

## The Parables of Zechariah.

BY THE REV. JAMES STALKER, D.D., GLASGOW.

### V.

#### THE PARABLE OF THE HIGH PRIEST (CHAP. iii.).

IN the preceding visions the prophet comforted his fellow-countrymen in view of the powerful enemies by whom they were surrounded, and the smallness of their own numbers. In this parable we come to a difficulty more solemn. It appears that, besides their external feebleness, they were beset with an internal weakness: they were oppressed with the sense of unforgiven sin.

I. In this new vision the prophet saw "Joshua the high priest standing before the angel of the Lord, and Satan standing at his right hand to resist" (or "accuse") "him."

This Joshua was a leading figure of the period. In the contemporary prophet Haggai he is frequently mentioned. There we learn that he was the son of Josedech, and that he was closely associated with Zerubbabel in all the pious and patriotic undertakings of those days. The one, indeed, was the ecclesiastical and the other the civil head of the new community.

When it is said that he was seen standing before the Lord, the first notion suggested by the words is that, as high priest, he was engaged in the duties of his sacred office;<sup>1</sup> because to stand before the Lord is frequently mentioned in Scripture as the privilege of the priesthood. It is probable, however, that the image presented to the mind of the prophet was totally different. It was not in the temple that Joshua seemed to him to be, but in a hall of judgment. To stand before the judge is a phrase used of the prisoner at the bar; and that this is its signification here is proved by the statement which follows—that Satan was standing at his right hand to accuse him; for this was the position of the prosecutor in a court of justice. And the same view is further supported by the fact that Joshua was clothed in filthy garments—a condition in which the high priest could, under no circumstances, have appeared before God in the service of his office, but which befits exactly the position of a criminal.

If it be asked why Joshua should have appeared

in this position, it has been answered<sup>2</sup> that this is an imaginative representation of the fact that false charges had been lodged against him in the Persian court by the enemies of the young community. It was common enough at that time to attempt thus to ruin the character of the leaders of God's people; but in the present case the suggestion is not a happy one.

It is nearer the mark to suppose that Joshua appeared at the divine tribunal as the representative of a guilty priesthood. Before the Exile the priesthood had sunk very low, those who ought to have been the leaders of the people in holiness being the ringleaders in sin. Of course in Babylon the Jews had no temple in which to offer sacrifice: and now the question might have arisen in pious minds whether the office had not become defunct. It was this which made requisite a solemn re-statement of Joshua and the other priests in the sacred office.

Whatever truth there may be in this view, however, the one which does most justice to the whole vision is, that Joshua appears here as the representative of a guilty people. The filthy garments with which he is clothed are the sins of the community; and the charges urged against him by Satan are its crimes and backslidings. The Exile was notoriously a punishment for sin; in Babylon itself the exiles had not been guiltless; and even since their return to their own land they had backslidden from the high ideal with which they had set out from Mesopotamia, as the unfinished walls of the temple too clearly testified. In the more sensitive hearts among them, the memory of these things was a source of depression and despair. They felt that God was angry with them and that, till their iniquity was taken away, no undertaking of theirs could prosper. The more sacred the work to which they were called, the more unfit for it did they appear to themselves to be.

Guilt is a paralysing feeling. What becomes of sins which are past? The majority never inquire:

<sup>1</sup> Wright thus understands the phrase.

<sup>2</sup> By Ewald.

they take it for granted that they have disappeared and been forgotten. But to those who realise that they have gone into the books of God and have to be faced and answered for, they are an intolerable burden, which saps the moral strength and makes progress impossible. Yet this despair is the precursor of hope; for it is only when we have gone to the bottom of guilt that we can be liberated from it. In the City of Destruction, although all were guilty and all in equal peril, there was only one man to whom sin was a burden. The rest were prosperous and easy in their minds, while he was crushed with despair. Yet he was the only inhabitant of the place who was in a safe or a hopeful condition.

II. The *rôle* played in this scene by Satan is similar to that ascribed to him in the Book of Job, where he appears in the court of heaven, to minimise the merits of good men and place their shortcomings in the worst of lights. So here he is the accuser, who, with the skill of an advocate, urges the offences of which the people of God have been guilty and endeavours to secure their condemnation and rejection.

It has been contended that in such passages we have a conception of Satan out of accordance with the later representations of Holy Writ. Satan, it is said, is not here a fallen angel and enemy of God, whose abode is in hell, but one of the sons of God, enjoying free access to the Divine Presence, and fulfilling a necessary, though perhaps a disagreeable, function in the divine administration.

This, however, is a shallow view; because the part played by Satan both here and in Job is a thoroughly evil one. It is true that to expose sin may be praiseworthy work. It is the work of the prophet; an Amos, a Malachi and a John the Baptist had to make manifest the exceeding sinfulness of the public crimes of their day, and drag into the light its hidden vices. In all ages this is the duty of the preacher; it was performed by a Chrysostom, a Savonarola and an Andrewes; and in no country or city is it superfluous. The office of conscience itself is to accuse and condemn the sinner. Yet it does not follow that everyone is praiseworthy who undertakes the office of accuser. All depends on his motive. The prophets stigmatised sin, because they were jealous for the honour of God; the true-hearted preacher awakens the conscience in order to save the soul; but it is

possible to expose sin merely for the purpose of gloating over it. The shortcomings of good people may be held up to ridicule, not for the purpose of correcting them, but in order to prove that no such thing as unselfishness or purity exists. There are those who are never so happy as when they have discovered something which seems to prove that a profession of religion or high principle is only the mask under which a hypocrite is cloaking his misdeeds. When God's work is making progress and its leaders are performing acts of heroism, such critics are silent; but, when any good cause shows signs of decline or any good man takes a false step, they seize upon the fact with avidity and publish it to all the winds of heaven. This is the spirit of the devil, and it is the one attributed in this passage to Satan. No doubt the true prophet, who is prompted by the purest love, may sometimes be unjustly supposed to be animated by a diabolic spirit, when, in the heat of his zeal for God and the bitterness of his shame at the degradation of humanity, he lays bare the evils of the time and denounces the abuses of his Church and country; but let the satirist look narrowly to two things—that he is not himself practising the sins which he denounces, and that the motive of his accusations is not hatred but love. Merely to demonstrate how weak and base mankind is can serve no good purpose, unless the censor at the same time has a plan for making it better.

III. Having commenced with the idea of a court of law, the prophet might have been expected to describe the details of the trial, specifying the charges brought forward by the accuser and the pleas advanced in defence. But this would not have been in accordance with Zechariah's abbreviated style. He is never diffuse, but contents himself with a brief indication of a scene, leaving the reader to supply the details. Besides, in this case there was no need of an elaborate trial: it was only too easy for the accuser to prove the guilt of the accused. In consequence of their sins the people of God were so weak and disheartened that anyone could rub into their wounds the salt of condemnation.

But the very abjectness which exposed them to the insults of Satan commended them to the loving-kindness of God. "Is not this a brand," He asked, "plucked from the burning"?

The language is borrowed from an older prophet,<sup>1</sup> but Zechariah imparts to it a peculiar pathos. Israel in the Exile had been thrown into the fire of the divine wrath. Much had been burnt, and perhaps all deserved to be. But at the critical moment the heart of God relented, and He snatched the burnt stump out of the fire. It was still defaced with what it had passed through, and bore the smell of burning. To gloat over the wretchedness of such a remnant was a shameful thing to do; and, for doing so, Satan received a sharp rebuke. But God Himself took up the brand tenderly, His repentings kindling together, to see what might still be made of it.

Did not Zechariah in this picture anticipate the gospel? In His life on earth our Lord was principally moved by the condition of the worst classes of sinners. The very extremity of their need appealed to Him. And to all generations His memorial is, "This man receiveth sinners."

Pardoning grace was expressed to Zechariah by a simple symbol: Jehovah gave orders to those who stood before Him—no doubt His attendant angels—to strip from the high priest his filthy garments and put on him change of raiment. Throughout Scripture this is one of the most frequent figures for forgiveness: the unpardoned sinner is clothed in filthy rags, the pardoned in raiment white as snow. In our day it is sometimes said that nothing is of any consequence but a change of character: this alone is the spotless robe. But, although pardon without holiness would be a gift without value, we ought not to confound things that differ. Pardon is one thing and holiness is another. A hundred incidents of ordinary human experience might be adduced to prove how valuable pardon is even among men; and shall we not value the pardon of God, against whom we have offended far more grossly and who is far more able to punish? Pardon sheds abroad in the heart the peace of God; it opens to the imprisoned will the gate of freedom; the pardoned man goes forward with a bound in the path of obedience.

The prophet proceeds to tell, that, witnessing the putting of the white raiment on the high priest, he could not help exclaiming, "Let them set a fair mitre upon his head."<sup>2</sup> The impulse under

which he thus cried out was like the emotion of angels who rejoice in the presence of God over repenting sinners. And it turned out that he had correctly anticipated the course of events, and that his perceptions and volitions were at one with the divine will; for the angels obeyed his order as if it had come from God. The mitre was the head-dress of the high priest; it bore in front the inscription, "Holiness to the Lord"; and the placing of it on the head of Joshua signified the divine recognition of him as high priest, and of the people whom he represented as chosen and sanctified.

IV. But a fuller indication was to be forthcoming of the privileges of the forgiven; for the angel of the Lord, rising up from the seat of judgment, came forward and, in the overflowing tones of grace, assured Joshua of the favour in which he and his country now stood in the mind of the Lord.<sup>3</sup>

The first privilege of the forgiven is access. "Thus saith the Lord of hosts: If thou wilt walk in My ways, and if thou wilt keep My charge, then thou shalt also judge My house, and shalt also keep My courts;<sup>4</sup> and I will give thee places to walk among these that stand by" (ver. 7). Among the frequenters of the divine court Joshua was to have his right and his position, and to be entitled to go in and out without hesitation. In the New Testament the same is described as a privilege of every justified man: "Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ: by whom also we have access by faith into this grace wherein we stand." The forgiven soul has lost the natural terror of God, and can in all its exigencies enter His presence with the confidence and joy of a child.

But to the forgiven country a still more imposing privilege was announced: the Messiah was about to come. "Hear, O Joshua, the high priest, thou, and thy fellows that sit before thee; for they are men wondered at: for, behold, I will bring forth My servant the Branch" (ver. 8). The fellows of Joshua are the other priests reinstated along

<sup>3</sup> The last sentence of ver. 5 belongs to ver. 6: read, "And the angel of the Lord arose and protested unto Joshua, saying."

<sup>4</sup> Wellhausen says, "Before the Exile, not the priest, but the king, had authority over the temple."

<sup>1</sup> Amos iv. 11.

<sup>2</sup> The "I said," however, of ver. 5 is exceedingly doubtful; probably it ought to be, "He said."

with him in their office. They are "men wondered at"; or rather "men of portent" or prophecy. Their reinstatement was a sign that something still better was about to come forth from Him who is wonderful in counsel and excellent in working. The restoration of the priesthood would be followed by the restoration of the monarchy; and the King would be no other than He who, from the days of Isaiah, had been made known by the prophets as the Branch—a name denoting both that in Him the sure mercies of David would be remembered, and that He would flourish in vigour and beauty for ever.<sup>1</sup> In token of the fulfilment of this promise, the angel of the Lord showed Joshua the royal diadem—a stone with seven eyes, or facets, with a blank space in the midst, on which the name of the coming King was about to be engraved.<sup>2</sup>

The mention of the Messiah invited the prophet to enlarge on the blessings of the Messianic epoch.

<sup>1</sup> Isa. iv. 2, xi. 1; Jer. xxiii. 5.

<sup>2</sup> Here I follow Wellhausen. Many other explanations have been given of this stone and the seven eyes upon it; see them enumerated in Wright. Ewald's is worth mentioning: the stone is the head corner-stone of the temple; the seven eyes of God rest upon it, that is, it is the object of God's watchful care; God will see to it that it reaches its place as the copestone of the completed temple; to assure the people of this, seven eyes are to be carved upon it by the

But, with his usual reserve and brevity, he merely touches on two of them. Both, however, are exquisite. The one is expressed in the words, "And I will remove the iniquity of that land in one day." We know how prominent a feature this was to be of the work of the Saviour, and we can joyfully add, "And not the iniquity of that land only, but also the sins of the whole world." The other feature is expressed in the words, "In that day, saith the Lord of hosts, shall ye call every man his neighbour under the vine and under the fig tree." The vine, with its lovely leaves and fruit, and the fig, with its pleasant shade, were the most prominent objects of rural scenery, and to sit on sunny slopes in friendly conversation with neighbours beneath the vine and the fig tree was the ideal of prosperity and peace.<sup>3</sup> In the Messiah's days, scenes of this description would be witnessed in every corner of the land; and they would be an indication that the wrath of Jehovah had passed away, and that His eyes were resting with delight upon His people.

mason's chisel. But there are two objections to this view—first, it anticipates the teaching of the next parable; and, secondly, it is not likely that, having mentioned the Messiah, the prophet would so suddenly pass on to another theme.

<sup>3</sup> 1 Kings iv. 25, the phrase occurs in a description of the happiness of the reign of Solomon.

## Christ in Islam.

SAYINGS ATTRIBUTED TO CHRIST BY MOHAMMEDAN WRITERS.

BY D. S. MARGOLIOUTH, M.A., PROFESSOR OF ARABIC, OXFORD.

(From El-Ghazzali's *Revival of the Religious Sciences*—continued.)

49. iii. 161. Jesus said: Of a truth I say unto you, even as the sick man looks at the food, and does not enjoy it, owing to the violence of his pain; even so the man of this world takes no pleasure in worship, neither tastes its sweetness for the love of this world which he feels. And of a truth I say unto you, that even as a beast, if he be not ridden and exercised, becomes intractable and changes his character; even so, if the heart be not softened by the thought of death, and the fatigue of devotion, it becomes hard and rough. And of a truth I say unto you, that even as a bottle, so long as it is not rent nor dry, is fit to hold honey; even so the

heart, so long as it is not torn by passion, nor befouled by desire, nor hardened by comfort, shall become a vessel for wisdom.

50. *Ibid.* Jesus said: He that seeks after this world is like one that drinks sea-water: the more he drinks the thirstier he becomes, until it slay him.

52. iii. 175. The apostles said to Jesus: How is it that Thou canst walk upon the water, whereas we cannot? He said unto them: What think ye of the *dinar* and the *dirham* (pounds and shillings)? They said: They are precious. He said: But to me they are equal with the dirt.

52. iii. 178. Jesus said: There are three dangers