, as that of Zephaniah, are little else than an expansion of the idea. In others it occupies a less prominent place, though it appears in very many.

This day was the day of Jehovah's interference, when He would manifest Himself as that which He truly was, when He would grasp the reins of rule, and bring to manifestation His purposes. At many times He seemed a God that hid Himself; on the day of the Lord men would behold His full revelation, and He would perform His work, His strange work. Some writers make the representation that the day of the Lord denotes any great calamity or judgment, and they speak of "a day of the Lord." This is no doubt a misinterpretation of prophecy. To the prophets the day of the Lord was an *à priori* religious presentiment, a moral necessity and certainty. They do not identify it with any calamity or judgment, or any particular and actual event. These calamities are at most the tokens and signals of its nearness, or no doubt such judgments sometimes accompany it. The day of the Lord is something universal and final, and never a mere crisis that may pass over. At one time the moral situation is such that the interference of Jehovah and the day of the Lord seem a necessity (Isa. ii.-iii.); at another time the judgments that afflict the community, or the great convulsions that shake society, suggest the presence of Jehovah: men seem to hear the sound of His goings through history, and the presentiment of His perfect revelation of Himself as at hand fills their minds (Joel ii., Isa. xiii.). Of course the world passes through the storm, and the day of the Lord is deferred. But this does not entitle us to denude the idea of its true significance, and reduce the day of the Lord to any merely temporary crisis, or to imagine that any prophet ever used the phrase in this attenuated sense. In the prophet Amos we meet with the idea of the day of the Lord for the first time, but the idea

was not new in his days. It was already a popular conception. Such a profound moral conception can hardly have originated in the mind of the Hebrew populace, or that populace was very different from modern representations of it. The prophet treats the popular notion of that "day" as a delusion: "Wherefore will ye have the day of the Lord? The day of the Lord is evil, and not good; darkness, and not light. It is as if a man fled from a lion, and a bear met him." He treats as equally a delusion the people's confidence in Jehovah's protection because they are His people. Other prophets have to meet the same delusion: "They shall cry unto Me, My God, we Israel know Thee"; to which the Lord responds with scornful accentuation of the term Israel: "Israel hath cast off good; let the foe pursue him" (Hos. viii.). The usual explanation of such ideas on the part of Israel is, that they are nothing but the expression of the natural confidence of a people in its national god, who, being its god, was naturally thought better and stronger than other gods. The explanation is hardly satisfactory. There seem reminiscences and echoes in this language of the people, superficial as it was in their mouths, of meanings more profound. The phrases they use are not their own, they have been taught them, or have inherited them; and those who first gave them currency used them in a deeper sense and with a better knowledge of what Jehovah was.

The information which the prophet affords regarding the social condition of the people is remarkable. The sin which he reprobates most severely is the injustice of one class to another, and the oppression of the poor by those above them. "They sell the righteous for money; . . . they pant after the dust of the earth on the head of the poor." It is not quite easy to understand the laws relating to land and debt in Israel, nor how it was that oppression was so rife. According to the idea, each tribe and each

family or clan had its own possession. The land was the Lord's and was held of Him; it was the portion given by Him to those who held it, and was inalienable. If for any temporary reason it passed out of the hand of the proper owner it was always redeemable for money, and at the year of jubilee it returned free. Such temporary transfers of land probably occurred frequently, and mainly on account of debt. The debtor in Israel appears to have been legally defenceless, though many exhortations are given to the people to use mildness and show brotherly feeling in their treatment of the poor. The chief want in Israel, as in the East generally, was probably not so much the want of laws or customs as the want of an upright executive to put them in operation. Micah complains that the prince asketh money, and the judge asketh for a bribe, and the great man uttereth his mischievous desire, and so they pervert it (vii. 3). When Amos prophesied at Bethel the country had long been scourged by expensive and exhausting wars. The protracted feuds with the Syrians had drained into the army the smaller yeomen in great numbers; their fields and vineyards probably remained without due cultivation; if they returned, they were impoverished, and fell into the hands of creditors. The prophet mentions some other things that must have been disastrous to the agricultural population, as droughts: "I have withholden the rain from you, when it was yet three months to harvest" (iv. 7); and failure of crops: "I have smitten you with blasting and mildew." The land probably in many cases changed hands. From being owners multitudes became hirelings. The law of restitution at the fiftieth year was a good law, but those who were entrusted with its administration were not good. The tenacity with which men clung to their paternal inheritance is illustrated in the case of Naboth, who refused an excambion even to the king; but the nefarious stratagem which the latter permitted himself to employ in order to

dispossess him shows the length which men might go to compass their ends : and when such things were done by the king, the fountain of justice, the powerful upper classes would not be restrained by ordinary scruples. The laws in Israel were customs rather than statutes, based on equity more than enactment. And when society lost the sense of justice and brotherhood the "law was slacked, and judgment did never go forth" (Hab. i. 4). It is the air of a society in this condition that Amos feels he is breathing; both in religion and in things civil it is the spirit of the people that he reprobates.

Whatever genuine religion there may have been in Israel, the national worship probably contained too fundamental a falsehood to retain influence over the people as a whole. The salt eventually lost its savour, society became secularized in its spirit, there was an overmastering devotion to trade, and fraudulence in the prosecution of it: "When will the new moon be over, that we may sell corn? and the sabbath, that we may set forth wheat? making the ephah small, and the shekel great; . . . that we may buy the poor for silver, and sell the refuse of the wheat?" (viii. 5, 6.) Even in a more decided way the spirit of ungodliness revealed itself in revelry and illegality at the religious shrines: "That drink wine out of sacrificial bowls, and lay themselves on pledged garments beside every altar, and drink the wine of the condemned in the house of their God" (ii. 8). But they went further: they were not only wicked, they became calculating in their wickedness; they went about beforehand to remove obstacles to it: "Ye made the Nazarites drink wine; and the prophets ye commanded, saying, Prophecy not" (ii. 12). They stopped the mouths of the prophets, not being able to corrupt them, and the Nazarites they seduced, that they might silence the reproof of their temperance and self-restraint. Greed of gain, luxury, oppression of one another; such irreverence, that it sinned

even in the holy place ; such impenitent hardihood, that it strove to befool and silence the voice of God among them—these were the sins of the time. And this stern shepherd from the south was the man chosen of God to denounce them and foreshow His certain judgments upon them. No fitter instrument could have been found ; the disease needed a desperate remedy, if any remedy now availed ; these corrupt members must be hewed by the prophets, if any part of the body was to be saved. And to the soft livers in the northern capital the wild, tragic shepherd from the wilderness must have been as wonderful and disquieting as they were odious to him. In the language of Amaziah, the land was not able to bear all his words.

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A PROBLEM IN CRITICISM.

PAPIAS records that he took no pleasure in “those who related the commandments of others, but in those who reported the commandments given by the Lord to the faithful and derived from the truth itself” (*οὐ τοῖς τὰς ἄλλοτρίας ἐντολὰς μνημονεύουσιν ἀλλὰ τοῖς τὰς παρὰ τοῦ κυρίου τῇ πίστει δεδομένας καὶ ἀπ’ αὐτῆς παραγενομένας τῆς ἀληθείας*). In this Papias, despite the traditional smallness of his intelligence, exhibited a soundness of judgment, which the theology of the future will do well to imitate, for, although the loftiest science and the most advanced thought must always acknowledge the real existence of the unseen and spiritual by the side of the seen and material, of that which is the object of faith by the side of that which is the object of reason, still it is certain that, where statements concerning the spiritual world are made on evidence which can be investigated by reason, that