

The Inner Life of Jeremiah.

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I.

THE Book of Jeremiah is largely an autobiography ; the author becomes unconsciously the hero of his work. And Jeremiah was above everything a hero of the *inner life*, the martyr-prophet of spiritual religion. The faith of Israel, at the crisis of her fate, took refuge within the soul of this much-enduring man, where its forces were concentrated for a great advance. Jeremiah's inner experience can be traced, through a series of self-revealing passages, with some uncertainty as to the order of time, but with a sufficiently clear apprehension of the growth of his spiritual character. Chapters 1. 8¹⁸-9² 11¹⁸⁻²³ 15^{10, 11, 15-21} 16¹⁻⁹ 17¹⁸ 20. 26 and 30-32 furnish the salient points in the history of this great soul ; they disclose the protracted struggle of a sensitive and yet sternly loyal and upright nature with a most cruel vocation, its progress from youthful consecration and brave acceptance of the Divine will, through moods of doubt and passionate revolt, to complete self-conquest ending in settled peace and a far-seeing assurance of God's victory over the stubborn and lawless heart of man.

This interior development, which makes the story of one man an epitome and prophetic mirror of God's dealings with mankind, may be divided into five successive stages : (1) Jeremiah's call to the prophetic office in early life ; (2) the youthful period of fierce denunciation, which extended from 628-621 B.C. and was antecedent to the reforms of Josiah ; (3) the time of disillusion and silence, 621-608, ensuing upon the public reformation ; (4) the period of decisive conflict, in the Judæan state and within Jeremiah's breast, which was opened by the fall of Josiah at the battle of Megiddo and terminated with the fourth year of Jehoiakim (chap. 36 : 604 B.C.), when Jeremiah came to a complete rupture with the king ; (5) the stage of full acquiescence, attained by the prophet amidst thickening national calamity and personal distress, beginning with the establishment of the Babylonian supremacy in 604, and enduring through Jehoiakim's rebellion and the first siege and deportation from Jerusalem, through Zedekiah's unhappy reign, to the destruction of the city by

Nebuchadrezzar and the flight of the Judæan remnant to Egypt, where the prophet dies.

I.

In *Jeremiah's call* the nature of his task, and the peculiar temperament of the man, reveal themselves. He was to be, like none before him, 'a prophet unto the nations' (¹⁵), the spiritual exponent of a coming world-revolution. With Jehovah's 'words put in his mouth,' this shrinking, diffident young man is 'set over the nations and over the kingdoms, to pluck up and to break down, and to build and to plant' (vv. ^{9, 10}). For Israel is now to be swept into the vortex of world-politics ; and Jeremiah presides over an epoch of destruction and reconstruction in the Divine government of mankind. This prophet witnessed and interpreted the great Scythian irruption followed by the fall of Assyria, the brilliant but illusive revival of the Israelite nationality under Josiah, the brief resuscitation of Egyptian dominion, the rise of the Median and Chaldaean empires, and the destruction of the Davidic monarchy with its city and sanctuary. Never was there crowded into a single lifetime a train of more swift and violent changes in the landscape of history. The political order existing around the prophet in 628, when his mission began, was completely swept away by the date of his death some forty-five years later ; but he had sown the seeds of a new creation, which were to germinate hiddenly through the exile of his people and their centuries of tribulation, that they might fructify till the end of time. The two symbols attached to Jeremiah's inaugural revelation, those of the *early-blossoming almond* and the *seething-pot looking northwards* (vv. ¹¹⁻¹⁴), picture the oncoming of the revolution.

The reluctance of Jeremiah to accept his call is characteristic of his career. His was not the prompt and eager spirit of Isaiah crying out, 'Here am I ! send me,' so soon as his lips felt God's fire and the summons reached his ear ; nor the unquestioning soul of Amos, to whom Jehovah's voice came with a note resounding and imperative as that of a lion roaring in the forest ; he meets

his grand commission with the reply, ‘Ah, Lord Jehovah! behold, I cannot speak, for I am but a boy!’ He feels no aptitude for public speech; his youth, to begin with, is an insuperable bar. The contempt and disbelief of his kindred, the insult and violence that he suffered from all classes of the people, the appearance of disloyalty and sympathy with his country’s oppressors that attached to many of his oracles, wounded his sensibilities in every part.

The Book of Habakkuk shows how the naive faith of the older prophecy in Jehovah’s rule was troubled at this epoch, as it began to face the more complicated problems of world-life and national destiny. Like his contemporary, Jeremiah had his sceptical moments, he broke out more than once into protest against the harshness of Providence; but the trial assumed in his case a more inward, subjective form. Jehovah had marked him from his mother’s womb for a great errand; yet this errand becomes his shame and torture; cf. 1⁶ with 15¹⁰ 20¹⁴⁻¹⁸. In Jeremiah the tragic mystery of God’s dealings with the individual man stands over against the mystery of his dealings with nations in the larger play of human life. It is a moral miracle and a fine example of the ‘strength perfected in weakness’—not without its parallels, as in the instance of the fickle Simon who becomes Christ’s ‘rock,’ or John the apostle of love who pours out in the Apocalypse the vials of ‘the unmixed wine of the wrath of God’—that He should have made out of this soft-hearted, tremulous man ‘a fenced city and an iron pillar and brasen walls,’ ‘a tower and a fortress’ for Himself amongst His rebel people (see 1¹⁸ 6²⁷ 15²⁰). Assailed by contradiction, ridicule, injury, with the whole force of religious authority and popular feeling enlisted against him yet never flinching, though his heart quaked all the while, Jeremiah stood faithfully and alone for God and truth,—a lighthouse on its solitary rock breasting the storms of more than forty of the darkest years that God’s kingdom on earth has known.

The oracle of chap. 16^{ff.}—‘Thou shalt not take thee a wife,’ etc.—at whatever time published, in all probability came to the prophet at the beginning of his course, for marriage was contracted, as a rule, in the early years of adult life. A man of affectionate nature, he is forbidden all household alliance, all share in family festivities or mournings; with pathetic iteration he alludes in his prophecies

to ‘the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride,’ to ‘the voice of the [household] millstones and the light of the candle’ (7³⁴ 16⁹ 25¹⁰ 33¹¹)—he was haunted by his lost domestic bliss. Cut off from social joys and the ties of kindred, Jeremiah must witness by his lonely and uncared-for lot the miseries impending on his country (16⁹⁻¹³). His detachment was emphasized by the prophet’s expulsion from Anathoth, his native place, where a plot was laid against his life. This circumstance may have occurred earlier than is indicated by the position of the narrative respecting it in 11¹⁸⁻²³: it reminds us of our Lord’s experience at Nazareth.

II.

The first youthful period of Jeremiah’s work coincided with the brief ministry of Zephaniah in its occasion and aim. Judaea was then filled with the idolatries set up in Manasseh’s reign (1¹⁶; cf. Zeph 3¹⁻⁴). Immorality and oppression pervaded society; see esp. 5¹⁻⁹, 26-31 (this chapter seems to reflect Jeremiah’s early impressions of Jerusalem—the state of things improved under Josiah’s administration, according to 22^{15, 16}). Both prophets see a storm of judgment sweeping down from the north; it is *the Scythian invasion*, then hanging over all South-Western Asia, which they depict in the graphic language of Jer 5¹⁵⁻¹⁷ 6²²⁻²⁶ and Zeph 1²⁻³. Jeremiah’s testimony during this period, written down from memory twenty years later (see 36^{1, 21}), is recalled in chaps. 2-6. A notable feature of his teaching at this early time is the comparison instituted in chap. 3⁶⁻¹⁸ between the sin of ‘Israel,’ the old northern kingdom, and that of ‘her sister Judah,’ to the disadvantage of the latter. This tender-hearted prophet, whose eyes in youth were accustomed to the Ephraimite and trans-Jordanic landscape visible from the height of Anathoth, could never forget the larger Israel nor surrender the unity of the ancient tribes.

Though some critics see in the hopeful passages of chaps. 3¹⁴⁻¹⁸ and 4¹⁻⁴ signs of interpolation, one cannot exclude from the forebodings of the years 628-621 calls to repentance on the prophet’s part, and anticipations of relenting in the sinful people (see 3²¹⁻²⁵); nor need we doubt that Jeremiah’s powerful and pathetic preaching during those years took visible effect and had its part in preparing for the reformation in worship, which Josiah imposed with the outward consent of the people. But

the general tenor of Jeremiah's utterances was severe and gloomy in the extreme; so much so that when the danger from the northern hordes passed over, and when Josiah's energetic and religious rule brought to Judah an interval of prosperity unknown for generations, events appeared to have run counter to Jeremiah's expectations and his pessimism became an object of ridicule.

III.

Jeremiah's relation to the Deuteronomic code and the reformation of 621 is the enigma of his life. The silence of his Book on the subject is even more perplexing than the ignoring by Isaiah of Hezekiah's reforms. Chap. 11¹⁻⁸ supplies the only reference pointing clearly in this direction. We cannot follow Duhm and Cornill, who dismiss these paragraphs as unauthentic because they are isolated in Jeremiah's recorded preaching. Vv. 1⁵, at least, bear strong marks of originality; and it is impossible to identify 'this covenant' (vv. 3, 6) with any other than 'the covenant' formally adopted by king and people under the circumstances described in 2 K 23¹⁻³. There is therefore good reason to suppose that Jeremiah, while he was not concerned in the discovery and publication of the Torah-book, recognized in Deuteronomy the true principles of Jehovah's worship and endorsed the action of Josiah in admitting it as statute-law of the kingdom. So much seems to be implied by his commendation of this king in the words of 22^{15, 16}. Jeremiah is the earliest of the writing prophets in whom the Deuteronomic dialect and manner are traceable. His pages supply numerous and sometimes striking parallels to the language of the Book in question.

The critics referred to find in Jer 8⁸ a positive condemnation of the Deuteronomic movement and of the use of any written Law. But this is a strained application of the passage, and rests on an exaggerated view of Jeremiah's hostility to the official classes. 'How can you say, *We* are the wise men, and the Torah of Jehovah is in our keeping? Nay, verily; the lying pen of scribes hath turned it into lies!' This rebuke dates not from the publication of Hilkiah's Torah, but from the reactionary time of Jehoiakim, thirteen years later; the reproof of those who plumed themselves on the possession of the Law, while they perverted its sense to suit their liking, is in reality a tribute to the genuine Torah. Israel now possesses a

Scripture recognized by all parties; already the heretics have learned to entrench themselves behind corrupted readings or crooked interpretations.

Jeremiah, we gather, accepted the Book of the Covenant published by Josiah as a presentation of the national compact with Jehovah, and proclaimed it through city and country in this sense (11¹⁻⁸). But his activity in favour of the royal policy was of brief duration.¹ The result of the movement thus inaugurated was grievously disappointing: in regard to place and forms of cultus, drastic improvements were effected that were to prove of lasting significance; but their action on the life of the people at the time was formal and superficial. The prophet saw too plainly, that with this public compliance and amidst the general enthusiasm for the new order, there was no 'circumcision of the heart,' no contrition for the past and inward 'turning to Jehovah.' The good seed of the Deuteronomic legislation had been 'sown among thorns,' without the 'breaking up of the fallow ground' for which Jeremiah had called (4³). The local heathenish altars were abolished; Jehovah's worship was celebrated by a united people at Jerusalem, with a splendour and fervour hitherto unknown; but the old sins flourished, and the national temper was proud and ungodly as before.

As this became apparent, Jeremiah withdrew and lapsed into silence. He could not oppose the pious and sanguine young ruler, who was so much deceived by appearances; he could not lend himself to methods that 'healed lightly the hurt of the daughter of God's people.' From the date of 11¹⁻⁸ until Josiah's death, there is no certain oracle of Jeremiah upon record; when gathering up his earlier teaching in the year 604 for the people's benefit, the prophet leaves this period a blank. The awful threats that he and Zephaniah had uttered have come to nothing; Judah has a popular, religious, and successful king, with whom Jeremiah has no wish to quarrel; his call to re-

¹ Had Jeremiah met the Josianic reform with radical opposition, and even treated the Torah of 2 K 22⁸ as a *fraud* (for so Duhm infers from Jer 8⁸), we should have heard a great deal more about the matter than we do; Deuteronomy could not, under such contradiction, have taken the uncontested position which it held in Jewish faith from this time onwards. The silence of Jeremiah (apart from chap. 11) is harder to reconcile with the assumption of his hostility to Josiah's Scripture than with that of his approval and support of it.

penitance had been, in a certain sense, obeyed, and the Deuteronomic régime was formally enforced by priests and prophets and accepted by the nation. Things had turned out, both for good and evil, far otherwise than the prophet of Jer 2-6 had prognosticated. Jeremiah is practically nonplussed; and through those twelve years of seeming success but inward chagrin, so far as we know, no 'word of Jehovah came' to His prophet.

This was the time of disillusion and inward test-

ing for Jeremiah—a harder trial scarcely could befall a prophet of God. Jehovah had 'set' him 'to pluck up and break down, to build and plant': twenty years have passed and so far he has effected nothing, either in the way of plucking up or new planting! Our prophet had to learn the emptiness of professional and ceremonial and political religion, the *worthlessness of everything else without the law written in the heart*. During twelve years of silence this lesson burnt itself into his soul.

Some Characteristics of Old Testament Miracles.

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1. The Question of Evidence.—In comparing the miracles of the Old Testament with the miracles of our Lord the first point of difference to the modern student would be the matter of evidence. One of his chief reasons for accepting the Gospel miracles would be that the Gospel records we possess go back demonstrably to the time when the miracles were wrought. But in the case of the Old Testament miracles no such demonstration, or even approximation to such demonstration, is possible. The Gospel miracles are far better authenticated than those of the Old Testament. It is also to be noticed that this demonstration, in the case of the Gospel, is founded on internal evidence. The records are the records of eye-witnesses, and we know them to be so, not because we have been told so by some one else, but because the marks of an eye-witness are clear in the records themselves.

2. Internal Evidence—The Shunammite's Son.—Still, from this point of view, the evidence for the old miracles is stronger than has sometimes been thought. And it is fair to look at the miracles from this point of view in the matter of evidence, because 'the criticism of the Old Testament which has marked the past quarter of a century has been pre-eminently an internal criticism.'¹ It has not been chiefly, or even considerably, the judging of Scripture by some external sources of information. Now some narratives of miracles in the Old Testament seem to be almost as completely beyond the power of invention, especially in that

age, and to bear the signs of the eye-witness as subtly and naturally, as even the story of the two men walking to Emmaus or the raising of Lazarus. One such narrative is that of the raising of the Shunammite's son.² First, the character of the woman is wonderfully suggested—a modest, determined, self-repressed woman, with a great capacity for love. Notice 'her standing in the doorway' to speak with Elisha, her love for her own home, and her own manner of life ('I dwell among mine own people'), the depth of emotion and desire expressed in her appeal to the prophet, 'Nay, my lord, thou man of God, do not lie unto thine handmaid.' Follow her on her journey—the preparations, the refusal to disclose the facts to her aged husband, the brushing aside of Gehazi, the insistence that Elisha shall return with her. Notice also how clearly the husband is sketched in—an old man, who evidently did not understand his wife, who had had no experience of children, and could only hurry the boy off to his mother, when he fell ill in the harvest field—'Oh, how unfortunate falling ill in this way! What am I to do with him? I don't know; I never did know what to do with children. Here, take him to his mother. She will know.' The life, too, is so beautifully and simply indicated—the position of the 'great woman,' the provision made for Elisha, the harvest work, the political influence of the prophet. And then the successive scenes—the Shunammite in the doorway of the little room conversing with Elisha; the woman and her dying

¹ J. A. Robinson, *Some Thoughts on Inspiration*.

² 2 K 4⁸.