

THE PROPHET JEREMIAH.

A STUDY OF HIS DEVELOPMENT IN THOUGHT AND UTTERANCE.

LET me with trembling hand and reverent love unveil the soul of the Hebrew prophet *Jeremiah*, the man of God, the prophet of personal godliness. He was that one of his class to whom many turned in our Lord's day, saying, "This Jesus is like him." This draws us peculiarly and with tender power to him. What was the secret of that power?

I do not purpose to draw a sketch of the life and times of Jeremiah in the sense of recounting simply all the external and formal facts, and solutions of questions, that might be so entitled. Rather do I wish, as I have suggested by the title, that my readers should watch with me the soul of the man and minister in his progress step by step, from word to word, and thought to thought, from knowledge and conviction on to higher knowledge and deeper conviction, and thus ever on to fresh Divine oracle. For God giveth "to man His thought," and "He revealeth His ways to His servants."

We shall see him gazing on God, on God's providence, on God's disclosures in thinking souls of the consequences of those facts which have been already disclosed. Beholding the man, we shall behold God revealing His own mind in the man, in the man's thoughts, in the man's eager scrutiny of all he knows and sees. We may see thus the very process of revelation. And we shall perhaps recognise in this man of God the very image of our own highest

selves. We shall find ourselves at home in fellowship with this minister to men and God. The picture of Jeremiah, so far away, shall lead us to-day.

I. The book of our prophet has an unfortunate appearance at the forefront. There is a beautiful tablet on the gateway of the building, hinting at golden treasure within ; but at once appears in the porch and far within a very confusion of stones and beams for building, and all material for adorning a glorious palace and home, lying all in heaps, all unbuilt, a riddle of disorder. At the outset, after the preface, the book of Jeremiah is very hard to read. In plainer words, the preface chapter is beautiful in its form, its faith, and its promise ; but then onwards for some nine chapters is a mass of summaries of oracles, of extracts and broken sayings that puzzle one badly and leave few brave enough to read through them and beyond. After this comes glorious delight.

For half a dozen chapters, on from chap. xi. to chap. xvii., are a series of scenes of experience, personal and national, told with most pathetic tenderness and great-souled sympathy, all interwoven with oracles of truly grand power. In these six chapters are embedded some of the most singular suggestions of thought, that have influenced the works and records of all Hebrew story since, and have thus deeply graven their mark on our own life. Onwards still through another half dozen chapters, we find chiefly pure oracle without much interwoven story, all however giving us the ever unfolding picture of the man.

At chap. xxvii. we come upon quite a new departure in the book. The scenes and oracles that follow are dated, almost without exception. Some great change must have happened to produce such effect. At first the dates tell us that the chapters and their scenes are from the happier though somewhat anxious days before the invader's hand gripped Jerusalem for her death blow. Then comes the

story of the siege, from chap. xxxii. onward, closed by the tale of the few poor families left by the conqueror in charge of the land when he carried off all the rest as slaves. Jeremiah stayed in the desolate land with the few to counsel them, and so was carried off by them in their terror-stricken flight to Egypt, to speak his last words on the banks of the Nile. This ends at chap. xlv. It is a thrilling tale. It is surprising that no oratorio-composer, or fashioner of romance, has as yet lit upon this fine, full story of life, woven throughout as it is with tragedy—tragedy of mortal life indeed, but more deeply inlaid with the tragedy of a soul.

Such is Jeremiah's book concerning Judah. There is also a section of six chapters (xlvi.—li.) of oracles concerning Babylon and those foreign peoples that made up the political horizon around Judah.

II. The outline thus gained will only excite a reader's further curiosity. Why that sudden change from undated to dated records of deeds and speech? And what do the dates tell of the condition of the world when this man spoke, in so quiet a corner, yet to such enduring purpose? Look back a moment along the stream of thought or life wherein this man stood.

From say 900 to 750 B.C., or to reckon by names, from the reforming leader Elijah to the eloquent leader Isaiah, men moved forward from grasp of one great faith to grasp of others; so it was at least among the best souls of the time. They grasped in Elijah's day the faith that Jehovah, the Hebrew God, was supreme. They moved on to grasp in Isaiah's day the faith that He was gracious unto forgiveness for His own people, giving forgiveness to wrong-doers who stood round the spot where He appeared on earth, to wit, His sanctuary Zion. Let us observe that the material accompaniments of their faith are interesting enough; it is of interest to study what Zion was, and so forth; but

more interesting by far is the fact of a mental advance, an insight in spiritual realities that was growing, a piercing deeper and deeper into the mind of God. To observe this is to see what may well be called the process of revelation. Look at it now further, after Isaiah had preached as we saw and persuaded men that Jehovah was gracious unto forgiveness to sinners in Zion.

About one hundred years after Isaiah, say when his influence had worked as long as John Wesley's has now, there was an awful calamity. A savage people, so called, burst forth from southern Russia, poured away down the wealthy Euphrates valley, eager to feast in its joys. They shook the great Assyrian government to its foundations, and then hasted away to revel in the luxuries of the other great land of wealth, the valley of the Nile. As the hordes streamed down the Philistine coast Judah might well be panic-stricken. Zion, nestling high upon barren hilltops away east, and far above the highway, shook like the aspen. Her lower lying villages to the westward must have been, of course, trodden like cornfields beneath wild cattle. She escaped almost unhurt; and the effect of the fright was wholesome. King, officers, and people joined in a solemn covenant to observe sacredly the Deuteronomic law of one sanctuary, declaring that the Zion where Isaiah had proclaimed God's grace should be henceforth the only legal place of worship.

Young Jeremiah joined in the covenant: all seemed well. But soon the watchful, thoughtful young preacher pointed his finger and his word at immorality in those covenant makers. When he condemned them, the people hooted at him. That covenant had been signed in 623 B.C. Onward until the year 606 Jeremiah seems to have been a social outcast. All we know of his preaching in those years must be learned from the scant summaries and the confused heaps of recollections that are piled up in the dozen

chapters following the preface. I can fancy how the day came when men were glad to gather these as best they could, when the once despised man had become famous. For so it was. We know how Jeremiah proved at last a true predictor. It seems that the political junctures and wars resulted, as he had expected, not in the success of Assyria over Egypt, indeed, but in the complete overthrow of Egypt at the battle of Carchemish before a new rival world-conqueror, Nebuchadnezzar, the brilliant warrior-prince of the old, long enslaved, but now fresh-wakened, mighty Babylon.

Jeremiah became at once popular. He was powerful, although still hated by many, consulted as a very oracle by kings, even when imprisoned for a while, wonderfully honoured by the very Babylonians, and at last carried off to Egypt by the superstitious fugitives, as if his person were a charm and safeguard against all harm. Henceforward his story was carefully recorded with dates. Men wrote his biography in more than one edition, and gathered in a sacred collection scraps of that counsel which they had once hated. *Sic transit gloria mundi*. One might distrust the collecting work of such sycophant editors, were not their very superstition some assurance that they have really given us the words of their prophet. It is fairly evident that for the most part they have done so.

II. We turn now to trace what the man was in *soul*, what he did and thought and learned to think, and what he became as he moved forward from position to position in his mental development.

Let us see first what we may call his fundamental thinking, or philosophy of religion, concerning the soul and the nature of God. We shall do this by watching the succession of the oracles one after the other, and the growth of soul thus evident. All the finer sight is this because his studies were carried on from no sense of duty to a profes-

sion, and under no command of some masterful teacher or school or tradition. These traditions indeed you will see him handle rather severely so far as they existed. His impulse in study was simply the instinct in him, his instinctive devotion to life. This is a high motive, for instinct means what God implants, and to follow it is godliness. Instinctive devotion to thinking means a very love for being in general, as Jonathan Edwards would say, and love for knowledge of being, and love for the increase of being. We shall see that Jeremiah was a genuine thinker and an unwearied student.

1. Let us trace then, as concisely as we can, his thinking about the nature of the soul. We shall see that he was a very father of psychology and anthropology; and it is from him we quote when we repeat certain well known characterizations of the will or the mind.

Let me premise that his observations all flow from a keen inspection of his own experience. His extremely frequent soliloquy shows this. Very much of his oracles are talks to himself, and to God concerning himself.

Recall some of his sayings, *e.g.* that notable word, "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?" In those days the heart was supposed to be the organ of knowledge; so in the language of to-day he would have said, "Who can tell the secrets of his neighbour's thoughts? How different may be his conceptions from what we think they are!" And he said it was faulty knowledge, or a badly instructed heart, that caused sin. He watched also the relation of the knowledge to the will. So in another notable oracle he discusses the will and the disposition, whose organ was supposed to be the reins. These, said he, with sorrow, are not secret, like knowledge. They are too well known, too consistent in bad men. The will is not so flexible a thing as it ought to be. It is, alas! as fixed as the features of the body.

“Can the Ethiopian change his skin? then can ye do good who are accustomed to do evil.” He counted the will a something that ought to be amenable to persuasion, and would be so were it a normal will. Now these psychological notes and well known sayings just mentioned are to be found in those chapters, xi.-xvii., which record, as we have said, much of his early experience in the days of his unpopularity. He was a hard student then. Reading on into the next following oracles, you will get a fine sight of his quick moving forward whenever occasion came and common sense required it. Chapters xviii. to xx. record his oracles of the “potter and his clay.” When he learned how the first of these had started the fatalist cry, “We cannot help sinning,” and saw that his doctrine of the will, as unchangeable when bad, gave some ground for this, quick as thought he faced round to the occasion, asserting the unanimous voice of men to be that the will is always free, that when men sin they do it utterly in the teeth of all nature and reason, and they deserve their ruin.

I may not now trace similar progress in his thinking through chaps. ii.-x., that summary of his early work; and I refrain the more now because to one special point in it I have to come back presently for serious reasons. I will only add here to this psychological story three short notes :

(1) When he pictures the bright future that he hopes for, when God’s grace shall give them a different heart—that is, a different and new and better *knowledge* of things than they have now—he adds carefully that the will must then remain free and responsible. They shall find God even then only when they seek Him with all their powers of knowing (xxix. 13; xxxii. 39).

(2) Again: there is a beautiful touch in his message of cheer to his faithful amanuensis Baruch, who grew frightened, disheartened during the siege and amid all the strange fortunes of his master. Says Jeremiah, chapter

xlvi. : "O Baruch, thou criest, Woe is me! I find no rest. Seekest thou great things for thyself, O Baruch? Seek them not. Jehovah is sure to bring evil on this place. But be satisfied, count it all sufficient that He will give thee thyself. To possess a soul is to have wealth abundant." Such an estimate of the value of one's soul was more inspiring than any Stoic's teaching. Was it not a very forestalling of the highest doctrine of the God-Man?

(3) Finally in the prefatory chapter i., which is the preface so fitly because it coins in a few characteristic words the substance of the whole book, you hear the grand soul of the man saying, "Precious is my soul, precious has it been ere ever it was born, precious enough for God to make His own companion." And this makes clear to us the peculiar worth of Jeremiah as distinct from all who had prophesied before him. They believed in the great value of Israel, saying, "God is with *us*." Jeremiah gazed on his own individual soul, saw its great worth, and declared for the first time, "God is with *me*." Such was this father of psychology two hundred years before Plato. The work of Plato was begun as far behind Jeremiah's day as we are behind Spinoza or Locke.

2. Such a man could not fail to speculate on the nature of God. His speculation on God seems at times even a little more scholastic than that on man; but it is quite as interesting, for at times it throws light on the old meaning of names of God. Jeremiah is not the father of theology, for the character of God was the great subject of the oracles of all those Hebrew teachers. Micah, just before Jeremiah, gives a sublime estimate of Jehovah's love and of His ethics also. Isaiah's great business was to proclaim Jehovah's devotion to His people; Amos had asserted the abstract goodness of God; while Hosea had actually started a dialectic concerning God by some of his questions. But none of these gives us anything like Jeremiah's discussions.

Turn again to those early oracles, chaps. xi.-xvii., and read especially that heart-stirring story and prayer concerning the drought (chap. xiv.). The tender-souled prophet pleads with Jehovah: "Art not Thou called by the very name 'the Rain Causer'? and art not Thou 'He that causeth all things'?" The same thought starts out ever and anon as we read through the early words, and on through all to the last, when nearly at the close we read a most singular oracle in the opening of chap. xxxiii. At the time of this utterance Jeremiah was in prison during the final siege, B.C. 591-588. Alone but with God, in the dungeon pit but beholding the highest of all things, silent but meditating, he writes:

"Thus hath said Jehovah, who is 'Maker,'
 Jehovah, who is 'Fashioner,'
 He who comes to establish,
 Jehovah is indeed His name,
 Cry to Me, and I will answer thee,
 And I will create for thee great things, yea, things apart,
 Which thou hast not known."

Here was verily a beginning of what Professor Max Müller would call philosophy of religion based on the study of language; and with Jeremiah this grew keener the longer he lived.

But there is a more profound feature in his theology, and it comes from inspection of his own soul as his psychology did. After all, while the history of the religious idea is very valuable, and the study of what other men have said about God and what they have called Him is very important, the central question must be, "What is God to me?" What control do I feel over me? Answering this faithfully first, I may then wisely compare and test my faith by study of the faith of others. Jeremiah gives us this, his subjective theology, as well as the study of the meaning of the name of God. He tells us what sort of control he felt

in himself, how he wrestled with it, how he even questioned its right to be. He would be called now a very freethinker, a very sceptic, determined to be right and to accept only what he saw to be right. It was in the later days of his unpopularity, *i.e.* about midday in his life, that he wrote thus (chap. xx. 7 ff):

“O Jehovah, Thou hast kept deceiving me, and I am indeed deceived:

Thou hast gripped me, for Thou art able.

So I have become a laughing stock.

Then when I reflect and say, ‘I will submit to this no more; I will honour Him no more; I will say not another word in his Name’:

Then there has been in my soul like a burning fire locked up in my bones.

I have been worn out trying to contain me, and I have been unable.”

That sense of control in the soul is God. A control so real that you try to resist it,—*that* is God. Such a struggle to be, if possible, an atheist is the truest theism. See the bitterly questioning soul! How intensely he felt God!

But the restfulness came with time, as was natural. Younger men have their struggling way of feeling God; older men feel Him in the calm and psalm of eventide. So Jeremiah. We have seen his early struggle: turn to chap. xxxiii. again, written far on in his years. It begins with study of the name, the word “Jahweh”; it rolls on thus, ver. 11 ff:

“Again there shall be heard in this place

The voice of joy, and jubilation,

The voice of them who say,

Give praise to Jehovah of hosts;

For Jehovah is good,

For ‘His mercy endureth for ever.’”

Whether Jeremiah was the first to write that grand chorus of the later psalms I will not discuss here ; but this I know, that it burst from his soul as from lips of no mere chorister. Rather as the vanquished wrestler with God he sang, bowing his soul, but more than conqueror ; he was the religious thinker, the theologian, who had burst into the very heart of God. Jeremiah tested God and said :

“ Jehovah is good ;

His mercy endureth for ever.”

III. Few words are necessary now to tell how Jeremiah thought, and advanced in his thought, of what we may call practical theology. He said momentous things concerning sacred institutions, forms, instruments, and the like. We can sum it in brief here after what we have already studied ; for it is a fact that an honest study of theoretical theology, *i.e.* of the philosophy of religion, is the best preparation for a clear view of practical religion. We have traced Jeremiah's doctrines of man and of God. I may put in very rapid statement the whole of his momentous faiths respecting forms of worship. There were two main things he said, one following directly as the consequence of the other. Let us look at the consequence first :

1. First then, Jeremiah reached and preached a remarkable *political* doctrine. He came slowly, unwillingly I think, but decidedly, to the belief that it was a wise thing and the best thing and the right thing for his nation to lose itself utterly for a long period in the great Babylonian empire. It was a hard doctrine for the people, harder far than we think : no wonder Jeremiah nearly lost his life more than once for it, and had several severe imprisonments and much abuse.

I need not mention the hopes of the previous prophets, save to recall Isaiah's. We know Isaiah's brilliant words of faith that “ Zion was absolutely safe, founded of God on a sure foundation. He that would but trust should

not make haste. He should never have to run from an invader" (Isa. xxviii.). In face of such great oracles the people might easily be angry with Jeremiah's new doctrine. For in the reformation under Josiah they had publicly recorded God's promise, and had sought to make this safety no mere simple gift of God's grace, but to add the safeguard of their own promise of obedience. The people had promised the obedience; how did Jeremiah dare to question such a great promise of God's grace, so ratified? He did question it. But even he came to it unwillingly and slowly. He believed in the reformation and the covenant at first. What made him change? There were various interesting causes, one being no doubt his general political wisdom and acumen; but that was not all. He saw Babylon rise quick like a magician's tree. It rose at once from its slavery to its empire. He saw it overshadow its great mistress Assyria; he saw Assyria fall, great but subject; then he saw Nebuchadnezzar lead the Babylonian armies to overwhelming victory over Egypt in 606 B.C. This is all true. Jeremiah judged wisely that Babylon was to be a more thorough world mistress than had ever been seen; and submission, absorption, would be safety. But these events all came *after* Jeremiah had begun to utter his mind. We recall the covenant made at the reformation, made but not kept, as Jeremiah claims. In the covenant, as you shall read it in Deuteronomy, obedience was promised all blessing as its reward; disobedience was threatened with every awful curse. This no doubt suggested Jeremiah's conclusion, that the curse must come. But he went much further. If he had gone no further he would have been a mere recorder of a judicial sentence that everybody knew was deserved and must be pronounced; he would have been no searcher into the deeper things of God. He would not have been the discoverer of new truth, the revealer that by God's grace he was. His cry, slowly pressed from his

soul, slowly wrung out by profoundest logic, by the logic of God, was: "Isaiah was wrong. Zion is not necessarily, inherently safe. Zion is only a material symbol, not more dear to God than other material things. She has been important; she is not so important to-day as is *order* in the family of the nations. Nebuchadnezzar and Babylon must rule all now, and so bless all the world, even although by-and-by, for her folly, she herself may fall.

2. So we are led directly to that faith of Jeremiah which *caused* his political change. Again] it was a faith reached only slowly and after resistance; and it was reached as the result of that earnest reflection on the state and nature of men's souls which we have already traced. Early in the summary mass of sayings (chaps. ii.-x.) is one dated from Josiah's days, *i.e.* before 609 B.C., which runs thus:

"It shall come to pass in the days when ye go on multiplying and are fruitful, as it has been predicted ye shall, then—the very oracle of God is, that men shall no more say,

'The ark of Jehovah's covenant.'

The ark shall not come into your mind.

Men shall not remember it.

No one shall miss it.

No new ark shall be made."

Such fine insight into the evanescence of religious symbols was sure to produce that political estimate of Zion which we have seen. Jeremiah never made the great mistake of supposing life can exist without forms. That were impossible. Indeed at the very time when he spoke the oracle just quoted, he praised certain forms which he laid aside afterwards. We pass on a few years, and read those startling words in chap. vii., under Josiah's second successor Jehoiakim. He goes into the Zion temple under a deep sense of God's guidance, and there cries:

"Trust not, ye Jews and worshippers, in lying words, saying, 'This is the temple of Jehovah.'"

And later in this oracle he adds :

“ Offer God no burnt-offerings, but eat as food all the beasts ye slaughter, for your own pleasure only. For He did not give laws at the exodus concerning burnt-offerings and slaughtering. He said : ‘ Listen for the Jehovah voice. Let Him be your God, and be ye His people. ’ ”

The words are startling to us. The hearers nearly killed Jeremiah.

The best thing for us to do is to put in a few sentences the gist of Jeremiah’s mind as expressed in the course of the whole of this striking oracle. He says, in effect :

(i.) “ Sacred things, such as temple, sacrifices, and the like, do not insure highest character. They do not give highest value to life. They are thus not *creative*. In this sense they are not Divine.”

(ii.) “ Rightness alone is so. Oneness with that abiding voice that whispers to the soul ‘ Thou shalt,’ ‘ Thou shalt not,’ alone gives peace, sense of approval, sense of worth, joy, life.”

(iii.) “ The use of sacred symbols is quite compatible with non-Jehovah worship, with subjection to false gods, or, as we would say to-day, with unholy character.”

(iv.) “ Therefore sacred things must be changed. Life will change them, and prove itself to be life by changing them. For symbols do not create new life : but life creates new symbols.”

Such was Jeremiah.

IV. In conclusion, let us suffer the attractiveness of this man to bind us to him, to our Lord, to one another. Yes ; let Jeremiah win us to know ourselves, as he strove to know his own soul, in its most hidden secrets. Let his constant interest, that beautiful interest he had in all the facts that God has made, the facts of self, God, life, especially religious life, charm into brightness our interest in all these things to-day. In a remarkable sense Jeremiah

was a teacher for us now; for the secret of all keen thinking to-day, whether among quicker thinkers or slower, more radical and rapid men or men more cautious and reserved, is the belief in the immanent God and the consequent unspeakable value of humanity and of nature, of thought, of habit, and above all of religion.

He was surely right in his iconoclastic attitude toward forms, as the tree is right to burst the binding bark which it ever re-forms afresh. Onward then be the watchword we cry, following this leading man of God. Ever new forms; ever more life that dwells in forms, and casts them off to fashion new. More life in more love that comes of more vision of souls, our own, our brothers' souls, the soul of God in whom we live. More vision in more thought; then fearlessly forward to new words and deeds. To this the prophet Jeremiah commands us.

A. DUFF.

THE FOURFOLD REVELATION OF GOD.¹

By the "Fourfold Revelation" announced for this evening's subject, I mean the revelation of God in Nature, Scripture, History, and Life. I propose to speak generally of their relation to each other, and more particularly of the relation of Scripture to the rest. Infinite as the subject is, some aspects of it may be brought within the compass of an evening's paper. It will be convenient to begin with a glance at Nature, History, and Life apart from Scripture.

First then we look at Nature. This is the revelation on which the stress was laid a century ago. Christians were tired of controversy, and inclined to look to natural religion for the substance of their duty; while deists readily fell in

¹ Read before the St. John's College Theological Society, Cambridge, May 22nd, 1890.