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The Ideals of the Prophets.¹

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'The wilderness and the solitary place shall be glad; and the desert shall rejoice, and blossom as the rose.'—Is. xxxv. 1.

There can be few who are in the habit of attending a Cathedral service to whom these words are not familiar, and in whom they do not arouse exquisite and delicious memories. Two great tone-poets, who have enriched the devotional music of the Anglican Church with some of its choicest gems, have vied with one another in the effort to express in worthy melody the noble and beautiful prophecy of which this is the opening verse: in dignified and impressive tones they have depicted the sudden change in the aspect of the barren soil; the waters breaking forth in the wilderness, and the streams in the desert; the doubts and fears of the exiled Israelites giving place to buoyancy and joy; the happiness of those privileged to mount triumphantly on the highway leading to their home; the rapture of sacred delight filling their breasts as they enter with singing into Zion, and are conscious that the supreme goal of human happiness has been reached by them, that sorrow and sighing have fled away, and that the discords jarring in the present have at last been resolved in the sweet and inexpressible harmony of the future. So long as the human soul remains susceptible to the emotions aroused by music, so long as music retains its magic power of winning entrance to the heart for true and noble thoughts, so long, we may be sure, the names of Wesley and Goss will be inseparably conjoined with the prophecy which now stands as the 35th chapter of the book which bears Isaiah's name.

What, however, may we learn from the prophecy, when we regard it in its context and original significance? It is connected intimately with the 34th chapter, and forms its counterpart and sequel. The prophecy in the 34th chapter is directed against Edom, the near neighbour of Judah, but also its great rival, between which and Judah there prevailed a spirit of inveterate ill-feeling and jealousy, leading to frequent and bitter hostilities.

¹ A sermon preached in the Cathedral Church of Christ, Oxford, on the first Sunday after Trinity, 1908.

The day of triumph for Edom was when Jerusalem was entered, and the temple destroyed, by the Chaldæans under Nebuchadnezzar: Ezekiel and Obadiah² alike bear witness to the malicious exultation which the Edomites then expressed: they laid in wait to plunder and intercept the fugitives; they watched eagerly as the victorious Chaldæans broke down the walls; as a Psalmist, writing long after, has not forgotten, they even urged on the work of destruction, saying:

Down with it, down with it, even to the ground!³

The 34th and 35th chapters of Isaiah form one of those prophecies which, though incorporated in the Book of Isaiah, are not by Isaiah himself. The 34th chapter was written while resentment for this unfeeling behaviour of the Edomites was still keenly felt by the Jews. It consists of a long and impressive denunciation of the judgment impending on Edom: the prophet describes the carnage and destruction of which its country, he imagines, will shortly be the scene; its mountain stronghold will be laid desolate; its land will be buried under streams of molten lava; its castles and fortresses will become the resort of desert creatures, which will haunt its ruins for ever.

To the desolation and abandonment thus anticipated for Edom, the picture in chap. 35 forms a striking and finely conceived contrast. For the Israelites, now at last to be delivered from their years of exile in Babylon, the wilderness and the parched land will rejoice, and the desert burst forth into a brilliant and abundant bloom. The wilderness meant is the broad arid expanse lying between Babylon and Palestine, which the exiles journeying homewards would naturally have to traverse. Jehovah is returning with His long-exiled nation; and the way by which He will pass must be worthily prepared for the progress of the Great King: the desert must be transformed into a paradise for the delectation of His people; avenues of stately trees must cast their shade about them: 'the glory of Lebanon shall be given

² Ez 25¹² 35⁵, 10, 12⁶, Ob 10-14.

³ Ps 137⁷ (Prayer-Book Version).

unto it, the majesty of Carmel and Sharon'—those richly-forested districts of Palestine—'they shall see the glory of the Lord, the majesty of our God.'

'Strengthen ye the weak hands, and confirm the feeble knees. Say to them that are of a fearful heart, Be strong, fear not': let those among the exiles who are fearful and timorous, and who doubt whether their release is near at hand, take courage: 'Behold, your God will come with vengeance; he will come and save you.' Then human infirmities will cease to vex, and nature will co-operate spontaneously in the relief of human needs: 'then shall the lame man leap as an hart, and the tongue of the dumb sing: for in the wilderness shall waters break out, and streams in the desert,' yielding cool and near refreshment for the returning exiles: the glowing sand or mirage, which so often in Eastern countries deludes with false hopes the exhausted traveller, will become a real lake, and the thirsty land will send forth springs of water. 'And an highway shall be there, and a way; and it shall be called The way of holiness; the unclean shall not pass over it, but it shall be for those: the wayfaring men, yea fools, shall not err therein.' The prophet imagines in the desert a raised way leading from Babylon to Zion: only those who are worthy, those who are holy and clean, will be admitted upon it: but it will be so broad and plain that even the simplest, even 'fools,' will not lose their track upon it, so elevated and well-protected that no dangerous beast will be able to climb up and molest the pilgrims journeying along it: 'No lion shall be there, nor shall any ravenous beast go up thereon, they shall not be found there; but the redeemed shall walk there'—not, of course, the 'redeemed' in the Christian sense of the term, but; as the expression is elsewhere explained, those whom Jehovah has redeemed from their long exile in Babylon: 'and the ransomed of Jehovah shall return, and come with singing unto Zion; and everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain gladness and joy, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.' The prophecy is thus, in a word, a promise of the glorious return of the Jewish exiles from Babylon, of the bountiful provision to be made for the relief of their temporal wants upon the way, and of the blessedness, spiritual and material, which will attend them when they are settled again in their ancient home.

The prophecy is not the only one in which

similar representations are found. The great prophecy of Israel's restoration to Palestine, which now forms the last twenty-seven chapters of the Book of Isaiah and which was written approximately at the same period, abounds in similar passages. The time has come for God's ancient people to be released from its long captivity in Babylon: a crisis fraught with momentous issues for the future is at hand; and in glowing imagery the prophet pictures the progress of the returning nation under the protecting guidance of its God: 'Prepare ye in the wilderness the way of Jehovah, make plain in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low: and the glory of Jehovah shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together. . . . I will open rivers on the bare heights, and fountains in the midst of the valleys: I will make the wilderness a pool of water, and the dry land springs of water. I will plant in the wilderness the cedar, the acacia tree, and the myrtle: I will set in the desert the fir tree, the plane, and the cypress together. . . . Go ye forth from Babylon, flee ye from the Chaldeans; with a voice of singing declare it even to the end of the earth: say ye, Jehovah hath redeemed his servant Jacob. And they thirsted not when he led them through the deserts: he caused the waters to flow out of the rock for them: he clave the rock also, and the waters gushed out. . . . And I will set thy stones in fair colours, and lay thy foundations with sapphires. . . . And all thy children shall be the disciples of Jehovah; and great shall be the peace of thy children. . . . Thy people also shall be all righteous, they shall inherit the land for ever.'¹

These, and such as these, are the gorgeous and brilliant traits with which the prophets of the Exile invest the rapidly approaching future of their nation. How imperfectly those expectations were realized, history tells us. It is true, the Jews were permitted to return to their own country in the first year after Cyrus conquered Babylon; but both the circumstances of the return itself and the state of the restored community were in singular contrast with the glorious anticipations of the prophets. No avenues of umbrageous trees protected by their shade the homeward marching Israelites: no streams gushed out from the wilderness beneath their feet: when the temple and city-walls, after

¹ Is 40³⁻⁵ 41¹⁸⁻¹⁹ 48²⁰⁻²¹ 54¹³ 60²¹.

many hindrances and difficulties, were at last rebuilt, the splendour which the second Isaiah had promised to the restored city, the homage and respect of distant nations pressing forward with their offerings, and the expected ideal perfections,¹ which were to be the peculiar privilege of the restored community, were, one and all, conspicuous by their absence. The prophecy of Haggai, and the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, written in large measure by men living within eighty years of the return under Zerubbabel, show sufficiently how meagre the principal results of the restoration were, how depressed and dependent the state of the restored community was.

How are we to understand this painful discrepancy between the prophecy and the fulfilment? We must remember what the character of prophecy is. The prophets, in the first place, write often as poets: they give play to their imagination; they construct *ideals*. It is true, they also often deliver plain and direct utterances: they rebuke their contemporaries for their vices; they make matter-of-fact statements respecting the duty of man to his neighbour or to God; they declare, in no ambiguous language, the temporal judgments, or temporal deliverances, which they see approaching. But they often intermingle in their discourses, especially in those which deal with the future, a large *ideal* element. The imagination, which has been such a powerful factor in the education of our race, and the master-creations of which have in all ages compelled the admiration and attention of mankind, is consecrated to the service of God, and is made the vehicle of the inspiring spirit. And thus, in the pages of the prophets, coming events are idealized: imaginative pictures of a golden age of moral and material blessedness are attached to them: a present crisis is no sooner past than the ultimate goal of human history is conceived to have been reached. Isaiah, when the vexatious tyranny of the Assyrian is past, pictures an immediate revolution in the character and fortunes of his people: he pictures society as at once transformed, freed from all the faults and shortcomings which mar the present; he pictures his nation in the enjoyment of ideal felicity, and ideal spiritual and moral perfections, secure under the guardianship of its ideal King.² The overthrow of the hosts of Assyria is the crucial turning-point

in the history of his people: when that is accomplished, the golden age begins. And so the prophets of the Exile idealize the coming restoration to Palestine: that with them is the crucial moment of history; and they depict it in more gorgeous colours than even Isaiah had ventured to employ.

How, then, are these prophecies to be interpreted? The prophets, it cannot be doubted, like other men, mean what they say: they believed that the pictures which they drew would be realized as they drew them. The only exceptions are cases in which it may be reasonably supposed that they are using figurative language, as when Isaiah, for example, describes the overthrow of the Assyrian army in imagery which obviously cannot be intended by him to be understood literally.³ But there are cases in which the prophets' whole conception of the future is such that it cannot reasonably be supposed to have been intended figuratively; and still it contains traits which have not been fulfilled in the past, and are of such a nature that they cannot be fulfilled in the future. I say, cannot be fulfilled in the future: because the historical conditions with which alone these traits could be consistent, and under which alone they could be intelligible, have passed away; and whatever the future course of history may be, can never be reproduced. Tyre was long ago destroyed: and its people have perished, without ever, as Isaiah anticipated, consecrating their gains to the service of the true God.⁴ The great nation of Assyria has also passed away: but it never, as the same prophet likewise expected that it would do, shared with Israel its high theocratic privileges, or consorted with Israel and Egypt in the friendly worship of Jehovah.⁵ And it is contrary to the most fundamental principles of the Gospel to suppose that Israel should ever become, as the great prophet of the Exile pictured that it would become, the priestly caste, with the Gentiles standing towards it in the subordinate position of laity, or that Jerusalem should become the actual and visible religious centre of the world, to be visited, week by week, and month by month, by pilgrims from all nations, to observe the Jewish feasts of the Sabbath and the new moon.⁶ Large parts of Is 40-60 are prophecies of this kind. They plainly describe what the prophet conceives is to follow immediately after the return to Pales-

¹ Is 60³⁻⁷. 10-12. 14-16. 18. 21.

² Is 29¹⁷⁻¹⁹. 23. 24 30¹⁹⁻²⁶ 32¹⁻⁸. 16-18 33⁵. 6. 20-24 11¹⁻⁹.

³ E.g. Is 10¹⁶. 17 29⁶ 30²⁷. 28. 30. 33.

⁴ Is 23¹⁸.

⁵ Is 19²³⁻²⁵.

⁶ Is 61⁶ 66²⁸.

tine: they cannot reasonably be regarded as intended figuratively: and they unquestionably have not been fulfilled.

Nor can the difficulty be overcome by the exegetical expedient of spiritualizing the imagery of such prophecies so as to make them predictions, in disguise, of Christianity. The language used is too plain to permit that. The Israelites are to be delivered not from the stronghold of sin and Satan, but from Babylon; and their deliverer is, not the Saviour of the world, but the Persian monarch, Cyrus. We must take prophecy as we find it: we must not, prior to any inductive study of what the contents and character of the prophecies actually are, assume that every description of the future which they contain must tally necessarily with the event, and be surprised and disappointed if we find that it does not do so; nor must we unduly strain the language for the purpose of bringing the two into agreement. The prophet is much more than a mere fore-teller: he is in a far wider sense the interpreter of the thoughts of God, the announcer to man of the Divine will and plan. He is not the less a true prophet because the picture of the future which he draws is sometimes a Divine ideal, rather than the reality which history actually brings with it. The ideals of the prophets display astonishing brilliancy and imaginative power. They stand before us, to kindle our admiration, to ennoble our aspirations, to stir our emulation. In no part of the Old Testament is the ele-

vating and ennobling influence of the Spirit more manifest than in the great ideals of the prophets. But they must be read, and interpreted, as ideals: the imaginative garb in which the prophets' thoughts and aspirations are set forth must be recognized as such, and not regarded as necessarily, in all its details, a prediction of the future. And although such prophecies cannot, without doing violence to words, be understood even as disguised, or figurative, descriptions of the blessings of the Gospel, yet they do embody ideas which are appropriated, and find their fuller realization, in the Gospel: they depict states of ideal blessedness, which, though they are not, and are not intended to be, identical with the blessings conferred by Christianity, may still be regarded as emblems, suited to the ages to which they were addressed, of the blessedness which it is the ideal aim of the Gospel to secure, partly upon earth, more completely hereafter in heaven. The felicity which the prophet of the Exile imagined would be the immediate consequence of the restoration to Palestine, may be viewed as an ideal, setting forth in warm and glowing colours God's purposes of grace towards His faithful people, and the blessedness which He has in store for them, and at the same time serving as a fore-gleam, or prelude, of that wider and larger salvation, which He offers to all men in Christ. Unto which, in His mercy, may He vouchsafe to bring us, for the sake of Jesus Christ, our Lord.

In the Study.

④ Study in Illustration.

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