

*RELIGIOUS CONTROVERSY IN THE OLD TESTAMENT.*

II. THE PERIOD OF THE PRE-EXILIC PROPHETS.

OUR previous lecture discussed the attitude to be taken to the various parties who figure in the religious controversies in the Old Testament. We agreed that the prophets and other inspired writers were in the right in their main contentions, that their work and their teaching were in the line of the progressive development of Revealed Religion. We also agreed that, in spite of this, we are not justified in taking up a partisan attitude and wholly condemning the other side. Men might be on the wrong side, we said, and might still be good and holy; they might even make some contribution to ultimate and permanent truth.

I wish to illustrate these principles further in a discussion of the work of the great pre-exilic prophets.

We may briefly review the leading features of the closing period of the Monarchy. About 750 the great series of canonical prophets began with Amos. That date falls towards the end of the reigns of Uzziah of Judah and Jeroboam II. of Israel. These reigns were long and prosperous; both the states enjoyed material wealth and political power and independence. These brought with them certain social and economic changes. The older Israel was largely a nation of yeoman farmers, each family farming its own land; great wealth and extreme poverty were equally rare. The changes of the eighth century led to the formation of great estates; in the process many of the farmers were ousted from their land, and they and their families became landless paupers. There was an increase of culture, luxury and the ostentatious display of

wealth. At the same time there was much external devotion to Yahweh, a profusion of elaborate ritual at many sanctuaries, supported by munificent offerings. But this external devotion was not accompanied by justice and benevolence; and the ritual itself was often superstitious and perhaps even immoral.

These evils were denounced by the prophets of the eighth century, Amos, Hosea, Isaiah and Micah. Meanwhile Assyria again asserted its supremacy over Palestine. The Northern Kingdom was overthrown in 721; Judah had a narrow escape in 701, but survived for more than a century. There was no real reformation of social evils or religious corruption; and in the last days of Judah, Jeremiah at Jerusalem and Ezekiel in Chaldea prophesied in much the same strain as Amos and Isaiah.

Hezekiah seems to have been under the influence of Isaiah at certain periods of his reign, and Josiah seems to have favoured the teaching of the canonical prophets; otherwise these prophets were for the most part in opposition to the authorities both in Church and State, kings, priests, and even to the general body of professional prophets.

The teaching of these prophets, therefore, was highly controversial and their ministry was fiercely contentious. They attacked popular religious teaching and worship, current social principles and practice, and necessarily also the influential classes of their day, men of wealth, rank and power, both lay and clerical.

I wish to devote this lecture to a brief study of these great controversies.

This period also has been very commonly treated on the principle that one party was wholly right and the other quite wrong. Even in homiletical works of the critical school the tendency is not altogether outgrown; as I said in my previous lecture, it has a certain justification in

sermons where individuals are treated as symbols of good and evil and not as ordinary historical personages.

Take for instance Professor G. A. Smith's great work on *Isaiah*. I trust it will be understood that my reference is not an adverse criticism ; I do not deny that in popular exposition, for the sake of immediate effect, by way of edification, such treatment is justifiable or even necessary. But very sweeping statements are often made by others as serious history ; and their presence in a popular exposition by so distinguished a scholar as G. A. Smith helps us to understand how they must dominate much traditional literature and preaching. Take then G. A. Smith's treatment of Ahaz : we are told that, " religion to Ahaz was only another kind of diplomacy " ; in another place, " if Ahaz had any conscience left " ; and again, " Ahaz is thus the Judas of the Old Testament. " It is however only fair to say that Ahaz is Judas on the understanding that Judas betrayed Jesus through a " wilful desire to bring about the kingdom of God in his own violent fashion. "

Now it is quite true that the religious policy of Ahaz was wrong ; but I see no justification for saying that with him religion was mere diplomacy, or for doubting that he had a conscience, or even for comparing him with Judas. He was probably devout, with a gloomy, superstitious devotion ; and not more worldly than most kings.

A Romanist divine of the sixteenth century might have written in the same way about Queen Elizabeth ; I should not like to say that there was any general resemblance between Ahaz and Elizabeth ; but I am not sure that we have evidence that Ahaz was conspicuously inferior in religion and morality, judged by the standard of his times.

Or again, remember that Jehoiakim and Jeremiah were deadly enemies, therefore, for instance, Dr. Streane (C.B.S. xviii.) is full of unmeasured condemnation of Jehoiakim

and his followers, we read "the disregard of religion on the part of the king was thus the means of effecting a speedy separation between the true servants of God and the empty professors. The latter fall back into idolatry and wickedness ; the former are refined by the adversity and their faithfulness shines the more brightly." I think it quite likely that Jehoiakim was harsh and selfish ; but I see no evidence that he disregarded religion, I am afraid that many harsh and selfish people are to be found amongst the regular attendants at Christian churches. Doubtless Jeremiah and his friends were true servants of God, but it does not follow that those who differed from them were empty professors.

As I have said, I do not quarrel with these statements as an emphatic and impressive way of saying that, judged by the ultimate issues, and speaking generally, Isaiah and Jeremiah were right, their ministries were links in the chain of progressive Revelation ; while their opponents were wrong, and their work had little permanent value.

It is urgently necessary nowadays to do away with the common idea that we have a right to judge a man's moral and spiritual character by the extent to which he holds our theological views and shares our religious observances. A little charity towards the opponents of the prophets might help to discredit this popular fallacy.

Let us then briefly consider these great controversies in a more impartial spirit. We need not be less friendly to Isaiah and Jeremiah ; we need not fear that scientific study will detract from the spiritual grandeur of these noble figures ; but we may perhaps venture to remember that history cannot be written as a series of dramatic contrasts between good and evil ; we may be a little less hostile to the unfortunate kings and priests and prophets who differed from Isaiah and Jeremiah ; especially as

almost all we know about them comes from their enemies and opponents.

Let us notice to begin with that religious antagonisms were complicated by personal, social, and political differences. I suppose we might assume this from our knowledge of human nature and of general history. Take any great religious struggle of which we have full information; whether between the Arians and the Catholics; between Rome and the Reformers; between Laud and the Puritans—such conflicts are never wholly confined to religious matters; they are also affected by the likes and dislikes of princes, prelates and statesmen, by the clashing interests of different classes; and by the political disputes of the period. There is no reason to suppose that controversies in ancient Israel were less involved or less complicated. Indeed we have direct evidence that the prophets were concerned with personal, social and political matters.

#### A. *Foreign Policy.*

In their days foreign policy was a burning question as it is in ours. For instance, in Hezekiah's time the supreme power in Western Asia was Assyria, and in Jeremiah's time the supreme power was Babylon; in both periods Egypt was perpetually instigating Judah to revolt against the dominant power; there was an Egyptian party and an anti-Egyptian party at Jerusalem; Isaiah and Jeremiah associated themselves with the anti-Egyptian party. It has been usual to maintain that these prophets were right, either by political insight or as a matter of special inspiration. They may have been; I am not prepared to discuss the matter now; but their opponents, the Egyptian party, were not necessarily lost to all sense of decency, honesty and godliness, because they took a different view.

International politics were as tangled and obscure then

as they are now, and it was as possible for sincere, straightforward, devout men to be found on opposite sides then as it is to-day. I do not think that I should be branded as a sinner above all men, if my views on the *Entente Cordiale* or the rapprochement with Germany do not happen to agree with those of the Archbishop of Canterbury or of Dr. Clifford, as the case may be.

B. *Differences on Personal Questions.*

Naturally our very meagre data tell us little about the personal relationships of the prophets. Their extant works are mere pamphlets, selections containing what was felt to be most inspired, or most valuable, or most important, either by the prophets themselves or by their disciples or by the devout scholars of later times.

Such a principle of selection would include few traces of any personal feeling which entered into the struggles of the prophets with their opponents; but I do not know that there is any creed or confession which requires us to believe that Isaiah and Jeremiah were more Christ-like in this respect than Savonarola, Luther or Calvin, Wesley or Whitefield.

Our evidence on such points is, as I have said, most meagre. We may perhaps fancy that we discern a personal note in the attitude of Isaiah to Ahaz or of Jeremiah to Jehoiakim. We might perhaps—I daresay we ought not, but we might be somewhat suspicious when we find Isaiah demanding (xxii. 15) the dismissal of one royal treasurer after another, first Shebna, then Eliakim. We might wonder whether this activity in domestic politics was wholly free from personal or party feeling. But we can hardly maintain that we have proof of such feeling, and we put the most favourable construction on what we are told. Possibly a similar charity is due to the other side.

Perhaps, too, some allowance should be made for the fact that, even on the showing of the prophets themselves, there seems sometimes to have been little that was winning or conciliating in the prophetic method.

C. *Social Ethics, Religion and Morality.*

We may turn now to a subject on which we have much fuller information, the prophetic attitude towards troubles between class and class. We have seen that the prophets of the eighth century lived in a period of social and economic change; in earlier times Israel was largely a nation of small landholders; in Isaiah's time there was a tendency to form large estates and thus create a class of landless paupers. The prophets protested strongly against this tendency; they clung to the old ideal according to which an Israelite family held its land as a sacred and inalienable inheritance. They denounced the wealthy nobles who added house to house and field to field.

In this and other matters, notably the pure administration of justice, the prophets upheld a high standard of social righteousness. This, however, was only one application of a fundamental feature of their teaching, namely, the essential bond between religion and morality. God demands not sacrifice but benevolence and beneficence; what He requires is not sacrifice but that His people should do justice and love mercy and walk humbly with their God. Therefore it is commonly said that one chief characteristic of the teaching of the canonical prophets was their insistence on the necessary connexion between morality and religion. No doubt this is substantially true.

But if this was, as it undoubtedly was, the teaching of the prophets, what was the attitude of their opponents, and of the persons and classes whom they denounced? Did the latter teach that there was no connexion between

religion and ethics ; that Yahweh was indifferent to moral character and conduct ? It hardly seems probable.

I am doubtful whether as a matter of express theory or doctrine there was any avowed difference on this point between, say, Jeremiah and his unfortunate antagonist Hananiah. I don't suppose the latter preached the independence or the divorce of religion and morality. I am not sure that any sane person ever did. Of course practice and theory are quite different ; but theoretical antinomianism is the hallucination of religious lunatics, and the latter sometimes occur in groups.

In *practice*, of course, religion and morality may be kept in separate water-tight compartments, especially among primitive peoples ; but when once the connexion of the two has been made clear, it is obvious and commends itself, so that it would seldom be denied.

Probably as a matter of formal theory all the prominent religious teachers of our period were agreed that Yahweh was a righteous God and required that His people should be righteous. Such teaching was no novelty in the time of Amos.

The avowed issue is hardly ever between morality and immorality ; the real question is what constitutes morality. Most people use the word "ought," there are things which *ought* to be done and things that *ought* not to be done. Controversy arises as to what these things are.

Let us illustrate from modern analogies. Supposing a High Church clergyman encourages his choir-boys to play cricket on Sundays ; a Sabbatarian accuses him of being immoral. A Labour Leader talks about the wickedness of a Christian employer who does not pay Trades Union wages. The employer thinks that a Methodist Labour Leader who makes his workmen dissatisfied is a pestilent hypocrite. But neither the clergyman nor the employer nor the labour



leader professes to advocate what is ethically wrong ; none of them intend to separate their religion from their morality.

Isaiah and his supporters denounced the governing classes for violating the principles of social righteousness, and condemned the clergy, the priests and prophets for abetting them ; but it is quite possible that amongst those who were denounced were honest and devout men, with a clear conscience, who felt that Isaiah and Amos were mischievous demagogues.

The prophets, as we have said more than once, protested against the formation of large estates. They apparently considered it wrong in their time that large districts should be owned by individuals, and that the people in general should have no opportunity of owning their farms and homesteads.

One principle underlying this position might be stated thus. No one is free, no one is a true citizen able to enjoy the rights and fulfil the duties of a citizen unless he is assured of a home and of the opportunity of earning a livelihood for himself and his family. If a man can be turned out of his home and deprived of his livelihood at a week's notice through the needs, the avarice, the caprice, or the ill-will of landlords and employers, such a man is not really a free citizen. Many slaves have had a more assured, a more honourable status. In Isaiah's time the ownership of land was the natural way in which a man could be assured of a home and a livelihood. Hence his teaching.

But to-day, after nineteen centuries of Christianity, we are by no means agreed about such a principle and still less as to its application. There is room for sincere Christians to take different views ; and so there was in the time of Isaiah. Assuming that every one ought to be sure of a home and a livelihood, it may have been open

to debate even in Isaiah's time whether making every head of a family a landowner was the way to get this principle applied to the furthest possible extent.

But Isaiah's teaching in this matter may also be regarded as an application of a broader principle. We have seen that Israel had reached a well-known stage in national development. As far as the community as a whole was concerned, there was a great advance in material wealth and prosperity, from which, however, the people generally derived little advantage. The increased wealth mainly went to provide large fortunes for a small class of great landowners, the millionaires, and multi-millionaires of their time ; on the other hand there arose a pauper class, more wretched and degraded than any that existed in primitive times. Such at any rate was what the prophets feared ; this seemed to them the tendency of the changes that were taking place.

Their protest involved a general principle which might be formulated thus : That the advantages of material progress should be fairly distributed amongst the community, and should not be exploited in the interests of a limited class.

But here again, what was the issue between Isaiah and those whom he attacked ?

I doubt whether the principle I have formulated would have been seriously challenged, as a principle, even in Isaiah's time. In practice the issue is usually as to facts and as to how principles are to be applied to existing circumstances.

May I again illustrate by modern analogies ? We have many social controversies now ; but the burning questions are not so much as to the theoretical principles of social righteousness, but as to how they are to be applied. Nobody, for instance, would publicly deny that the

worker is entitled to a living wage. But what is a living wage? Dukes, for instance, are as a rule, I believe, hard workers; and I understand, from statements as to recent financial measures, that their incomes are only barely sufficient, they cannot stand the strain of any additional taxation; they have just a living wage. Then, again, to take another class of workers, the artisans—what is a living wage for them? How much beer and tobacco, how many music-halls and football matches does it include? Are three weeks at Blackpool or Yarmouth necessary, or would a fortnight be enough? Surely here the point at issue is not the principle but how it is to be applied.

Again, we should all agree that an employer should treat his workpeople fairly, and if possible generously. But even an outsider, with the most slight and superficial acquaintance with business, knows how difficult it is to settle what is fair and possible. If the employer is to keep in business, he must make some profits, he must compensate for the losses of a bad year by extra profits in good years; he must have a reserve fund. It is not easy to say what wages he can afford to give.

To state the matter in the most simple fashion, there are three parties concerned, and each should deal fairly by the other two; the employer should be fair to the workmen and to the consumer; the workmen should be fair to the employer and the consumer; and the consumer should be fair to the workmen and the employer. It is very easy to lay this down as a general moral principle; it is difficult to apply it to any actual case.

Any one who reads the organs of different political parties, including those of capital and labour, knows how easy it is for honest men to differ as to what is right, and how easy it is for such men to be led to opposite conclusions by varieties of interest, temperament, intellectual bias, and

sympathy, and how readily they denounce their opponents as unprincipled scoundrels.

Probably the controversies of Isaiah's time were carried on under somewhat similar conditions. Some of the men whom he denounced were obviously guilty of cruelty and injustice; but Isaiah would not be alone in condemning them; all decent people would sympathise with him. It was merely his courage, eloquence, and inspiration that made him conspicuous as the spokesman of justice. Where he would provoke opposition would be in his attitude towards the social and economic changes of his day, the particular remedies he advocated. He would be obnoxious not by his sympathy with the poor, but through his hostility to the rich.

There was, after all, a case for the other side, even on general principles of social righteousness. We may neglect, as I have said, gross cases of cruelty and injustice. But apart from such, there may have been people who differed from Amos and Isaiah, and yet had good reasons—I do not say *sufficient* reasons but *good* reasons—for thinking that they were justified in following and taking advantage of the social and economic tendencies of their time.

Here again the points at issue were not formal and avowed differences of ethical principles personal or social. They were twofold. First, there would be controversy as to what admitted principles required under existing circumstances. And secondly, you have on the one hand the enthusiasm of the prophet for all that is true and fair and generous, and on the other hand the anxiety of the average man to safeguard his own interests.

#### D. *Theology.*

Let us now consider how far there may have been antagonism between Isaiah and other religious teachers and leaders

on the score of conscious and formal differences in theology. We may use theology in an elastic sense for expressions of religious opinion.

The history of Christianity shows that the real issue between churches and faiths does not generally lie in differences of theology. Such differences are often the ostensible occasion or cause of division, and theology is useful in furnishing watchwords and shibboleths. But churches and faiths are really divided by conflicting claims to authority, personal and official; by varieties of race, of ritual or external observances, and of ecclesiastical organisation. A church with any vitality finds room within itself for a wide range of theological opinion. There are great varieties of belief in the Church of England, amongst Presbyterians, amongst Congregationalists, amongst Baptists, and within other denominations. The theology of an Anglican clergyman may be much closer to that of a Presbyterian minister than to that of some of his brethren in his own church.

Possibly there were theological differences amongst the followers of Isaiah; while in some cases the chief difference between a devout Israelite and an equally devout Moabite was that one called God Yahweh and the other called Him Chemosh. And in Judah, take even Isaiah's great watchword *Q'dhósh Yisráel*, the Holy One of Israel; Isaiah's opponents would have shouted "Holy, holy, holy is Yahweh, the God of Israel" with as much enthusiasm as Isaiah himself. I doubt whether Isaiah's opponents would have found much fault with his theological propositions; only they might not have understood them in the sense that he intended.

We must not, of course, forget the theory I mentioned in my previous lecture, that from the time of Moses onward there was what we may call an orthodox party in Israel

which handed down a tradition of something like an ethical monotheism and maintained this faith as against the corruption and superstition of the rest of the people. If that were so, the prophets of the eighth century would stand in the line of this tradition. I think that somewhere I have seen a similar view with regard to "the pure Protestant faith," viz., that throughout the Christian centuries, amongst all the corruptions of Romanism, the Protestant faith has always been held by an elect remnant; that it is a continuous tradition from Christ and His Apostles. The parallel may suggest something as to the probabilities with regard to the religion of Israel.

But the canonical prophets do not seem to be defending an ancient tradition of ethical monotheism against a corrupt theology. There is no appeal to ancient tradition or to the authority of Moses; they and their hearers seem to have a common ground in the faith in a special bond between Yahweh and Israel, which involved mutual claims, duties and obligations. So far as abstract theory was concerned, their teaching as to the righteousness, power, and majesty of Yahweh was welcome and popular. Here again controversy arose out of the practical application of these principles. For instance, the popular view was that the righteousness and power of Yahweh were shown in giving victory to His Chosen People, whereas according to the prophets these attributes were manifested in punishment inflicted on the sin of Israel.

The objection to eclecticism, syncretism, Baal-worship and so on has nothing to do with theoretical monotheism, it is a purely practical matter—the patriotic Israelite should be devoted to the national God. Thus it was, once more, a question of the application of a principle that the Israelite should be devoted to Yahweh. But how should he show his devotion? what did Yahweh want? The

answer may imply theology, but these prophets were above all things practical. G. A. Smith<sup>1</sup> speaks of Amos as "destitute of dogma." Take, for instance, the great prophetic doctrines that Yahweh was not the Champion, but the Judge of Israel; and that His judgments would bring ruin on the nation—this also is chiefly practical.

As to the principle involved, every one knew that Yahweh was the Judge of Israel—even Chemosh could be angry with Moab. The points at issue were the kind of conduct which He approved or condemned; the form of the punishment which He inflicted and the measure of its severity.

All this seems to show that the prophets were not at variance with other religious teachers on questions of pure doctrine.

#### E. *Ritual.*

Let us turn next to the attitude of the prophets to ritual, or external religious observances. What was their controversy with their opponents on such matters?

The characteristic teaching of the prophets was as follows. They depreciated external religious observances and treated them as of small importance compared with justice and benevolence between man and man. They attacked the worship, the sanctuaries and the clergy of their time, including the Temple, the priests and the prophets. Incidentally they denounced idols and other items of Temple furniture, and condemned any worship of gods other than Yahweh.

Here at any rate are clear issues, but they are largely personal; it is the worshippers, both lay and clerical, who are wrong. The worship is unsatisfactory because the worshippers have failed in justice, duty and kindness to their fellow-men. It is a matter of emphasis; most men

<sup>1</sup> *Twelve*, i. 86.

laid the greater stress on external observances, on sacrifice, on sacred days and things, places and persons. The prophets were chiefly concerned with character and conduct. It is probable that they attached little importance to forms and furniture, and in view of this we must not lay too much stress upon their denunciation of idols ; they also denounced sanctuaries, sacrifices and priests ; and it is not clear, at any rate in the case of Hosea, that they regarded idols as more objectionable than sacrifices.

It is not, as I have said, absolutely clear ; but I am inclined to think that Isaiah and other prophets came to object to idols and other features of popular worship because these were common to the worship of Yahweh and that of foreign gods ; and the prophets were anxious to make the religion of Israel conspicuously different from foreign religions, so that there might be no confusion and no connexion between Yahweh and other gods. Such confusion and connexion were common in those days ; there were many who worshipped other gods *as well as* Yahweh ; it is even possible that there were some Israelites who worshipped other gods *instead* of Yahweh. But it is not certain that even in this matter there was any formal opposition to the teaching of the prophets. Were there really religious teachers of any standing or authority who maintained that true religion consisted in supplementing the worship of Yahweh by that of the Tyrian Baal or Astarte ? Would priests or prophets of Yahweh encourage men to worship Astarte ? Or, on the other hand, would the priests of a sanctuary of the Tyrian Baal be anxious for their clients to worship Yahweh ?

There are in these days many religious vagrants, who drift about to different places of worship, like tramps to various casual wards, but I don't think that either clergymen or ministers encourage the practice. There are also



Summer Schools where you may hear speakers of a dozen denominations.

In Israel the worshipping of various gods might often be encouraged from interested motives. The authorities of a sanctuary might multiply shrines of deities and demons in order to attract as many as possible to their festivals.

Then, again, considerations of politics, especially foreign politics, might lead the government to tolerate or even encourage a variety of cults. Eclecticism might be winked at as a practical necessity, but hardly justified as a formal doctrine. Most serious, earnest men would agree that an Israelite should confine his worship to Yahweh, as far as possible.

#### *Summary and Conclusion.*

We have thus made a brief survey of the period from Amos to the Captivity. This survey does not suggest that the antagonism of the prophets and their opponents was that of two organised religious parties, opposed to each other by formal statements of doctrine; or by avowed differences as to the standard of ethics; or by marked varieties of ritual.

The opposition might rather be stated thus:

On the one side were the prophets, men with a living enthusiasm for God and man, eagerly desiring that nation and individual alike should be truly devoted to God. They were convinced that such devotion would find expression in social righteousness, in mutual helpfulness and benevolence amongst men, and especially in care for the poor and weak. They were indignant that the moral and spiritual energies of the people should be dissipated in external observances. Ritual should be subordinate. Because they were good Israelites, their profound experiences and lofty ideals were associated with Yahweh, the God of Israel,

and they were intolerant of foreign cults which divided and distracted the religious forces of the nation.

Then, on the other side, there would be the usual mass of indifferent, conventional people, with a high standard of morals and religion as a matter of formal profession, but also with the tacit understanding that their professions were not to be taken too seriously in practical matters. Such people would not be enthusiastic supporters of the prophets, neither would they be active opponents; but they would probably consider that the zeal of such men as Isaiah was troublesome, inconvenient and uncalled for.

Then there would be earnest, devout, old-fashioned people who would be shocked at the prophets' language as to sacred institutions like sacrifices, Sabbaths and the Temple, and as to established authorities like the priests.

Then, on the other hand, there would be men of liberal culture, who saw a distinct gain to Israel in the development of a wealthy class, and in friendly relations with foreigners. These would object to the teaching of the prophets on social matters and to their denunciation of all foreign elements in religion. There would also be the priests of foreign cults and of local deities and demons, together with the whole tribe of witches, magicians and soothsayers. There would be kings and their ministers, whose domestic and foreign policy was interfered with by the uncompromising Puritanism of the prophets. And, finally, there would be all those who found their account in lust, cruelty and oppression.

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