

The Poetry and the Wit of Jeremiah.

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JEREMIAH is, in some respects, the greatest of the prophets, and the most neglected. By his life he suggests to our minds the noblest conception of the Old Testament, 'The suffering servant of Jehovah,' and by his words he reveals the new and more glorious covenant between God and men. But in spite of all this he is neglected.

This neglect must be largely ascribed to the style in which much of the book is written.

The sadness and sombreness of Jeremiah's style are natural to a high-strung man living in a doomed country among a panic-stricken people. With no hope from man, and with the heavens black as midnight overhead, the prophet cannot give us the purple patches of the royal Isaiah, or the hope-stirring poetry of him who sang in the land of exile, when the dawn of a better day was already breaking. Nevertheless, a sad style, however natural, soon tires an ordinary reader.

In addition, there is found in Jeremiah a redundancy that is most trying. Not only phrases and expressions and ideas, but whole sentences are repeated, until we are tempted to wonder whether the obligations of the prophet to Deuteronomy are not counterbalanced by his tendency to fall into the prolixity and verbosity of that book.

It would be a mistake, however, to conclude that there is nothing to brighten these writings.

In the darkness there comes at times a flash as of lightning, that reveals the whole land against the midnight sky with wondrous realism. Then again we hear voices speaking out of the darkness weirdly, and, while we see no man, we are thrilled by the words and feel the power of the born dramatist. Still further, when we look more closely we notice that there are even flowers to be gathered in this dark valley, and, stranger still, that he who walks within it has a playfulness of wit which could not be expected in the prophet of tragedy. Sometimes it is said that we cannot rightly judge regarding the characteristics of Jeremiah's style, as his writings have come from the hand of Baruch, and have been edited by later scribes. But the flowers and the wit are so apparent on almost every page that we are forced to conclude that they come from the prophet's own mind.

The figures of speech are apparent to the most cursory reader, but it is only when we study the book more closely that we observe how varied is the field from which they are drawn.

Some beautiful pictures of natural features of the land are painted by this artist: the swelling of the river Jordan, the snow that crowns the heights of Lebanon, the bubbling fountain still springing in the hot noontide when the cistern has yielded to the drought, the rushing of the black tempest across the sky. All these are open to the poet's eye. Then we hear echoes of the wild beasts: the cry of the jackals, the braying of the wild ass, and the roar of the lion that was still a terror to the lonely peasants of the land. The prophet has watched too the birds of the air: the stork that returns yearly at nesting time, the eagle with its wings widespread in flight, the swallows and the doves, and the owls and many another. Nor does Jeremiah disdain to notice the common things of everyday life: washing with soap, setting snares for birds, gathering grapes and pressing wine, labouring at the brick-kiln and building houses, shaping vessels at the potter's wheel, smelting copper and brass at the furnace. Common works like these yield many an illustration to the prophet's preaching.

It is true that these illustrations are only slightly developed and little dwelt upon, but it is possible that this compression may be due as much to the hand of Baruch as to the design of Jeremiah. In spoken word, the flowers may have grown more luxuriantly than we now find them, when embedded in the written word, for 'the flowers of Jeremiah's diction and thought have reached us only after being cut and pressed.'

It is scarcely possible to fully illustrate the playful wit of the prophet except by long quotations of the Hebrew text, as the wit consists chiefly in a playing upon words that can hardly be made effective in English. It would scarcely be becoming to call Jeremiah a punster, for he has nobler aims than we associate with that title, but, beyond any other Hebrew prophet, he indulges in a word-play that brightens and lightens many a gloomy passage.

The frequency of this form of wit may be judged by the fact that, within the first six chapters, there may be counted more than a dozen examples: 1¹⁰ 1^{11, 12} 1¹⁷ 2¹² 3¹⁹ 3²² 4^{17, 18} 4^{30, 31} 5²³ 6¹ 6¹¹ 6³⁰, and throughout the whole book there is the same peculiarity.

A few renderings may be attempted to give some faint idea of this word-play. The vision that Jeremiah saw when he was called by God is thus described: 'The word of the Lord came to me, saying, Jeremiah, what seest thou? And I said, I see a branch of a *saugh* tree (shaked). Then said the Lord unto me, Thou hast well seen: for I *saw* (shoked) my word to perform it.'

In the sixth chapter the prophet seeks to arouse the people to a sense of danger by descriptions of the siege, capture, and devastation of Jerusalem that were at hand, and his opening words may be freely rendered: 'O, ye children of Benjamin, flee for safety out of the midst of Jerusalem, and in "*Soundham*" (Tekoa), *sound* the trumpet, and in Beth-haccerem *fly* the *flag*.' Again, in the prophecy regarding Moab in the forty-eighth chapter, Jeremiah exclaims: 'The praise of Moab is no more. In *Plottown* (Heshbon) they have

plotted mischief against her: Come, and let us cut her off from being a nation. Thou also, O *Dumbton* (Madmen) shall be stricken *dumb*. The sword shall pursue thee.' Thus the prophet plays upon the names of well-known towns in a way that may be suggested by these English renderings, but cannot be truly translated.

One more passage may be quoted in which we find both the figurative and witty qualities of Jeremiah's style exemplified. At the close of the sixth chapter there is deep lamentation over the lamentable condition of the people of Zion. All had been done to reveal any excellence in them, and all had been done in vain. At last the prophet closes in sorrow with a figure taken from the work of the refining smith: 'The bellows glow; the lead is consumed of the fire. In vain hath the smelter smelted, and the wicked have not been separated. *Réfuse* shall men call them, for the Lord hath *refused* them.'

Many similar passages might be quoted; but this last quotation is enough to show that while Jeremiah's style may be sombre, it can also be glowing, and that in the midst of much that is monotonous there are surprising scintillations of wit.

The Great Text Commentary.

THE GREAT TEXTS OF THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES.

ACTS XIII. 2, 3.

'And as they ministered to the Lord, and fasted, the Holy Ghost said, Separate me Barnabas and Saul for the work whereunto I have called them. Then, when they had fasted and prayed and laid their hands on them, they sent them away' (R.V.).

EXPOSITION.

And as they ministered to the Lord.—*i.e.* the prophets and teachers, at least primarily. It is probable that this ministry was that of prayer, and waiting upon God for special guidance on a matter already occupying their thought. This matter was surely the question of a forward movement into the Roman Empire, which we may imagine had been suggested by Saul, in pursuance of the special revelation, which he claims to have had touching the destination of the gospel for the Gentiles.—BARTLET.

And fasted.—Fasting would seem to have its basis in a grief over sin so deep and intense that all desire for food is taken away, or such a strong desire for holiness, for the

progress of God's work, for the removal of all that hinders it, that we forget to eat. Therefore it implies that we are doing that which fasting expresses. It is saying, I desire this good gift of God more than food, more than bodily pleasure, more than all else besides. So putting away every sin at any cost, taking up hardest duties, confession of sin to our neighbours, doing all we can for the love of Christ, are expressions of the same principle which underlies fasting.—PELOUBET.

The Holy Ghost said.—It is not stated by what means the Holy Spirit voiced His will, whether through prophets or through a general simultaneous impulse pervading the Church. We must be careful not to limit the ways in which the Holy Ghost speaks to us. He speaks to us by conscience, by reason, by providence, by His word and by inspiration.—PELOUBET.

Separate me Barnabas and Saul for the work whereunto I have called them.—The 'work' was the conversion of the Gentiles. Hitherto Gentiles had indeed been admitted into the Church, but they had come in through the synagogue as God-fearing Greeks. Now St. Paul turns to