

*JEHOVAH RESTING :**ISAIAH'S CONCEPTION OF HISTORY.*

(ISA. XVIII., XIX., XX.)

FROM the thirteenth to the twenty-third chapters of Isaiah we have what may be called "The Book of the Nations." It is impossible to deal with these chapters as a whole. Some of them (chaps. xiii. and xiv.) were certainly not written by Isaiah, though grouped with others under his name; some of them (chaps. xv. and xvi.) were probably only edited by him, with possibly an appendix of his own; while each has its own date and historical setting. But here are three chapters (xviii., xix., and xx.) almost certainly from Isaiah's own hand, having a common theme, and forming together a sort of trilogy, if one may borrow a phrase from the Greek drama. The study of these three chapters may not only help us to understand the nature of the prophetic office, but may give us some insight into the conception formed by this particular prophet of the history transpiring around him.

On one side (N.E.) of Judæa, the scene of Isaiah's ministry, lay Assyria, rapidly advancing in power under its great kings Sargon and Sennacherib, organizing that vast empire which, more perhaps than any other the world has seen, might claim to be universal. On the other side (S.W.) of Judæa lay Egypt, with which these chapters deal. For many years the power of Egypt had been broken, the country divided into petty kingdoms, no one of which had any claim to supremacy, or could do more than barely maintain itself. But about this time a change took place, and Egypt reappears as one of the great powers of the East. South of Egypt proper lay what is now called the Soudan, anciently known as Ethiopia or Kush, a vast tract, in part stony and barren, but in part rich and fertile, and

well watered by the numerous streams which feed the Nile. The inhabitants of this land are spoken of by the Greek historian as μέγιστοι καὶ κάλλιστοι, *i.e.* tallest and handsomest of men: a description singularly parallel to Isaiah's. The prophet speaks of them as scattered and peeled (*m<sup>e</sup>mushak, m<sup>o</sup>rat*): scattered, *lit.* drawn out, *i.e.* tall, and peeled, *i.e.* polished,—tall and beautiful; while their land is aptly described as (not "spoiled" but) cut up, divided, intersected by rivers. About the year 750 B.C. this vast Ethiopian land was governed by a ruler called Piankhi, who, tempted by the disorganized condition of the country, pushed northwards down the Nile, and succeeded in the course of twenty years in reuniting Egypt under his sway. He is the founder of what is known as the Ethiopian dynasty of Egyptian kings, two of whom, Shabak (or S<sup>o</sup>), and Tirhakha are familiar by name to Bible students. Thus once again Egypt and Assyria stood facing each other, each preparing for the mortal conflict which ensued, while Judæa lay trembling between them, the inevitable battlefield on which the great duel must be fought out. The Egyptian kings were no match for their foes, and naturally sought to strengthen themselves by alliances, and specially to secure outworks or ramparts in the shape of defenced and allied cities, which might ward off the struggle for a time and give them a chance to gather strength. Thus we read (2 Kings xvii. 4) that Hoshea, the last king of Samaria, ceased to pay tribute to Assyria, and sent messengers to the king of Egypt, *i.e.* formed a defensive alliance with Egypt. The consequence of this was the siege of Samaria, which fell after a spirited defence of three years; while its faithless ally, the Egyptian king, sat still, and did nothing, well pleased that the Assyrian power should break itself like the waves of the sea against this outer barrier of rock, leaving smooth waters inshore for Egypt to ride on. Again in 720 B.C., only three years later, we find Egypt in alliance

with Gaza, a strong Philistian city ; but with no better results.

“ Sabhi trusted in his forces, and came to meet me to offer me battle. I called upon the great god Asshur, my lord. I smote them. Sabhi fled with a shepherd who kept sheep, and escaped. Hanno I took prisoner. All that he possessed I carried away to Assyria, and I laid waste and destroyed his cities and burned them with fire.”<sup>1</sup>

Again :

“ Hanno, king of Gaza, with Sibichus, king of Egypt, came to battle against me [*i.e.* Sargon] at Raphia. I put them to flight. Sibichus could not resist the attack of my servants. He fled, and his footsteps were not seen.”

This defeat was followed by a peace between Assyria and Egypt, the record of which is still to be read on a lump of clay discovered by Layard in Nineveh, and now in the British Museum. Affixed to the clay are the twin seals of the Assyrian and Egyptian monarchs. Once again, in 709 B.C., we find Egypt in alliance with Ashdod, another Philistian city, with still more disastrous results. Here is the story as Sargon tells it :

“ Azuri, the king of Ashdod, hardened his heart against payment of tribute. He sent to the kings his neighbours messages hostile to Assyria. I prepared vengeance. I raised his brother Ahimit to his place on the throne. The people revolted and refused his rule. They put themselves under Yaman, who was not the rightful possessor of the throne. In the anger of my heart I marched with my warriors against Ashdod. I besieged. I took Ashdod and Gimt-Ashdodim, with the gods which inhabit these cities. I took the gold and silver and all that was in his palace. Then I restored these cities. I placed people whom I had subjugated in them. I put my viceroy over them, treated them as Assyrian, and they were obedient.”

Again :

“ When Yaman heard of my campaign against the land of the Chatti, the fear of Asshur my lord overcame him. He fled to the borders of Egypt, to the border-land of Meroe ; to a distant place he fled, and his hiding-place was not discovered.”

<sup>1</sup> See Duncker's *History of Antiquity*, vol. iii. See also *Les Inscriptions des Sargonides*, by Oppert.

By the fall of Ashdod Egypt was thrown open to the Assyrian advance. But worse happened. Yaman, the king of Ashdod, fled to Egypt, but was put in chains and handed over to the Assyrian king by his false-hearted ally, who was content, by such an act of treachery, to ward off still further the day of reckoning from his own land. Such was the condition of things, such the state of Egypt during the years of Isaiah's ministry. With these facts before us, we can easily understand the opposition with which Isaiah met any talk among his countrymen of an Egyptian alliance, and the scorn with which he treated the childish idea that Zion might fare better at Egypt's hands than Samaria or Ashdod had done. Now we may examine the chapters before us one by one.

In chapter xviii. Isaiah turns to Ethiopia, "the land of the whirring of wings," as he calls it, with reference to its insects, probably also to the whirring or clashing of its armed men, which these suggested. He sees the Egyptian vessels, light papyrus boats, darting across the Mediterranean waves, hither and thither on their way to stir up the nations, and organize a vast defensive league against Assyria. He acknowledges the gravity of the crisis, but he cannot share in the panic which has smitten this great nation to its heart. He bids them return to their people and the king who has sent them, with the message that Jehovah can defend His own cause without the help of man. When the time comes He is never wanting. The figure Isaiah uses is striking and powerful. Like the heat-haze with which we are familiar on a summer day, or the night-mist which in Eastern lands does so much to refresh the earth and further vegetation during the hot season, Jehovah's presence *rests* on the earth, causing things, if one may so say, to ripen; ready at the proper time, like the vinedresser or harvester, with keen edge or glittering scythe, to strike in and lay low all that may oppose Him. "Thus saith the

Lord unto me, I will take My rest, I will consider in My dwelling-place like clear heat upon herbs, and like a cloud of dew (*i.e.* mist) in the heat of harvest. For afore the harvest, when the blossom is over and the flower becomes a ripening grape, He shall cut off the sprigs with pruning-hooks and the spreading branches shall He take away and cut down" (vers. 4 and 5). Such an interposition, so manifestly Divine in its suddenness and thoroughness, must (as it seems to the prophet) still further issue in the conversion of those distant lands. "In that day shall a present be brought unto the Lord of hosts of a people tall and smooth, . . . to the place of the name of the Lord of hosts, the Mount Zion" (ver. 7).

We turn now to chapter xx., which comes next in the order of time. Egypt did not accept the prophet's advice, the messengers did not return. The great battle of Raphia followed, with its disastrous defeat, and, still later, the fall of Ashdod and the treacherous surrender of her allied king. Judah had a special interest in the fall of Ashdod, which throws a vivid light upon this chapter. In the previous year (710?) Hezekiah had received an embassy from Mero-dach-Baladan, the high-souled adventurer of Babylon, who, after ten years of ceaseless intrigue and twelve years of energetic and prosperous rule, was preparing for the inevitable struggle with the Assyrian oppressor. He too depended for support upon his allies, and sent these messengers to Hezekiah, nominally to congratulate him on his recovery from sickness, but really to invite him to join with neighbouring kingdoms in a defensive alliance. Hezekiah, as we know, was not unfavourable, and with royal courtesy threw open his palace to the inspection of his guests. But Isaiah, adhering to his policy of consistent non-intervention, opposed the league, and the king was forced to yield an unwilling assent to the views of his

powerful minister. That it was an unwilling assent is plain; for the next year Hezekiah did actually engage in treasonable correspondence with the kings of Egypt and Ashdod, and brought on himself the displeasure of his Assyrian lord. The fall of Ashdod was therefore a blow to the opposition party in Jerusalem, whose programme consisted of one item, the proposed alliance with Egypt. But it was more. To Isaiah the fall of Ashdod was the beginning of the end. He foresees Egypt also overrun by the foe and carried captive, naked and barefoot, to their shame. Politicians are seldom slow—least of all during an election campaign—to make capital out of an opponent's defeat: and in Isaiah's case we must remember how really politics and religion are one. He determines to make the most of the fall of Ashdod. Donning the sackcloth, the garb of a mourner, he traverses the streets of the capital, wailing out the loud lament which he puts into the mouths of his fellow countrymen, "the men of this coast": "Lo, such is our expectation, whither we flee for help to be delivered from the king of Assyria: and how shall we escape?" The lesson he will impress on them is the impossibility of outwitting or hoodwinking Jehovah, the impotence of any intrigue or alliance, any Ashdod, to arrest even for an hour the inevitable, the awful judgment which Jehovah had bidden on the earth. "And how shall we escape?" Time after time the cry rang through the streets of the giddy but now stricken city, brought face to face with ruin: just as they do still ring in men's ears at times when the thin veil we hang between ourselves and the unseen is rent asunder, and we are brought face to face with death or judgment.

Chapter xix. follows. It is quite certain that this chapter is of a later date than the others: and even if its genuineness be doubtful—supposing we regard it as the work of a later hand, a disciple of the prophet—yet we may take it as

representing Isaiah's latest and maturest views regarding Egypt. But really there is no reason to doubt its Isaianic authorship. One expects "last words" from such lips on a theme like this; and, as Cheyne says, "we can hardly imagine a more swan-like ending for the dying prophet" than these verses give. Let us glance at the chapter. The Assyrian has advanced, and at last Egypt itself is the prey. The prophet foresees it all: the central power broken, the petty kings risen against each other, caste defiled, wise men become as fools. The Nile, the symbol of prosperity, is dried up: the fish perish, the reeds wither, and all the domestic industry which depends on them is stayed (ver. 9). Egypt is given over unto the hands of a "cruel lord," *i.e.* the Assyrian. Yet in this extremity of distress hope dawns for her. This hour of sore travail witnesses the birth of a new Egypt. Smitten with terror, her eyes turn to Zion, and Jehovah who dwells there. This glance, humbled, beseeching, is followed by conversion. "Five cities in the land of Egypt shall speak the language of Canaan, and swear to the Lord of hosts": one of them so utterly destroying its idols as to win for itself the name, "The City of Destruction" (ver. 18). Both the numbers here (five and one) are symbolic; *e.g.* "a thousand shall flee at the rebuke of *one*, at the rebuke of *five* shall ye flee." It is therefore quite unnecessary to find in the verse either a play on the words ("*cheres*" being rendered "*heres*"), or a reference to the later history of Heliopolis, the City of the Sun, with its Jewish temple. The latter lies altogether beyond the prophet's horizon; and exegesis, which deals with the text only, finds that here at least the text explains itself.

Thus smiting, Jehovah heals. And thereon follows peace. Egypt and Assyria, no longer enemies, unite with Judah, hitherto their field of battle, in the worship of the one true Lord: and a blessing from Jehovah Himself rests on

all the three. We have seen how, following on the fall of Ashdod, the Egyptian king delivered up his ally in arms, and made peace with the Assyrians. We have seen too that the record of a similar peace, made about this very time, has been discovered, with the twin seals of Assyria and Egypt affixed. Few things could be more interesting than this discovery, or throw a clearer light on the closing verses of this chapter. How could Isaiah ever dream a dream like this of universal peace: Assyria and Egypt, mortal foes from the beginning, swearing friendship thus? So we are ready to ask, somewhat sceptically. The answer is, at the very time this chapter was written the thing was done, done repeatedly; and the proof is before your eyes. For the prophets were not dreamers. They always start from facts, the fact in this case represented by the lump of clay with the royal seals affixed. But observe how, starting from facts as history does, prophecy differs from history; how it leaves far behind it the bare facts as of no importance beyond the hour, and rises, as by inspiration only, into the region of spiritual laws and eternal principles; sees in a dishonourable, flimsy peace patched up between two kings, one a tyrant, the other a traitor, to allow them breathing space, the forecast of a real and enduring peace, based on principle, not on prudence, prefaced by the conversion of both lands, a peace the records of which should be preserved in no earthly palace, but among the archives of Jehovah's court.

So much for the history. Now then let us notice what is for us of commanding interest in these three chapters, the prophet's *conception* of history, or, to put it otherwise, of God in history. "For so the Lord said unto me, I will take My rest" (chap. xviii. 4)—Jehovah resting. This is the rest of God's holy judgments.

Every one has noticed how the course of justice too often



runs among men : how old abuses are tolerated with utter want of thought till the conscience or heart of the people is roused ; and how often *then* the result is a hot haste of revenge, a severity which is just as cruel and unjust in its way as the injustice it is meant to rectify, without consideration or compensation allowed for the innocent suffering it involves. Thus human history seems to be a perpetual oscillation ; perfect justice is seldom or never reached except by some happy accident, or for a moment, in the transition from one extreme to another of injustice. How different, the prophet feels, it is with Jehovah ! In Him you have the perfect self-restraint of adequate knowledge and power, of love that is passionless in its intensity. In Him is no bias nor any haste ; but, as the result, that quiet, even-handed, universal justice which men seek for all in vain from one another. There is no hurry in God's judgments. *Ohne hast, ohne rast* : without stay or stir, He moves forward to His ends. Four centuries must pass, because the Canaanites, a petty tribe, are not yet ripe for judgment : yet even Assyria, with all her youthful vigour, may not hope to escape. Such is the prophet's conception of history : Jehovah resting ; an open eye that quietly surveys, notes all ; a hand that holds the reins of power, yet gives to human freedom its play ; a providence which makes the restless sea of human passions, blind, furious, cruel, its pathway, and moves, or rather *rests*, in its own eternal purpose that embraces all. How little do we grasp this thought ! how little does the quiet of eternity fill our lives or even influence our judgment ! Take any of the vexed questions of human history : man's sin, earth's sorrow. Why should this be ? How is this consistent with what we believe of God ? Nay ; these weary problems, which have worn away the heart of so many generations, are to God the momentary statement of a question. He rests, that when once the question is fairly stated, it

may receive from Him its adequate and final solution. God keeps silence; whereon, to ninety-nine per cent. of men, the inference is plain: there is no God. Not so. "Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap." But the harvest must come first; and, like Isaiah's heat-haze or night-mist, Jehovah rests, lets the evil ripen. In His time, like lightning from the cloud, like the flashing of the mower's scythe, judgment comes. Judgment must come; but the case must be stated, tried first: each day must bear witness, the life pronounce sentence against itself; and then, doom. "Thou thoughtest I was altogether such an one as thyself; but I will reprove thee, and set in order before thine eyes." Surely there is in this thought much to comfort the pious heart, specially while there is so much in the affairs of our country and in the prospects of Christ's Church fitted to alarm. One thing will keep us calm all through: the faith Isaiah had as he saw the swift messengers gleaming across the waves on their restless search for human help, as he heard the tramp of hosts, and felt the heart of a great people tremble,—Jehovah is resting: that faith shared with him, and so well expressed by our own great poet:

"One adequate support  
 For the calamities of mortal life  
 Exists, one only: an assured belief  
 That the procession of our fate, how'er  
 Sad or disturbed, is ordered by a Being  
 Of infinite benevolence and power,  
 Whose everlasting purposes embrace  
 All accidents, converting them to good."

It is said that at the heart of the whirlwind there is always a point of absolute rest. If you could find that, and keep yourself just there, you might move with the storm and smile at the havoc. In those great whirlwinds which sweep over the lands, moral and social upheavals, there is

always one point of rest. At the heart of every one of them is a Divine purpose, and Jehovah rests. Find that point, and keep it; by faith you enter into rest. "And there arose a great storm of wind, and the waves beat into the ship, so that it was now full. And He was in the hinder part of the ship, asleep on a pillow." *There* is the point of rest. They creep close to Him, they waken Him. He has risen, He has rebuked the winds, and said unto the sea, "Peace, be still. And the wind ceased, and there was a great calm."

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### THE WATERS OF LIFE.

(JOHN VII. 37-39.)

THE closing festival of the Jews' sacred year was its greatest and most joyous one. It was the national harvest home of an agricultural people, after both the corn and the vintage had been safely gathered. To observe such a season of thanksgiving with cheerfulness was a religious duty. "Because Jehovah thy God shall bless thee in all thine increase, and in all the works of thine hands," so ran the ancient statute, "therefore thou shalt surely rejoice."<sup>1</sup> So Jerusalem put on its gayest looks to welcome the pilgrims who flocked from far and near. Every man on his flat house-top, or in its shady court, set up a booth, built of boughs from the pine tree, with olive and myrtle intertwined. Similar sylvan tents for the country folk filled every spare space on the streets or round the walls; and there the population dwelt and made merry for seven long idle holidays. Hospitality and social gatherings were endless. They held festive assemblies, and feasted and sent each other "portions," and made great mirth, as their

<sup>1</sup> See Exod. xxiii. 16 and Deut. xvi. 13 and Lev. xxiii. 33 ff.