THE OLD TESTAMENT PARABLES

by John Macdougall

Macdougall's analysis of parables found in the Old Testament, including detailed study of Nathan's parable of the ewe lamb to King David, illustrating how these ancient stories convey divine truth about sin, judgment, and mercy.

15 Chapters

Table of Contents

01. The Word 'parable'

CHAPTER I THE WORD ’PARABLE’ IN addition to their attraction as a subject of absorbing interest the Old Testament Parables make a strong historical, moral and spiritual appeal as a background for much that we read in the New Testament. More detailed study than one can possibly reproduce here has given the conviction that Jesus was not only familiar with the Old Testament Parables and fond of recounting some of them, but that in narrating His own stories of the Kingdom He used forms of expression and symbolism with which His hearers were already familiar. “ The Rabbis, who made such large use of parables, were alive to their value as a method of teaching and for the purpose of vivid illustration “ (C. G. Montefiore, Rabbinic Literature and Gospel Teachings).

Jesus raised the parabolic method of teaching to a standard previously unattained and gave to it a value which the world has ever since appreciated. The Old Testament Parables merit at least a small share of this universal approbation because they had already provided the scheme, the system, the power and genius of parabolic teaching. “ We have ground to conjecture that such forms of composition must have been long, diligently and abundantly cultivated “(Kautzsch, Literature of the Old Testament).

Only a new spirit was required to impart a fresh interest to the system, and that came with the appeal of Jesus for a New Kingdom. Indeed, some of our Lord’s parables may be recognised as familiar Old Testament stories with the new idea of the Kingdom of God set in their heart. This appears in reading the parables of the Wicked Husbandmen and the Mustard Seed, which remind us of the parables of the Vineyard (Isa 5:1-7) and the Great Eagles (Eze 17:1-24).

Reared in the Old Testament atmosphere which inspired Him to use such metaphorical language as “ The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me “ or “ The stone which the builders rejected the same is become the head of the corner,” it is no surprise to find Jesus adapting the simplest and most obvious facts of life to the function of proclaiming the truth of the Kingdom of God.

Between the parables of the two Testaments there is a wide difference. Whereas those of the Old are mainly composed of narratives of action, fable and imaginative fancy, those of the New Testament are rich in common and well-known experiences of life. It is true that Jesus uses imagination in certain parables, but in all His stories there is a ring of reality. They are free of the crudity which marks the Old Testament stories, and some of them are so intricately woven that they required to be interpreted for their hearers. The * time ’ difference in the two types of parable is also important. The New Testament Parables were spoken by Jesus Himself as their originator, and the period of narration was no more than three years. Those of the Old Testament were spoken by various people over a period of time embracing many generations and several civilizations, each with its peculiar language, mode of expression, morality and religious interpretation. The parables of the New Testament are universal in their appeal, whilst those of the Old Testament, with few exceptions, are local and personal; the truths of the former may be universalized, but the latter are mostly related to particular events and to directly personal duties,

national and individual. The Old Testament Parables lack the prophetic note and high spiritual value of their successors, yet they charm us by their truth to life and their unerring portrayal of the deeper regions of human experience sin, remorse, punishment and reformation. In them we read of the moral and social life of varied epochs in Israel's history and are given a glimpse of the religious conditions under different regimes. They are very matterof-fact because they shew us man as he was and is rather than as he may be ideally. Their humanity is their appeal. THE WORD * PARABLE ' In his opening chapter of ' Notes on the Parables ' Archbishop Trench refers to the difficulty of finding a definition of the word ' parable ' which should " omit none of its distinctive marks, and at the same time include nothing superfluous and merely accidental."

What the distinguished scholar writes regarding a definition for New Testament Parables applies with even more force to the setting forth of an adequate and acceptable definition of Old Testament Parables. So familiar are we with the charming stones told by Jesus Christ and with their particular form and application that we may bring to the word ' parable ' in the Old Testament a misleading conception of its content. A simple and concise definition is not possible, but an explanation of what the word embraces can be provided. The Jews had many " apophthegms, parables, pregnant witty sayings... and even apart from the Book of Proverbs it is doubtful whether any national literature is so rich in such utterances as is the Bible " (McCurdy, History, Prophecy and the Monuments). Oral and written collections of sage and apt sayings, of fables and parables were common in Israel just as were ballads and proverbs in Britain many years ago. THE OLD TESTAMENT ' MASHAL ' As a rule, the English word ' parable ' in the Old Testament represents the Hebrew word ' Mashal ' (^9) though we may discover no ' parable ' such as that word usually implies in the English language. The Hebrew word is generally translated in our English versions as ' parable ' or ' proverb,' but it embraces a wide range of illustrative and figurative language.

Mashal may mean parable (Eze 17:2), proverb (1Sa 10:12), allegory (Eze 24:3), taunting-speech (Isa 14:4), an argument (Job xxvii. I and xxix. i) or an obscure utterance such as a poetic oracle (Num 23:7; Num 23:18, and Hab 2:6). " Through the Mashal a man can understand the words of the Law " (C. G. Montefiore, Rabbinic Literature, &c.). The purpose of the Mashal being primarily its suggestion of comparison or similitude, there is little difficulty in understanding how the word became associated with ' parable,' because in the ordinary acceptance of its meaning the word ' parable ' necessitates a comparison or similitude. A parable is defined by Bishop Lowth as " a continued narrative of a fictitious event, applied by way of simile to the illustration of some important truth." In the Old Testament the terms ' parable ' and ' proverb ' are almost interchangeable, and it is interesting to observe that the Old Testament stories which conform most closely to what is regarded as the customary standard of what constitutes a parable are not introduced by the term Mashal. These are the narratives of the Ewe Lamb (2Sa 12:1-4), the Tekoan Woman (2Sa 14:4 f.), the Lost Prisoner (1Ki 20:38-42), the Vineyard (Isa 5:1-7) and the Ploughman (Isa 28:23-29). They are, nevertheless, Mashals, and they suggest that we must seek our Old Testament Parables in the content rather than in the name of the stories.

NEW TESTAMENT PARABLES

There is not the same difficulty among terms in the New Testament, where all the accepted parables are contained within the four Gospels, being part of the teaching of Jesus Christ.

They are inseparable from their blessed Narrator, and are all related in greater or less degree to the Kingdom which He came to establish upon earth. Matthew states that “ all these things spake Jesus in parables unto the multitudes; and without a parable spake He nothing unto them: that it might be fulfilled which was spoken through the prophet saying, I will open my mouth in parables; I will utter things hidden from the foundation of the world.” It has been pointed out that Matthew’s quotation is rather free, and that it does not agree with the Hebrew or with the Septuagint of Psa 78:2 (Kirkpatrick, The Book of Psalms); but the fact remains that Jesus “ adopted the methods of the teachers of the old dispensation, and fulfilled them by carrying them to their highest perfection.”

Even in the New Testament, however, there is need to distinguish between parable and proverb and between parable and allegory. Some scholars would exclude John’s narratives from the list of parables on the ground that they are allegories; others would restrict the list of parables to about thirty rather than accept about sixty, which are recognised by many students of the Gospels. The interchangeability of ’ parable ’ and (proverb ’ is also found in the New Testament. Jesus remarked that His hearers would say to Him this * parable ’

“ Physician, heal thyself “ where the word parable ’ is inapplicable; whilst He also said, “ I have spoken unto you in proverbs,” where, it would seem, the word * parables ’ is implied. In a wider sense it may be claimed that in so far as most of the sentences of the Sermon on the Mount are metaphorical or similitudinary, they are also parabolical; but by common consent they are excluded from the list of parables because they do not provide the elementary foundation narratives by means of which a comparison is set up and a moral is derived.

Bishop Lowth’s definition of a parable falls short when applied to the narratives of Jesus Christ, since His Parables do not merely provide * some important truth,’ but they supply a definitely spiritual truth related to the Gospel message. In dealing with the Old Testament Parables we must confine our study to such stories as were probably regarded at the time of their narration as having an implied lesson of spiritual or moral truth or of practical and possibly personal allusion. We must avoid the temptation to read too much into them and to discover detailed circumstances to coincide with each minute part of the stories. Nor must they be so Christianized as to deprive them of their historical, local and individual importance, although we endeavour to see their message, if there be any, for our own period of history. For our purpose there must lie behind a Parable a particular truth, fact, act or picture which is necessary to the moral or spiritual life, or to a special expression of some characteristic which ought to be exemplified in the life of an individual, community or nation. The story may be given as fact, fable or fancy, but there lies within it, by comparison, another and higher meaning. This higher meaning is, in most instances, applicable to the listener’s life.

PARABLES OF FACT The narratives of fact may or may not deal with historical truth, but the circumstances depicted are such that they lend the possibility of truth to the stories, and by the application of that possible truth a contrast is set up which leads to the other meaning which constitutes a parable. Among such stones are the Ewe Lamb (2Sa 12:1-4), the Vineyard (Isa 5:1-7), and the Poor Wise Man (Ecc 9:14-15). In form the parables of fact are nearest to those of our Lord.

FABLE

It may be objected that the fable can never rise beyond mere human morality, that Jesus did not stoop to its use, and that it makes inanimate and earthly substances as well as beasts and birds appear as though in possession of human speech. If the fable succeeds in its purpose by bringing home an ethical or spiritual truth which would otherwise remain unrecognised or inadmissible, and if it does this by setting the story in the fable over and against the listener's own life, then such a fable is parabolic. In this sense the fables of Jotham (Jdg 9:8-15) and Jehoash (2Ki 14:9) are admitted as Old Testament Parables. Archbishop Trench holds that the fable " has no place in the Scripture, and in the nature of things could have none, for the purpose of Scripture excludes it." He regards the fable as " essentially of the earth, and never lifts itself above the earth." He draws a very fine distinction between ' folly ' and ' sin,' and indicates that though the fables teach men their folly they do not teach them their sin. For the reasons already specified the fables are included as parables in this book and we might with some advantage urge the claim for these fables to be admitted as parables because of their narration in a much earlier civilization than the New Testament Parables.

02. The Ewe Lamb

PARABLES OF FANCY

Within the category of parables of fancy there come visionary and imaginary descriptions which are directly capable of a higher interpretation and which were first recounted for the purpose of conveying such a message.

Stories which are obviously visionary in the sense that they are merely illustrations or are unrelated to the circumstances of the listener or to a general law of human life which requires to be brought home, must be discarded. There are many stories which prompt us to ask ’ what these things mean ’ but which fall short of our standard and definition of an Old Testament Parable, e.g. the Good and Bad Figs (Jer 24:1-10.), the Two Harlots (Eze 23:1-49.), the Boiling Pot (Eze 24:3-5), the Vision of Dry Bones (Eze 37:1-28.), and the visions in the books of Amos and Zechariah. Narratives like those of the Linen Waist-Cloth (Jer 13:1-11) and the Potter (Jer 18:1-1 o) are included among parables of fancy. The foregoing classification of the narratives into parables of fact, fable and fancy gets rid of difficulties created and suggested by our English varieties of figures of speech, and gives us the privilege to concentrate our thoughts upon the parables rather than upon the dialectical discussion as to what constitutes a parable. We shall accept the principle that in the parables “ we lay one kind of action in one sphere alongside another kind of action in another sphere and illustrate the one by the other “ (McCartney, The Parables of the Old Testament}. This will fulfil the simple meaning of the word ’ Mashal,’ which meant primarily “ the setting of one thing beside another “ for the purpose of comparison. By means of that comparison there will appear the lessons and higher principles or spiritual truths which prompted the narration of the stories.

“THERE were two men in one city one rich and the other poor. The rich man had very abundant small cattle and large cattle; but the poor man had totally nothing save one little ewe lamb which he had bought. He nourished it and it grew up together with him and his sons.

It used to eat of his own morsel of bread and drink from his own cup. It lay in his bosom and was as a daughter to him. To the rich man there came a visitor and he was chary to take from his own small cattle or his own large cattle to prepare for the wayfarer that was come unto him; but he took the poor man’s ewe lamb and prepared it for the man that was come unto him.” 2Sa 12:1-4. As an illustration of the narratives of fact the simple words of the above story are very suitable.

They present what might well have had a basis in some recent incident, and their reality so impressed their original hearer that he accepted them as fact. To read the story to-day in its direct and terse sentences awakes in every heart an intense feeling of anger against the rich man and of deepest sympathy towards the poor man.

Quite apart from its parabolic interpretation the story makes its appeal, but when linked to the episode of which it is a parable it opens up an approach to a part of Scripture history in which is found a monstrous depth of iniquity over and against which are set the wrath and mercy of God.

By its means the tragedy of David's spiritual and moral life is not only clearly portrayed and condemned but its consequences are revealed and a moral lesson is taught. The closing verse of Chapter xi is the key to the incident " But the thing that David had done displeased the Lord." From his lowly shepherd life God had taken David and steadily advanced him in wisdom, honour and power. In the field of battle he had been victorious. As a king he ruled a united and prosperous people. As a man he was surrounded by every luxury and opportunity for self-indulgence which any man of that time could wish. By the law of succession he owned Saul's harem in addition to his own wife and concubines, yet it was just in this wealth of opportunity to satisfy his passions that David revealed his selfishness, a selfishness that culminated in a most despicable crime. We may wonder why such a story is told in the Bible, more so as it relates to a man who was renowned for his love of God and his zeal for righteousness.

We ought, however, to appreciate the truth and sincerity of the Bible in being so faithful in depicting human sin and weakness where even a holy man may be so fallen in iniquity that conscience and remorse are almost stifled.

After his throne was made secure and he had almost completed the overthrow of all his foes, David was ensnared by success and idleness. Not far from his palace he beheld a brave soldier's wife whose person his lust immediately desired and acquired. Her husband, Uriah the Hittite, was with the army, and verses 8-12 of Chapter xi suggest that Uriah returned to find his wife defiled and his home devastated.

Aware of his adultery's consequence, David now coveted Uriah's wife, and to accomplish this purpose he planned Uriah's death. A letter was sent to the army commander, Joab, to put Uriah where he would be slain in battle a sad defection in David's character from the David who despised the wickedness and blood-thirsty acts of Joab. After the death of Uriah, upon whom he had treacherously lavished false hospitality, David took the widow, Bathsheba, to be his wife " but the thing that David had done displeased the Lord," and God sent the prophet Nathan to speak unto the king. The faith, courage, tact and sympathy of the man of God are alike commendable. Though his errand is unpleasant he does not seek to evade it. By choice selection of his words he leads the king to pronounce judgment upon a man whom he has not suspected to be himself. When the crisis is reached, the king condemned, and confession of his wrong made in abjectest desolation of soul, then Nathan speaks comfortingly of the mercy of God to the sinner though the sin must bear its own fruit. In the parable itself there is no direct reference to or indication of the sin committed by David.

Impurity and adultery are not suggested and there is no trace of murderous intent against anyone. Nor is there even the slightest hint of any responsibility to God. The facts are such that no one can read them unmoved.

Low as he has sunk, David is aroused, his better nature responds and the heart that was once so pure, loving and compassionate pulsates with such a horror of the deed that he exceeds the usual punishment for theft by condemning the guilty not only to restore fourfold (some readings put it l sevenfold ') which was the customary punishment, but to death also. This may be due to a certain restlessness which had come into his life following upon his evil deeds. Under a long spell of uneasiness in conscience the temper is easily ruffled and irritation may lead to excess and rash judgment or action.

Nathan's words are carefully selected. It is important that we read ' small cattle ' and ' large cattle ' for ' flocks ' and ' herds ' because the significance of the rich man's abundance is thus made more evident. He might have taken from his own small cattle if he needed only a small beast, but if he wished to do special honour to his visitor then there were the herds of large cattle. David was under no necessity to seek a woman outside his own house where he had wives in abundance. The lamb's nature is described minutely and we cannot overlook the possibility that the animal may have been bought for the purpose of supplying milk to the house as sheep are so used in the East. The care lavished upon it and the intimate bond between it and the poor man are very delicately and vividly described. The poverty of the home is suggested in three ways: the lamb ate of the poor man's morsel of bread; it was to him as a daughter, and the words indicate that there was neither a mother nor a daughter in the home. For the last suggestion it is best to translate the phrase t with his children ' by * with his sons ' which agrees with the Greek and Hebrew versions. That the rich man coveted and then took by theft the poor man's one little ewe lamb exposes the enormity of his heinous act. He robbed a home of its centre of love, joy and peace; of its contentment and only wealth, for " he had totally nothing save one little ewe lamb " a phrase which agrees with the interpretation that Uriah and Bathsheba had not been long married.

Regarding this story of a home's desecration as true, the king angrily and impulsively declares the sentence of death only to recoil crestfallen, ashamed and self-condemned when the prophet declares " Thou art the man." The decisive and brave words of the man of God strike home to the very heart of the king. His sins are now uncovered. He had sought to hide them from men and to shut them out of his own memory, but here they loom before him in their true perspective. The parable illumines his darkened vision. He sees his own utter want of pity and love, and though murder does not appear in the parable he now regards his own hands as stained with blood and wonders how he can be delivered from bloodguiltiness (Psa 51:14). He had sinned deeply and had tried to silence his conscience. " When I kept silence my bones waxed old through my roaring all the day long " (Psa 32:3).

Having pronounced his own judgment he must now hear God's. The parable is interpreted and applied. As Nathan tells the sentence of God upon David and his house, the king realises the truth and his soul is aroused to confess and acknowledge his sin against God " I have sinned against the Lord." " Against thee, thee only have I sinned and done this evil in thy sight." It is the exclamation of a great but broken man, the cry of a heart that once loved the Lord, the utter resignation of a soul that is dejected and forlorn into the compassion and mercy of God. None can read David's confession and not feel a wave of sympathy towards him sweep over one's own heart. Much as he has sinned and grievous as must be the consequences in his own and other lives, yet that wail of confession will ever remain as a signpost to humanity, especially to the proud, the righteous and the rich. The sword which he introduced into the home of Uriah will wreck the peace and security of his own house; and though God does not condemn him to death for his sin, but most mercifully forgives the sin, yet the child born of adultery will die prophecies which were soon fulfilled. THE LAMB DESIRED.

It is no mere coincidence that when Jesus would condemn selfishness and the want of pity He too spoke of a rich man and a poor man Dives and Lazarus. To our own generation this Old Testament Parable does not lack a message. In recent times it has become more applicable than formerly to social life because two of the grossest iniquities known to-day are depicted in the

parable the desecration of home life through a lowered sense of morality and religion, and the reckless want of genuine pity towards those who have not the means to protect themselves from the lust, aggression and covetousness of those who have already an exceeding abundance. It was not essential that the rich man should take the poor man's lamb when he had his own flocks, but he desired the other man's lamb and he~ had no pity in his heart. In order to satisfy their sinful tendencies and lust men covet in the life of others that which they themselves do not require. Their desires are insatiable, affecting as they do practically every sphere of activity. This evil tendency is apparent in political, business and social life, where men are so restless and ambitious that they think nothing of coveting honours and positions which can be theirs only at a cost to others. Most serious, however, is the case where a man with sufficient of this world's goods cannot be satisfied until he has secured for himself that which means ' bread and butter ' to poorer brothers. It may be done in the name of commercial or economic efficiency, but there is a direct challenge to Christianity in the desires of wealthy syndicates and combines to possess for themselves the means of existence of small concerns. When we recall that the rich man lived near the poor man, we are reminded that the lustful desires of men are often such that they affect adversely those who are neighbours. David was a false friend to Uriah. It was his duty to protect and not to destroy the home of his neighbour, to develop rather than to wreck its happiness. THE LAMB ACQUIRED The sin of the parable may have lain in the desire to acquire, but it reached its depth of enormity when the lamb was taken from the poor man. The lamb was stolen. Though the average adulterer does not desire his sin to be described as theft, yet theft it is quite apart from its concomitant evils. Was Jesus thinking of this parable when He spoke the memorable and difficult sentence, " Whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart "? Jesus would have a man restrain his desire before it urges him to acquire.

All the circumstances of the parable indicate that a man can obtain what he unlawfully seeks from another's possessions only by sinning against God and by a want of pity and consideration. The tenth commandment forbids us to covet " anything that is thy neighbour's "because " when lust hath conceived it bringeth forth sin; and sin, when it is finished, bringeth forth death" (Jas 1:15).

Whether applied to the greed of rich nations or rich commercial houses or rich individuals the moral of the parable abides with us and it tells us that the nemesis follows. Once they have been sown the seeds of evil bear their harvest of wrong and cruelty. Associated with our parable is the death of Bathsheba's child, an incident which provides one of the most touching scenes in Scripture and which is now reverently immortalized when the words are read over a beloved child's body and comfort to mourning parents is found in the words of David " Can I bring him back again? I shall go to him, but he shall not return to me."

They are the words of a chastened man: a man whom God has really forgiven but who feels that others require to pay the penalty of his sin. We have known how national covetousness has resulted in war, death, destruction and misery. None of us can be blind to the ravages of syndicalism and there are few families which have escaped the blight of social evils. If we could only see sufficiently far into the future years to perceive what sacrifices may be required of our children and children's children because of our sin, our prayer would be from that great psalm of confession which is said to have been written by David after his conviction by the parable:

" Create in me a clean heart, O God, And renew a right spirit within me." Psa 51:10:32

03. The Vineyard

CHAPTER III (b) “ THE PARABLE OF THE VINEYARD “

“ LET me sing for my beloved my love-song concerning his vineyard:

“ My beloved had a vineyard on a fertile hilltop; he tilled it well and cleared it of stones; and he planted it with red-grape vine. He built a tower in its midst and he also hewed a winevat in it. He kept expecting it to yield grapes and it brought forth bad grapes.

“ And now, inhabitants of Jerusalem and men of Judah, judge ye, I pray, between me and my vineyard. What might be done to my vineyard that I have not done in it f Why, when I looked for it to bear grapes, did it bring forth bad grapes? And now, let me tell you, I pray, what I shall do to my. vineyard. Its hedge will be reduced and it will be laid open to be consumed. Its wall will be breached and trampled down; and I will lay it waste. It shall neither be pruned nor hoed but briar and thorn will grow up and I will command the clouds not to sprinkle rain upon it. For the vineyard of the Lord of Sabaoth is the house of Israel and the plant of his delight is the men of Judah: and he looked for judgment, but lo! bloodshed; and for righteousness, but lo! a cry.” Isa 5:1-7. As a narrative of fact the Parable of the Vineyard occupies a high level. The story rings true; it is well-conceived; it holds its listeners and its interpretation is applied directly and minutely. Its rhythm lends support to its appeal and its subject is one which was very popular in Israel. Whether Isaiah was the first to make use of the vineyard as representing the people of God in their relationship to God as the owner of the vineyard is a question which cannot be answered. This story was certainly narrated at a very early date by Isaiah, possibly about 740 B.C, and it resembles very closely the description of the vineyard in Psalm Ixxx with this pronounced difference that whereas the latter describes a destruction which has already fallen upon the vineyard, the former is a prophecy of approaching calamity and devastation. It is probable that the vineyard had long been associated with the thought of Israel and Judah as the planting of the Lord, and that Isaiah was using a familiar symbol which may have been borrowed from older literature or oral traditions.

Regarding the words and interpretation of the parable itself most critics are in agreement.

What differences may appear are easily reconciled and harmonised. The words of introduction to the parable remain uncertain in their meaning, and in so far as they do not seriously affect the parable itself they may safely be left as a field for exploration and research by scholars. Confusion does certainly arise from the Septuagint’s use of the first personal pronoun throughout the story and its interpretation, as also from the doubtful meaning of the Hebrew words translated ’ a song of my beloved ’ in the Authorised Version. By a very slight change in pointing the Hebrew ^”p* 7 (my beloved) may be read “’TPT (my love), but the latter word is usually descriptive of sexual relationship and for that reason may not be considered as applicable in this case where the beloved is revealed to be God. Opposed to this objection there is the claim that a valid meaning can be brought out when we picture the prophet coming before his audience as a minstrel who has

a special love-song to sing, a song to which he invites them very specially to give ear. It is equally possible to read into the words ’ a song of my beloved,’ the idea that if the owner of the vineyard should sing this would be his song. In itself the story is very simple, and it uses familiar features in good husbandry. The owner proves himself a good prospector of land.

He selects a location which ought by nature to give good returns to diligent labour a fertile hill-top, or, as the Hebrew text describes it, a horn, the son of oil. Thus it possesses all the advantages of a good lay-out which every modern husbandman cherishes a rich soil, a good exposure to the sun, and ground that has already proved its fatness. He works the soil well by turning it over thoroughly, seeing that it is cleared of stones and well-drained. (For this stage of the preparation the Septuagint version describes how he puts a fence around it and fortifies it). When the ground has been made ready he plants in it the choicest of vines sorek which were distinguished for their red grapes and a wine that was treasured for its excellence. As a safeguard against marauders a watch-tower is erected so that neither may the plants be harmed by prowling animals nor may the fruit be stolen by thieves. It is not enough to have his winepress but he must see that the lower part of the winepress (the wine vat) is carefully constructed by being quarried out of the slope. Into it he hopes one day to see the red wine pour forth from the press above.

Having done all that a good vineyard-owner might do he awaits the fruit of his labours and care only to meet with bitterest disappointment. His well-tended plants bear bad grape word meaning * evil-smelling ’ and the term * wild grapes ’ scarcely defines it sufficiently.

PARABLES OF FACT

1 Bad grapes ’ seems best although the Septuagint uses ’ thorns ’ which may give ’ wildings ’ or 1 weeds.’

Whilst his hearers search in their minds for some explanation of this catastrophe and shew their astonishment by their countenances the singer breaks upon their reverie and wonder to challenge them to tell how such a calamity had followed upon all the industry and precaution of the husbandman. Even as Nathan drew from David his judgment upon the culprit, so here does Isaiah call for an explanation, but ere they can answer he breaks forth with the owner’s decision and at once they observe that his speech and tone have changed. No longer is he the minstrel singing his love-song to delight them at a festive season but he is the man of God who proclaims the judgment of God upon the people who had so grievously requited all His love and mercy towards them. They gradually sense his meaning as the tornado of judgment upon the unprofitable vineyard is uttered. The disappointment has not been so much the economical loss as the want of gratitude and a failure to respond to love and kindness. “ What more might be done that I have not already done in it? “ Therein lies the grief, and because all his labour must be abortive of good results he resolves upon the destruction of the vineyard. He will make an end of it. The shrub fence will be broken down ready for fuel and the vineyard will become a place of desolation. Whilst this judgment is being given it is probable that some of the hearers do not understand its meaning for themselves. Seeing their dullness and want of full comprehension the prophet discards all veiling from his words and proclaims that the vineyard of God is Israel and that the choice vine is Judah. He has finished his song in which he has been mysteriously caught up into the presence of and identified with the person of God.

Now he declares solemnly and regretfully what the song has signified.

Upon Israel as a nation God had most tenderly and thoughtfully exerted the greatest care and manifested every possible provision for their good. Canaan was chosen by Him as a land of promise from which the enemies were driven out. By every good spiritual and moral influence He had striven to protect them and prosper them. This was particularly the case with Judah, within whose borders were Jerusalem and the seat of the Davidic line. Being a prophet in Judah Isaiah regards his country as the special planting or choice vine of the Lord. Yet, just as the parable indicates that no amount of expense and labour can possibly overcome some inherent defect in the soil of the vineyard so now it is revealed that God's disappointment lies in the failure of His people to shew justice and righteousness in their lives. Despite all the protection and safeguards afforded them, likewise all the encouragement and rich blessings extended them, there have issued lawlessness and oppression where peace and love should have prevailed. The delightful play upon words which appears in the Hebrew text of the closing sentence is lost in our English translation. Even written in an English form the assonance and charm are felt:

" He looked for mispat and lo! mispah, for zedhakah and lo! zeakah." The contrast is brought home realistically and there can be no evasion of its thrust. The evils which are described in the remaining portion of the chapter (Isa. v.) shed light upon the extent of sin and unrighteousness among the people.

All moral restraint had been loosened, religious privileges had been abused, despised and neglected, and from many souls a cry or shriek of despair and suffering was heard. A suggestion is therefore made that no remedy can be found except to make an end of all since every other effort had been futile.

God's messengers might relate a similar parable in modern times. To do so might necessitate courage even greater and stronger than was Isaiah's. In so far as the influence of Christianity has affected nations we have evidences of the great vineyard of the Lord. It is no ordinary coincidence that Jesus speaks in parables of the vineyard and that in His narration of the parable of the Wicked Husbandmen (Mark xii. i-io) His words descriptive of the creation and defence of the vineyard itself are, in the Greek New Testament, almost strictly identical with those of the Greek in the Septuagint version of this Old Testament parable.

Jesus has no need to interpret the parables of the Wicked Husbandmen, the Barren Fig-Tree (Luk 13:6-9), or the Vine and Its Branches (John 15:1-8). We read that after Jesus concluded the parable of the Wicked Husbandmen saying: " The stone which the builders rejected is become the head of the corner " there was fierce anger " for they knew that He had spoken the parable against them."

YESTERDAY'S CONSTRUCTION When we consider the Construction of God's Vineyard of Yesterday in its effects upon our world and our lives, we recall the many hopes and dreams of humanity for a day of happiness and mutual helpfulness. By various means God has surrounded His people with the sunshine of Christian graces, gifts and helps which have tended and promised to enrich life in all its aspects and to bear a rich harvest of good fruit. The vineyard is representative in our day of Christian civilization throughout the world, and we must remember the labour which has been expended upon giving that vineyard to the nations. What more could God

have done for the vineyard than He has done? Jesus gave His life and laid the foundation of the Kingdom of God. God has richly endowed nations and individuals with power to extend that Kingdom, and has given them blessings and privileges which were expected to bear fruit. Isaiah's description of God's goodness to his own nation might with profit be applied to the history of several nations such as our own. There have been occasions when God's hand seemed to be guiding the affairs of our people in no uncertain way, and we have good reason to believe that we, too, have been a chosen people, but we should ask ourselves ' chosen for what? '

Under the Christian dispensation a new people has arisen representative of all nations who have come to acknowledge Jesus Christ as their Lord. They are the choice plant from which so much is expected. They are of the body of Christ who said, " I am the Vine, ye are the branches." From the Christian Church and from those who are bound to Him either in membership of that Church or by reason of their Christian heritage through receiving boundless mercies and opportunities, God has looked to see good fruit in beautiful lives, in noble spirits, in loving service and in sympathetic endeavour to sweeten and hallow all life around by raising the fallen and easing the burden of the oppressed. The test of national and personal response to God lies in the degree of our production of fruit for God.

TO-DAY'S PRODUCTION

Whereas there are many proofs of the careful construction and preparation of the vineyard, there is also evidence of failure to produce fruit commensurate with the labour expended. We consider the production, and we behold how some of the favoured nations have not borne the fruit they ought to have produced. That the standards for testing productivity vary according to opportunity and circumstances must be admitted: for example, whilst we recognise how highly favoured Spain was in the Middle Ages and how she pioneered across the seas carrying her civilization to other nations, yet we cannot view with approbation her decline from her high estate. We are convinced that she could have produced more and better fruit.

Similarly, in respect of our own nation we cannot be proud of the results of our history when we consider how rich have been our opportunities.

Alike in our international, national, social and religious life, we are but a remnant of what God expected us to be. " There are the foxes, the little foxes, that spoil the vines." A national departure from religious standards and a wave of irreligion are features common to the life of several nations in modern times.

Nations are losing the virtue and sanctity of Christian home life. The ' New Morality ' is a serious peril to Christian Morality as it tends to extend licence and sin, its fruits being crippled lives associated with sorrow and suffering. The failure to find harmony among the nations which profess to be Christian and to pursue the way of peace and brotherhood is in itself a rebuke of national pride and selfishness. We have reason to be proud of what has been accomplished in God's name, but we have also to confess that in many ways we are a disappointment to Him because we have not produced for His glory the purest, sweetest and noblest fruits. Everywhere are the oppressions of a merciless and remorseless social organisation; the cry of the poor, the outcast and defeated is heard amidst all the noises of modern machinery; and tariff conflicts between nations threaten them with evils as grave as those from armaments.

Within these nations we look in vain for the evidence that the Church reflects clearly the glory and power of Christ. She is hesitant, and her voice is indistinct. We wonder what will be the issue of it all, and we turn to consider the parable's warning.

TO-MORROW'S DESTRUCTION In our parable ' to-morrow ' sees the destruction and devastation of the vineyard. It is left derelict, and so it must ever be where God is forsaken and His love and provision are despised.

Down the centuries we hear the prophet's cry of doom to every such fruitless planting. Great nations and empires have passed away, and in some instances their glory is but a faded memory.

Such is the warning which is written large over the pages of Israel's history as clearly as over the history of Greece and Rome. Neglect of opportunity to bear good fruit for mankind, departure from the highest standards of virtue, and the enthronement of false gods, lead inevitably to desolation and gloom. No nation can afford to slight the privileges which God has given. The Church dare not be disobedient to her heavenly vision; and the individual Christian must never be unmindful of the words, " By their fruits ye shall know them."

Sin's harvest cannot be evaded, but the Gospel message proclaims the love of God which seeks us, saves us, renews us, and restores to us the locust-eaten years. It tells us that apart from Jesus we cannot bear fruit "He that abideth in Me and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit."

04. The woman of Tekoah

CHAPTER IV (c) “ THE WOMAN OF TEKOAH “

“ THE Woman of Tekoah came to the king and fell on her face to the ground and did obeisance and said, * Help, O King.’ And the king said to her, ’ What is the matter? ’ And she said, 1 1 am a mourning woman, a widow, and my husband is dead. I had two sons who strove together in the field where there was no one between them to separate them; and the one attacked the other and killed him. Behold, now, the whole clan has risen up against thine handmaid and said, “ Give up him that smote his brother and we shall kill him for the life of his brother whom he slew and thus shall we also destroy the heir.” So shall they quench my coal which is left that there be preserved to my husband neither a name nor a remainder upon the face of the earth.’

“ And the king said to the woman, ’ Go to thine house and I shall command concerning thee.’ But the Tekoan woman said to the king, ’ O my lord, the king, the iniquity be upon me and my father’s house, and the king and his throne be guiltless.’ 1 And the king said, ’ Who- 1 The words probably mean “ I and my father’s house shall suffer, not the king and his throne.” ever speaks to thee, bring him to me and he shall not touch thee any more.’ Then she said, ’ Let the king remember the Lord thy God so that the avenger of blood may not further destroy lest they extirpate my son.’ And he said, ’ As the Lord liveth there shall not fall one hair of thy son to the ground! ’ Then the woman said, ’ Let thine handmaid speak a word, I pray, unto my lord, the king ’; and he said, ’ Speak.’ And the woman said: ’ Wherefore hast thou devised such a thing against the people of God? And by the king’s speaking this word he is as one guilty in that the king doth not bring home again his banished one. For we must needs die, and are as water spilt upon the ground which cannot be gathered up again; and God taketh not life away but deviseth devices not to banish from him a banished one.’ “ 2 Sam. xiv. 4-14. This amazing story which achieved its purpose so dexterously and subtly introduces another type of the narratives of fact. It is an acted parable and is one of a group which made their appeal along somewhat similar lines. In all probability its plan was borrowed from one of the ancient stories told around camp fires, as it does not suggest the freshness and originality of Nathan’s parable. Though the aim of both stories was the same to procure a judgment from David which might be turned to good purpose against him they approached their purpose along widely different channels. Tragedy overhangs both. In each of them the king’s conscience must be awakened. His own guilt is brought vividly before him in one instance by direct accusation and in the other by the underlying insinuation that the king himself had known what it was to be banished through sin.

Whereas Nathan can directly interpret and apply his parable the Tekoahite finds it necessary to pursue her dialogue and action in order to give the interpretation.

Taken by itself the above story lacks the natural appeal of Nathan’s which, taken alone, is a story that impresses itself upon the mind. This acted parable requires its explanation in order to be fully appreciated, and at each stage of the unfolding of the meaning we seem to see a man standing in the shadows controlling and directing the whole stage-management of the various scenes. That

man is Joab, the brave but astute and blood-thirsty leader of David's army, the man who knew the secret of the king's blackest sin and who would later give David cause to lament the day that he had sent that fatal letter to him concerning the murder of Uriah. Again, though this parable lacks the high spiritual tone of Nathan's, it possesses in germ what has become a precious theological conception of God which is particularly set forth in the parable of the Prodigal Son and is frequently emphasised in the teaching of Jesus, e.g. It is not the Father's will that one of His children should perish (Mat 18:14). The parable's historical setting lies between two of the saddest tragedies in Bible history.

Following upon a most dishonourable act by Amnon, David's eldest son, when he ravished Tamar, his half-sister, Absalom, the king's beloved son, had awaited his opportunity for revenge and two years later he murdered Amnon under cruel and deceitful circumstances. Thus the king was reminded of Nathan's words that the sword would not depart from his house. The second tragedy was that in which the young man Absalom's vanity, disobedience and lust for power reached their consummation and caused to be wrung from a father's heart that had already been broken amid sorrows, disappointments and remorse these immortal words, " Oh my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would God I had died for thee, Absalom, my son, my son! " Absalom was banished from the king's court after Amnon's death, but aided by Joab he plotted to be recalled. When Joab saw that the occasion was opportune he devised the fictitious story which was narrated and acted so skilfully by the woman of Tekoah.

There are individual opinions upon the opening words of Chapter xiv all dependent upon the meaning of the word translated in the Authorised PARABLES OF FACT

Version as ' towards.' It may be derived from ^N (towards) or hj> (against), but great support is given to the view that it should be * against ' by the fact that in the only other instance in the Old Testament where the word f?s is used with that for ' heart ' (Daniel xi. 28) the meaning cannot be other than ' against ' or * at enmity with.' It was quite natural for the king's heart to be against Absalom whilst the father's heart yearned for his return. We are not justified in reading into the word a forced meaning prompted by the king's deep grief when Absalom was slain.

Rather should we be guided by the facts that a strong appeal was necessary to cause the king to relent and lift the ban; also, that even when he sanctioned a return from banishment he would not permit his son to come into his presence. May it not be that Joab hoped for much from the restoration of Absalom to favour?

Absalom was heir to the throne and we can understand how Joab was displeased when he observed " that the king's heart was against Absalom." Not far from Bethlehem was Tekoah, made famous in Biblical history as the home of Amos.

There lived the shrewd and very wise woman whom Joab secured to fulfil his plans. We cannot but admire her clever acting and her bold, courageous reasoning; she manifests a deep penetration and insight into human character, is quick in repartee and exceptionally tactful, painstaking and persevering to achieve her object. Not until her story is completed and a sacred pledge of security and fulfilment obtained from the king, does she proceed to enlighten him as to the purpose of her story. That she succeeds so well in obscuring from him so long the deeper meaning of her words, adds to the value of her narrative. A charge may be laid against this parable and others of a similar

nature that it cannot be regarded as a true parable because the woman very obviously acted it, and made it up on a fiction knowing it to be such. It is true that when compared with certain parables it does not bear the same stamp of possibility in truth as does that of the Ewe Lamb or of the Vineyard, but we might set it against such New Testament parables as those of the ’ Ten Virgins,’ or * The Judgment ’ (’ Inasmuch ’) or ’ The Labourers in the Vineyard,’ in all of which the truth possibility is no greater than in the story told by the Woman of Tekoah. The real want of truth lies in her action because her own character is interwoven with the tale she unfolds. THE HEIR The first part of the story deals with the heir whose death will mean the extirpation of a family and name. This was a calamity to be averted if at all possible, and on this point the woman pleads well. She professes real and deep mourning. The Hebrew text strengthens an interpretation which may seem redundant in its description, but is very necessary to the woman’s narrative. She mourns as a mother who has just had one of her two sons killed, and thus she emphasises the fact that she is a mourning woman; that is, her loss has been quite recent. She is also a widow through the death of her husband. Though sounding like a pleonasm this description is also essential to her story because otherwise she could not effect so powerful an appeal to preserve the name and remainder to the family. By the code of laws then prevailing the relatives of the family were justified in seeking blood-vengeance, a life for a life, upon the son who slew his brother. The widow makes no complaint against the law, knowing that the king must uphold the law. What she endeavours to secure is mercy which will somehow operate to prevent the clan from rooting out entirely her husband’s seed. To describe her son as her coal and remainder is adroit since it awakens a natural pity and sympathy. Let him be slain and the embers cannot be rekindled. THE KING The second part is concerned with the king. The tender chords of the king’s heart are reached by the woman’s dejection and plea. When her words play upon these chords the king cannot withstand an impulse to defend the woman, though he knows the danger to himself in so setting aside the customs of his people. It has been made clear to him that the clan seek blood more in order to destroy the heir than to inflict legal punishment. Rather than that the king should be compromised by his compassionate resolution, the woman disarms him of all suspicion and astutely encloses him within her net by offering to bear all the responsibility herself. The mother-love and spirit of sacrifice are thus very forcibly presented to David, and his earlier resolve is strengthened into firm determination.

He will risk punishment upon anyone who may speak against her a bold step even for the king in face of the recognised laws. Under her strong pleading that a sacred promise be given that the avenger of blood will not be permitted to destroy her son, he swears that her son will be saved. THE FATHER The king has spoken. The parable is ended. Its meaning is now unfolded, and it concerns David not as a king but as a father. Having satisfied herself that the king’s determination is fixed, the suppliant reveals to him by clever suggestion and innuendo as also by logical reasoning that a king who can thus abrogate the law for her son can surely take steps to preserve his own heir and son. By his decree in her favour he condemns his own action and is guilty of wrong in not restoring his banished son. Can the father-heart resist her argument “ we must needs die and are as water spilt on the ground, which cannot be gathered up again “?

Thus, using what was probably a familiar saying she proceeds to compare David’s attitude as king and father with the love and compassion of God who, whilst He does not seek to return a soul after He has taken it away, yet lovingly plans that a banished child be not kept in exile.

Amnon is dead. He cannot be brought back.

Absalom is yet alive and is both son and heir.

If the king should hesitate to bring him back surely the father will have mercy. The reasoning is sound and very personal because it reminds the king of God's mercy to him when he stood condemned to death for his own sin.

It may be said that it was only David the king who relented, and that David the father did not forgive his son because he would not allow the returned exile to see him and that by so doing he encouraged him in his treachery to the throne. Such an interpretation can scarcely be accepted. The obverse may be the truer explanation. Whilst the father's heart would cry, " Come home; come home;" the king must observe as far as possible the requirements of the law.

There are aspects of this story which find a sympathetic chord in every heart, and the most important experience depicted is that which suggests that there arise occasions when we are called upon to decide between contending principles such as faced David when law and love, king and father were contending within his breast. Occasions arise such as that when Napoleon was faced by a mother whose son had been sentenced to death; when the great soldier said that it was justice which must be observed she replied that she asked for mercy and not justice. Many parents have known the perplexity of David's mind and heart when a child who had done an irreparable wrong to the parent sought to be restored to the love and fellowship of the home. There are cases where husband and wife have reached a serious impasse and the conflict which has to be waged between right and wrong, truth and love, almost rends the soul. Where truth will pain love would soothe and where to do the right may mean offence to another, to do wrong will leave a lasting sense of shame.

Employers face the crisis when asked to reinstate their former servants who have wronged them, and employees also face the conflict when honesty is asked to prevail over duty and obedience to a dishonest master.

What is the Christian attitude in such cases? In the light of Gospel teaching the three words, ' heir, king and father,' have a powerful application, in which we may see the message which Jesus came to teach and fulfil. Acting under His guidance we are brought to make wise decisions because just as the Tekoan woman won the heart of David by reference to God's mercy so are our hearts strengthened to do that which is acceptable to God by reference to what God has done for us and others. Sin banishes us from God. When we sin we become aware that we have somehow alienated ourselves from Him. We become God's banished heirs. The law may exact its full pound of flesh but the King can pardon. Where the law decrees death the King can give life. What the law could not do God has done for His people through the gift and sacrifice of Jesus. He has devised means for bringing us home because Jesus came to seek and to save the lost the banished ones.

God does more than forgive. He restores us and reinstates us. He makes us heirs and jointheirs. He awaits the homecoming of the wanderer and His token of love is not the King's pardon but the Father's kiss. Therefore " Being all fashioned of the selfsame dust, Let us be merciful as well as y ust"

LONGFELLOW, Tales of a Wayside Inn. because “... earthly power doth then show likest God’s When mercy seasons justice.”

SHAKESPEARE, Merchant of Venue.

05. The Poor Wise Man

CHAPTER V (d) “ THE POOR WISE MAN “

“ THERE was a small city and in it were few men. And there came unto it a great king who encircled it and built great siege-works against it; but there happened to be in it a poor wise man who by his cunning caused the city to be saved; yet not a Man 1:1 remembered that poor Man 1:1.”

Ecc 9:14-15. This simple but attractive parable has not received the care and attention which it merits.

Hidden amidst numerous proverbs the story suffers from being regarded only as a passing illustration of how wisdom may be despised though it be of great consequence in an hour of crisis. Attempts have been made to identify the story with an actual incident in history, but they have all been mere conjectures. For a satisfactory grasp of the narrative attention is directed to an alternative translation of the Hebrew word (?) ’ there was found ’ and to a series of contrasts contained in the narrative. The verb Nyip necessitates an ambiguity to give the

1 In both the Hebrew and Greek texts there are two words used for ’ man ’ and the texts emphasise the word ’ that ’ in ’ that poor man.’ meaning ’ there was found J because the text reads better that the great king besieging the city ’found ’ its deliverer there. Another form is the impersonal use of the verb, ’ one found in it; ’ although such an interpretation makes a distinct break upon the sequence of the verbs and conjunctions used in the Hebrew text. Since the verb possesses strongly the idea of a sudden discovery such as might result from the arrival of a visitor, or the occasion that one * happened to be there ’ though not usually resident, we are able to set forth a series of contrasts a small city and a mighty king; few men in it and great siege-works encompassing it; there had come a poor wise man and also a great ruler of men; the poor man saves from the powerfully wealthy man; whilst someone might have remembered a wise man yet no man remembered that poor man. In verse 16 it is revealed clearly that emphasis should be laid upon the city’s neglect of the man because of his poverty even though his wisdom was accepted as valuable.

Unnecessary as they are to an adequate appreciation of the parable a few sentences may be devoted to the historic events which scholars have associated with it. Were it possible to decide upon one of them definitely the result would be very valuable as an aid in fixing the probable date of the writing of Ecclesiastes. The occasions suggested are:

(1) The siege of Dor in 218 B.C. by Antiochus III

(the Great). This siege was said to have been raised because the city was ’ hard to be taken ’ and on account of the approach of Nicolaus.

(2) The siege of Dor about 139 B.C. by Antiochus VII is described in 1Ma 15:11, 1Ma 15:13, 1Ma 15:25; also by Josephus (Antiq. xiii, vii and viii). There is no indication that the city was taken. But

Antiochus was then greatly helped by Simon, high priest at Jerusalem.

(3) The siege of Bethsura in 162 B.C. by Antiochus V, when the city was taken mainly as a result of starvation though after a battle was fought (1Ma 6:31).

(4) Abel-Beth-Maacah is the city which was delivered from siege by a wise woman who reasoned with Joab that it was better for the citizens that she should give him the head of Sheba whom he pursued than that the whole city should perish. Though this seems the most favourable analogy it suffers from two defects the deliverer was a wise woman and the besieger was not a king.

(5) The deliverance of Athens by a stratagem of Themistocles when Xerxes attacked that city, yet the saviour of Athens was ostracized in 471 B.C. In this case, however, Themistocles had great honour immediately after the withdrawal and defeat of the Persians.

(6) The assault upon Syracuse by the Romans in 212 B.C. when Archimedes strove to deliver the city without success an event which adds value to a translation which says the poor wise man ' would save the city ' rather than that he saved it. The siege of Syracuse lasted nine years, Archimedes was not a wealthy man nor was he of high rank.

Cicero found his tomb forgotten by the Syracusans. " Not a man remembered that poor man." If the suggested emendation be accepted whereby it is not claimed that the city was saved but that the poor, wise man would save it then the siege of Syracuse may have been the occasion referred to.

Though it may be of service to know the actual historical occasion to which the parable refers, the story is, nevertheless, precious as a parable if we retain only its substance. The story of the Good Samaritan loses nothing through our inability to identify ' a certain man ' or the ' Samaritan.'

If it be borne in mind that the emphasis must rest upon the poverty of the wise man there need be no difficulty in the interpretation. Many wise men who were poor have, through use of their wisdom, rightly or wrongly, become rich. Not so in this parable; and its significance lies in the indication that but for his poverty the wise man would have been remembered. There is a common remark that public service is seldom appreciated as it deserves to be. A man who is lauded and idolised to-day has his name and honour foully besmirched to-morrow. So long as danger threatens and the enemy's ramparts are being strengthened the poor man's wisdom is recognised, his word obeyed and his position exalted. When deliverance is achieved and the foe has withdrawn the city relapses into the old routine, the poor wise man returns to his humble abode and lowly task, there to be forgotten by those whom he has served so well. It may not be inappropriate to recall the changed fortunes of men in high office during the recent Great War.

Some of them are already experiencing that forgetfulness of a people in our own and other lands who remember them not. Is there not room for a readjustment of the valuations of human service? A rich man makes a trifling remark and it is boomed abroad. In his humble circle the poor man makes a speech of which every sentence is a gem and no more is heard of it. We need sound, balanced judgment.

Every wise man is not a poor man and every rich man is not a wise man. Had a rich man's wisdom delivered that small city his social eminence would have helped to perpetuate the memory of his deed. Many of our greatest inventors, discoverers, artists and literati were poor men and had to

undergo ignominy and abuse before doors were gratefully opened to their wisdom and skill. Appreciation came in several instances when it was too late. It is necessary to mention only a few like Dr. Wm.

Harvey, Galileo, Columbus, Turner, Goldsmith, Chatterton, Francis Thompson, and Carlyle.

To-day we know scarcely anything of the mighty ones who derided them.

“ Seven wealthy towns contend for Homer dead, Through which the living Homer begged his bread.”

Truly the deeds live on though the actors are forgotten. This is a view which raises the despondent spirit. It is also true that under modern conditions there is a better opportunity afforded the poor man to give evidence of his abilities. This we owe very greatly to the teaching of Jesus, which has given to the individual a value and which assures us that no deed rendered even unto the least is lost or forgotten.

Jesus has immortalized deeds by poor people such as the anointing of feet, the gifts out of poverty by a widow, the mere offer of a cup of water and the menial service of washing men’s feet rendered by One who had not where to lay His head. Thanks to the Gospel-Spirit, but especially to the influence of Christ’s own personality and life, the modern world regards the wisdom and work of the very poorest man with an increasing sense of gratitude. His deeds are enshrined in golden memories and grateful hearts. Robert Burns sensed this when he wrote

“ For a’ that, and a’ that, Our toils obscure and a’ that; The rank is but the guinea stamp, The man’s the gowd (gold) for a’ that”

Even the poor man should not serve merely to be remembered for his works, but the deeds of the poorest of benefactors merit the gratitude and remembrance of all who have benefited thereby.

06. The Escaped Prisoner

CHAPTER VI (e) “THE ESCAPED PRISONER”

“ THE prophet went out and waited by the way for the king, and he was disguised with a cover upon his eyes. As the king passed by he called out to the king and said, ’ Thy servant went out into the midst of the battle, and behold, a man turned aside and brought a man to me and said, “ Guard this man: if by any means he be missing then shall thy life be in place of his life or thou shalt weigh a talent of silver.”

Now it happened that as thy servant was busy here and there, he vanished.’

“ Then the king of Israel said unto him, ’ So is the judgment. Thyself hast decided.’

“ And he (the prophet) hastened and removed the cover from off his eyes, and the king of Israel recognised him that he was of the prophets. And he said, * Thus saith the Lord, Because thou hast let go out of thy hand the man of my curse, thy life shall be in place of his life and thy people for his people.’ “ 1Ki 20:38-42. In this, another acted parable seeking judgment from a king, we are presented with an introduction and a narrative which indicate some of the crude moral standards of an early civilization. They must not be valued by our modern conceptions of social or international relationships, but be related to their contingent purpose, which is that of demanding fullest obedience to the command of God and the identification of our own will with God’s will. Judged by twentieth century standards we should congratulate and honour any victor who embraces his fallen enemy as a brother in the spirit in which Ahab received Benhadad. But this is to miss the point of the story, because the historian’s aim is to drive home the lesson that victory resulted from God’s intervention and God’s support. The victory had been promised and its fruit assured conditionally upon the ground that Ahab, king of Israel, should not let Benhadad, king of Syria, escape from his hands. The incidents merit a brief reference. Ahab was a great soldier, fearless, indomitable and not altogether ruthlessly unkind. Possessor of many excellent kingly qualities and abilities he might have been a great and potent king.

What special gifts he had been endowed with he prostituted to base ends. His failure to honour God and to encourage religion in the national life was presageful of disasters and wreck. No good, but rather much evil, followed upon his marriage to a heathen foreigner under whose baneful influence he was brought to despise the premonitions given him by God’s messengers. At least one dastardly crime darkened his reign, so that his wife’s name and his own name have become significant of covetousness and cold-blooded murder far exceeding the enormity of Macbeth’s cruel deed.

Twice he was given victory over Benhadad of Damascus, and on the second occasion the Syrian King was actually delivered into his hands, but he set him free after getting from him some specious promises. This liberation of Benhadad cost Ahab his life on a subsequent occasion, and brought much distress upon his people. THE MASKED PROPHET The parable gathers around the foregoing incidents. A nameless prophet whom Josephus identifies as Micaiah, the son of

Imlah, because Ahab appears to have cast him into prison on account of a prophecy which threatened him waits by the roadside to intercept the king as he passes along flushed with victory and exulting in his magnanimity. The introduction to this scene is somewhat difficult to understand. The prophet invites one of his brethren in the school of the prophets to wound him, and he declares that he asks this in the name of the Lord.

Because he refuses, the brother prophet is condemned to death, not for disappointing his fellow, but for disobeying God's command.

Having succeeded in obtaining another man who would and who did strike and wound him, the prophet covers the wound with a linen cloth (not ' ashes ') which serves not only as a bandage, but also as a disguise over his eyes. Why all this preparation was necessary is not easy to explain. Possibly it was to encourage him in his purpose, and to reassure him that he was on one of God's errands. Thus disguised, he meets the king and submits for royal judgment his story.

He had been engaged in the recent campaign, when suddenly there was brought to him a prisoner whom he was charged to hold under guard on penalty of life or the forfeiture of a large sum of silver.

There is uncertainty about the translation of the Hebrew word (sar) which may be part of the verb T)D to turn aside, or may be a gloss for (sar) "ifr, which means a captain or prince. The latter reading is the more attractive because it embraces the thought of obedience due to a commander's order, but it does not conform with the Septuagint translation which indicates that ' a man carried out unto me a man ' and thus supports our translation that * a man turned aside.' The Septuagint rendering is somewhat more explicit throughout, stating as it does that if by any means the prisoner ' shall leap forth ' his guard's life will be forfeit, or a talent of silver must be weighed in the balance. Then comes the fatal denouement a confession that he has let the prisoner escape, or, as the Hebrew text has it, l he was not.' He had gone while the guard's attention was set upon other duties.

What can the king say? Ignorant of the application of the story to his own action, he decrees the sentence and so condemns himself. It is a repetition of the method used to elicit selfcondemnation from David regarding both Uriah and the banishment of Absalom. THE KING UNMASKED When the prophet's mask is removed and the king recognises him as one of the prophets, his own words come home to him, ' Thyself hast decided.' He knows instinctively what is purposed, and he can read into the parable its application. One may picture him suddenly humiliated and crestfallen; all his laughter and joy subdued, and his hopes from the alliance with Benhadad absolutely shattered. He hears the sentence of God fall from the prophet's lips in words which speak of death and destruction.

He is doomed. What he has sought to evade, he must now face his responsibility to God for the care and preservation of God's people. The mask of deception falls from him, and he is aware that his disloyalty and disobedience are discovered. Rather than confess his sin as did David, he goes to his house sullen and angry.

He is unrepentant, but he cannot escape from the prophet's words. They follow him everywhere until he allies himself with Jehoshaphat of Judah to fight against the Syrians at Ramothgilead. There he remembers the fatal sentence, and he fears to enter upon the battle in his royal array.

Regal dress is worn by the king of Judah, who is unaware that this may make him a target for the Syrian sharp-shooters, whereas Ahab disguises himself for the fray. All his caution avails nothing. He falls and his people suffer a fearful slaughter at the hand of that very nation to whose king he had shown the mercy forbidden by God " thy life shall be for his life and thy people for his people." For many years thereafter Israel came under the ravaging scourge of the Syrians, a punishment which could have been avoided had Ahab obeyed God. His will had been impaired as a consequence of neglect and religious indifference. The sufferings of his people had been hidden to a vision blinded by sin and selfishness. Selfaggrandisement being his ambition, his nation's highest interests were sacrificed to his motives, and opportunities to develop the national life were neglected and spurned. From what we know of Ahab's character, we are justified in concluding that his motive in preserving the life of his foe was other than a merciful one. There must have been something which he hoped to derive by way of a return to his kindness. His action opens up for us the question which had to be faced by the leaders of our own allied forces in the recent Great War. There are in our midst those who assert that the greatest mistake in the whole campaign was the decision of the victorious armies not to proceed right into Berlin. Such people attribute much of the world's present trouble to a premature peace. Would the Allies have been justified in pursuing what would have been a policy of mere retaliation and vengeance? Surely the decision reached, no matter its consequences, was more in harmony with modern thought and Christian practice than would have been a continuation of the needless waste of life.

History indicates that nations have come to this considerate attitude towards enemies very slowly. We cannot judge the times of Ahab by our standards of political wisdom. In accordance with the practice of his time, and quite apart from any consideration of his duty to God, Ahab made a mistake for which it was anticipated that he should require to pay heavily later in his career. To-day, people are thinking more of the preservation than of the destruction of life, and a king's duty, as it is also a nation's duty, is to protect even an enemy's life rather than to destroy it. Nations have come to recognise their mutual dependence upon each other and that they are all members of one great family. By means of conference and arbitration, questions of difficulty and differences can now be dealt with in a friendly manner which gives more satisfaction to all parties and permits the development of national interests to proceed without the fear of interruption which must always exist where armaments are used to settle disputes. For this advance upon the conditions of former days, the world is undoubtedly indebted to the penetration of Christian truth into the conscience of humanity. Though all men may not recognise Christ as their Lord, they are yet prepared to reverence His teachings and the value of His truth when applied to modern perplexities. Our Lord's parables of the Talents, the Ten Virgins, the Rich Fool and the Sheep and Goats point to the importance of trusteeship. The parable of the Escaped Prisoner is also a story of trusteeship, and it may be profitable to us to consider, in the light of this interesting Old Testament story, our Christian Trusteeship.

TRUSTEESHIP.

God has reposed in each of us a trust. He has put into our charge particular responsibilities in which we must not fail if we would escape vexation later on. We must protect and save our honour, our good name, our home and its sanctity, our own and our neighbours' characters. We are to use every power we can to restrain, control and suppress every foe which may threaten that which we must guard. The principle of ' Laissez-faire ' is dangerous in the sphere of moral

responsibility. If we do not concentrate upon our tasks we shall find some day that the enemy whom we have neglected will return to injure us.

Opportunity is given us to carry out a truly good work for God and our brethren, but we are so much preoccupied with trivial matters of our personal affairs that we miss the tide of opportunity. Saul suffered for permitting Agag to live, and in modern times there are homes and lives in ruins, health which is undermined, ideals which have vanished, youth lost and souls wrecked because a trust reposed in us has been neglected or an opportunity has been let slip from our power. Prisoners have been put into our charge. We have known that we had power to prevent evils, temptations and vices from continuing to afflict men; yet owing to our neglect and disobedience these foes have succeeded in eluding their guards. The lost opportunities of life return to mock us and often to defeat us.

“ But the tender grace of a day that is dead Will never come back to me.”

TENNYSON, Break, Break, Break. To many of us who pass along life’s highway self-satisfied and possibly somewhat elated, there cry out the messengers or monitors of God whose words turn our joy to sorrow, our sweetness to gall and our pride to shame. They may be nameless prophets, yet we recognise their words to be true. They may come to us in the silences of life when we are alone with God or with the spirits of those whom memory recalls; in the vision of a face, in a cherished lock of hair, in the dim ink and browned pages of an old letter or in the eyes which penetrate to our soul from a picture or photograph.

There they await us and confound us.

“ If I had known!

Ah, love, if I had known.” Not the good of which we boast and are proud, but the wrong we did not right, the evil we did not vanquish, the venom we did not eradicate these are the sources of our condemnation. Their harvest of sorrow follows us. We are reminded of the love we could have given, the work we meant to do, the good which won our approval but not our support, the painful thorns we could have extracted and the blessings to others which we could have secured. Now they are gone! gone!! and for ever!!!

Ahab returned to his house angry and sullen. So do many of us when we are reminded of our disobedience and neglect. If we return to God however, we shall possess abundant hope and joy. He tells us in Jesus of the victories which may yet be won when we receive Jesus into our hearts and enthrone Him as king of our lives. Our attitude towards God when our whole life is unmasked may be that of displeasure or despair or penitence. Soul-death follows upon the first two, but hope, life, joy and salvation follow upon the last. We cannot bring back that which * is not,’ but we can rebuild and seek to atone in such ways as will provide us with peace and happiness and our fellowmen with comfort and blessing.

07. The Sluggard

CHAPTER VII (/) “ THE SLUGGARD “

“ I PASSED by a slothful man’s field and by a garden of the type of man who lacks understanding. Lo! the whole of it grew thorns, nettles covered its surface and its stone walls were broken down. Then I beheld and pondered in my mind. I saw and was taught a lesson: A little sleep; a little slumber; a little folding of hands to lie down, and thy poverty shall come ravaging and thy wants as an armed man.” Pro 24:30-34. The book of Proverbs is peculiar in its use of the word ’ sluggard ’ or * slothful man.’ Closely related to this parable is the lesson of the ant to the man of sloth in Proverbs vi. 6-n, where the same closing verses appear, thus suggesting that in one of the sections these verses were a later insertion by a scribe. It is interesting to observe that the Septuagint version in both chapters varies considerably from the Hebrew. In Chapter vi, in addition to the ant the bee is given as an example of industry and husbandry; and in Chapter xxiv the language is more figurative than parabolical (e.g. “ Even as a field is a witless man “). Its description is more exhaustive and less ambiguous. It tells how neglect of a garden renders the soil inoperative through exhaustion of its fertility and the closing verses suggest more than do those of the Hebrew text the process of repose a dozing, a nap, then a deep sleep. Instead of poverty and want ’ coming upon ’ the sluggard they are revealed as f going out running ’ before him like a good herald. The application is practically the same in both texts and the one helps to elucidate the other since each leaves upon the reader’s mind a vivid picture of idleness, neglect, ruin, desolation and subsequent poverty coming rapidly and irresistibly. Though the story may never have been recounted, but be merely a soliloquy by the writer, it ranks among Old Testament Parables by reason of its simple description of one of the seven deadly sins. It is more frequently used in art and literature than the others and it has a direct message to every age, nation and individual. Its scene is in the sphere of agriculture where, possibly more consistently than in any other occupation, a man must work faithfully, energetically and laboriously. Agriculture was, anciently, the common occupation in the East and even in modern times, when mechanical implements may lessen the burden of labour, there is always need for the farmer and gardener to be early afield if he will seek a harvest. In countries where the noon-day heat prohibits outdoor toil and where the darkness comes on suddenly it is imperative that the agriculturist should be early at his task. Our narrative passes from a consequence to a cause, from weeds and sterility to neglect and idleness. It attributes the sluggard’s folly to a lack of understanding as well as to inherent laziness. Whilst the passer-by is aware immediately that the owner is indolent he concludes that he is also of that class of men who are ignorant of what is best in their occupation. There are two Hebrew words used for man in verse 30, the first for an individual and the other for a general type.

Very obviously the owner is foolish because he does not seem to know that his lack of understanding will bring speedily upon him utter want and poverty. Perhaps there is a play upon words in the use of the Hebrew words for ’ lacking ’ (chasar) in verse 30 and * thy wants (machsoreka) in verse 34, each of which is derived from the same root (“ion chaser).

Krummacher has related that among the disciples of Hillel was one Saboth whose weakness was idleness. Hillel sought to cure him of his fault. When he took Saboth to the Valley of Hinnom where was a standing pool full of vermin and covered with muddy weeds he said, “ Here let us rest.” Because of poisonous vapours the disciple would not rest there. “ Thou are right, my son: this bog is like the soul of a slothful man,” replied the teacher. A little later he shewed Saboth a field well described in our parable and pointing to its condition said, “ A little while ago, thou didst see the soul: now behold the life of an idle man.” The lesson bore fruit in the pupil’s life. “ To pass such fields,” said St. Gregory, “ is to look into the life of a careless liver and to take a view of his deeds.” An old Arab proverb says that “ sloth and much sleep remove from God and bring on poverty,” whilst we have many familiar sayings in which the same meaning is inherent, such as No sweat, no sweet; no pains, no gains; early to bed, early to rise. Sloth was the youthful defect in Thomson, the author of The Castle of Indolence. On one occasion when he had overslept and was roused he is reported to have said “ Troth, man, I see nae motive for rising.” In his description of indolence he speaks of an enchanter who enticed thoughtless wayfarers and destroyed their strength by a round of pleasures which sapped all vigour and lulled men into false security and happiness. No scene is so distressing as that of a neglected garden. Apart from its infertility and want of beauty such a garden is a constant menace. Its weeds spread seeds all around which injure other gardens and cause extra labour to their owners.

Soon the walls fall down and the place is laid waste. Ruin, desolation and poverty are written large over the scene and we wonder why any owner could ever have failed to preserve the place in its fertility, tidiness and utility. Too frequently we must conclude as did the writer of the parable that the cause has been indolence and ignorance. The former consists in the love of ease, the latter in failure to apprehend with what rapidity destruction will come. Alike in the cultivation of land and in the cultivation of social, moral and spiritual qualities the parable bears its message. Indolence and sloth are fatal.

Bunyan depicts Sloth as having a better head than Simple but not making use of it. Whereas history points to the work of men and women whose diligence and early-rising brought to their labours abundant fruits, it also reveals lives which might have been most helpful to mankind rendered derelict, abortive and bankrupt through lack of application. Not only in the ranks of business men but also among spiritual and moral leaders vision, inspiration and courage have resulted from faithful and diligent cultivation. The soul must be tended most carefully and all weeds eradicated. Habits require active watchfulness lest they propagate evil influences. Thoughts must conform with high ideals and actions should be consistently good, kind and loving. Power has come to men of God most frequently as it did to the Wesleys, Archbishop Leighton, Samuel Rutherford, Murray McCheyne and others by the consecrated hours spent with God each morning before entering upon other daily duties. The garden of family life must also be carefully tended if the best results are to be procured. The sons of Eli were weeds in their own home but they were also a poisonous influence upon the social and religious life of Israel. Eli’s indolence brought shame upon his people. The love of ease is very aptly described first a little sleep, just that turning-over in one’s bed for a few minutes; then a little slumber in which drowsiness creeps on and one forgets the flight of time; and finally, when habit has hardened into principle one calmly folds hands upon the breast and sinks into a sound sleep oblivious of the calls of duty, of the world and of humanity.

“ ’Tis the voice of the sluggard, I heard him complain, You have waked me too soon, I must slumber again.”

WATTS.

Whether verse 33 is a description of the sluggard’s laziness or an expression of his own desires does not seriously matter, as in either case the issue is the same poverty and want. The rapidity with which the sequence develops is very characteristically depicted. Poverty will come in * ravaging.’ Some understand the Hebrew word for ravaging to mean ’ like a highwayman ’ because it is derived from the verb ’ to walk ’ and is a term which “ belongs to a time when men who frequented the public roads were likely to be robbers.” Seeing that the concluding clause speaks of an armed man who probably carries off one’s goods the translation * poverty will come in ravaging ’ appears to be both satisfactory and accurate. If men would only realise that whilst they are slothful, poverty and affliction are already on their way they would be up and doing. The one talent man loses altogether the talent he has buried and he is punished in addition for his neglect and failure as a steward. The point of several parables taught by Jesus lay in His references to the certain reward of folly and indolence. He urges us to watch and pray continually and in His own life He set the example of diligence, perseverance and hardship. Of the Master it is said: “ A great while before day, he went out, and departed into a solitary place, and there prayed.”

“ Work while it is day; the night cometh when no man can work.”

08. The King of the Trees

CHAPTER VIII (a) “ THE KING OF THE TREES “

“ THE trees went out set upon anointing a king over themselves and they said to the olivetree: ’ Be king over us ’; but the olive said to them: ’ Shall I forsake my fatness by which gods and men are honoured to go to lord it over the trees? ’ Then the trees said to the figtree: ’ Come thou, be king over us ’; but the fig-tree answered them: ’ Shall I leave my sweetness and my good fruit to go to lord it over the trees? ’ So the trees said to the vine, * Come thou, be king over us ’; but the vine replied to them: ’ Shall I leave my wine which cheereth gods and men to go to lord it over the trees? ’ All the trees then said to the thorn-bush: ’ Come thou, be king over us ’; and the thorn-bush said to the trees: * If indeed you anoint me to be king over you, come, trust in my shadow; but if not, let fire go forth from the thorn and let it burn up the cedars of Lebanon.’“ Jdg 9:8-15. The ’ Parable as Fable ’ brings us to the second of the categories outlined in Chapter I. The fable is associated with a very early stage of literature and “ draws its characters from the lower brute creation and even from the inanimate world. Thus foxes and wolves, eagles and tortoises, trees and flowers, pots and pans converse with one another like human beings “(A. C. Zenos). There are two fables in the Old Testament Jotham’s (given here) and Jehoash’s (in next chapter) in both of which trees are made to speak and to teach. Neither of the fables can be interpreted without reference to the particular historical occasions to which it is related, but they become parables for two reasons: first, even without the historical information they are stories which have obviously some lesson, however obscure, to teach; and second, they suggest (at least locally) a moral.

They embodied such a moral originally and were spoken for that purpose. Under modern circumstances they cannot be altogether lacking in appeal, message and warning, for they compel us to ask their meaning. The fable of the election of a king over the trees is common to many countries, languages and literatures. Sir James G. Fraser gives a very interesting chapter to Jotham’s Fable in his P ’oik-Lore of the Old Testament, revealing how popular this type of story was in antiquity. In various forms it is found in the fables of JEsop, in a poem by Callimachus the Alexandrian poet, in Armenian stones and in writings by Phaedrus which became very popular during the Middle Ages. As described by Josephus the fable of Jotham entrances a reader, and in that form it should certainly be read because of its delightful narrative and its naive summing-up where we learn that Jotham told his listeners “ that what he had said was no laughing matter.”

WHAT WERE THE CIRCUMSTANCES?

After Gideon’s death there was a family feud no uncommon experience in olden times which was aggravated by the fact that he left seventy sons by recognised wives and one son by a concubine. So well had Gideon acquitted himself as leader and liberator, that he had been asked to become king. The desire for a monarchy had already possessed the Israelites and it grew stronger daily. Though he had been highly admired and appraised, yet Gideon declined all preferred honours and set before the people the true viewpoint: “I will not rule over you, neither will my son rule over you,

the Lord will rule over you.” Gideon’s seventy sons were willing to abide by his decision, but the remaining son, Abimelech, had great and mischievous ambitions. He planned well and trusted much to a reactionary movement against the house of Gideon by Baal-worshippers. His mother, reputed to be very wealthy, was a native of Shechem, and the Shechemites had been enraged when Gideon overthrew the altajrs erected to Baal. With an open and generous purse, and by a strong religious appeal to the men of Shechem to avenge themselves, Abimelech proceeded to slay the seventy sons of Gideon near the very spot where the altars of Baal had been cast down by Gideon. His net failed to enclose the youngest son, Jotham, who escaped, only to make a dramatic appearance on Mount Gerizim, where he shouted out his story. Truth and righteousness cannot be altogether exterminated. There is always ’ some youngest son ’ who escapes and later perplexes; who keeps alive the spirit of truth and goodness and proves that judgment is the Lord’s. The warriors of Shechem assembled near a station or post which is described as ’ an oak of a garrison ’ and there they proclaimed Abimelech king. Their celebrations were rudely disturbed and seriously clouded when a voice was heard ringing out from a projecting ledge on Mount Gerizim where Jotham stood, shouting so that all could hear. Shechem (now Nablus) lay in a valley between two hills Mt. Ebal on the north and Mt. Gerizim on the south and it is said that at certain times the human voice can be heard clearly over the width of the valley. There are sound reasons for regarding the occasion on which the parable was narrated to have been a later assembly of the people, so that time had elapsed during which Jotham learned of Abimelech’s proposals; but this is unnecessary. As a lonely fugitive, Jotham garners all the information he can about Abimelech’s movements, and his sudden appearance makes the irony and bitter sarcasm of his words the more annoying. His best opportunity was on that day when they gathered around the * oak of the garrison ’ the mercat-cross of Shechem.

Recent excavations have located the tower of Shechem. The modern name for a suburb of the city (* Balata ’) may be derived from the Aramaic ’ Ballut ’ (oak) and so perpetuate the memory of the venerable tree which formed a sacred and central feature of an ancient sanctuary of the plain. Under the oak of Shechem Jacob concealed the idols and amulets of his household. Under the (oak of Shechem ’ Joshua set up the witness-stone and gave his farewell messages to the people. It is possible that the tower of Shechem may be identified with the * oak of the garrison,’ which term has also been translated ’ the massebah-tree ’ (i.e. the tree under which the massebah or sacred stone was set up). Having delivered his scathing and threatening prophecy, Jotham fled, but the sting of his words remained. THE FABLE The parable is simple. In the light of historical knowledge it is pungent. Having decided to have a king the trees proceed to elect one.

We experience some difficulty in reconciling this decision to appoint a king with the refusals to accept office, but that circumstance may be passed over because the story emphasises the acceptance of kingship and not the decision that there should be a king. Among the Israelites the desire to have a monarch had steadily grown. Gideon and his sons had declined the honour when it was proposed to them. Every true Israelite would regard God as king and would refuse the crown. Abimelech’s eagerness to rule was a mark of his baseness. For this reason Jotham tells how the great, useful and valuable trees decline the offer of lordship over the trees, because they realise that in their own sphere they are of more use to gods and men than they could possibly be by waving to and fro over other trees.

Regarding the phrase I gods and men ’ we observe that trees are not supposed to be in a position to speak of * God,’ but they do speak of gods in the same way as of men. Olive and vine were used by the heathen and Israelites in worship and in religious ritual. In some instances the gods were supposed to receive the juice of the vine. As for men, they had many services to which they could apply the fruits of olive, fig and vine. It would not be advisable for the trees to forsake their natural sphere of greatest utility. The thorn-bush or bramble has not the same high ideals of office and responsibility. It is a low, creeping and grovelling plant which seldom reaches higher than six feet.

It is prickly, bears small leaves and insignificant flowers, and is suitable only for fuel.

If there is any tree which ought not to be king of the trees that tree is the thorn-bush; yet this is the tree which is keen to agree conditionally to become ruler of the trees. It lusts for supremacy, not because the others have refused the office, but because it desires pre-eminence and power. What a subtle proposal lies in the condition set forth let the others humble themselves by taking shelter under the shadow of the thorn-bush. They must then be wholly under the control of the thorn-bush and their fruitfulness and growth restricted to whatever limits their king may permit. This is an unacceptable as well as a preposterous condition.

Unwillingness to accept it means destruction, for fire will issue to burn up all the good trees. The thorn-bush may wear a crown, but it is still fit only to be fuel.

Abimelech expects the faithful followers of Gideon’s house and the worshippers of Israel’s God to submit to him a usurping, murderous and unscrupulous Canaanite. He may be made king but his heart remains treacherous, his hands blood-stained, and his reign a period of destruction and death. The men of Shechem will one day be destroyed by him whom now they seek foolishly to honour. Almost in a literal sense fire went out from Abimelech to destroy the men of Shechem. Later, they rebelled against his yoke, and he laid waste their city, burning their tower. In the end he perished, crushed by a mill-stone aimed at him by a woman.

MODERN ABIMELECHS The fable has its valuable suggestions to our own times. There are always Abimelechs in society covetous, crafty and contemptible.

There are grasping usurpers who are never content to fill a humble role, but are eager to occupy positions for which they are unqualified.

Theirs is “ vaulting ambition which o’erleaps itself.” Self-aggrandisement is often the motive of public service, and the Abimelechs leave no stone unturned until they achieve their selfish purposes. They elbow others aside and decry the labour of good men. Where honourable and well-qualified men decline honours, the Abimelechs claim them with avidity. They even snatch them though unfit to use them with profit to their fellowmen. All civic, ecclesiastical and commercial circles suffer from this type of strategist. Possibly on account of the hesitation of big-hearted, broad-minded and high-souled men to accept posts of responsibility, the adventurer gets his opportunity.

There is urgent demand that wherever men are endowed with gifts they should dedicate them to God through service to humanity. Our people need to be educated to discern the true type of public man for leadership. The populace is too easily deceived. When Jesus was on trial the

people at Jerusalem cried out that they knew no king but Caesar. Not many years thereafter the Roman legions came and burned up Jerusalem. The Nemesis is inevitable. The supplanter does not escape. The very trickery by which young Jacob deceives Isaac is later practised by his own sons upon Jacob grown old. Unscrupulous dealing in business or religion, in friendship or society brings its own retribution.

If men who are fit to direct the affairs of state, city, church or business persist in electing the upstart and demagogue to offices of responsibility and control, then they must experience that it will be on the same condition as laid down by the thorn-bush bow down or be ruined. No tyranny is so oppressive as that exercised by the democrat become autocrat or dictator. Beneath his iron heel there is neither liberty nor prosperity.

We are conscious of the crises which arise in our individual inward lives. Selfish, proud, covetous, boastful and conceited elements in our life are continually seeking the mastery. They may be enthroned only at the cost of our peace of mind, our purity and honour. Each of us has a king to appoint over his soul. The thornbush and destroyer is self; the noble and fruitbearing tree is Jesus, the True Vine.

09. The Thistle and Cedar

CHAPTER IX (b) “THE THISTLE AND CEDAR”

“ THEN Amaziah sent messengers to Jehoash, the son of Jehoahaz, son of Jehu, king of Israel, saying, ’ Come, let us look one another in the face.’ And Jehoash the king of Israel sent to Amaziah, king of Judah, saying:

“ ’ The thistle that was in Lebanon sent unto the cedar that was in Lebanon saying, “ Give thy daughter to my son to wife: “ and there went by a wild beast of the plain which was in Lebanon and trampled down the thistle.’ ’2Ki 14:8-9.

There is much similarity in the two fables of the Old Testament which are here classified among the parables of that book. Apart from the power of speech, attributed in each of them to vegetable life, there is an element of parallelism in the types of plant life introduced and in the method of effecting an issue to the stories. In each case the thistle or bramble which grows in the shade of its big brothers, represents the spirit of arrogance, swollen pride and provocative ambition. Whereas, in Jotham’s fable, the thorn symbolises fuel which will destroy the cedars of Lebanon, in Jehoash’s fable a beast of the plain is regarded as part of the scheme for the destruction of the thistle. There is no indication that any knowledge of events is ascribed to the wild animal in question or that it was aware of the important part it was playing in frustrating the over-reaching ambition of the thistle. Further, strict parallelism between all details of the story and actual events in history cannot be insisted upon, since whereas in the fable the cedar and the beast cannot be identical yet in historical fact Jehoash, king of Israel, as symbolised by the cedar, was in reality the one who, as symbolised by the wild beast, crushed the thistle which symbolised Amaziah of Judah. To possess a full array of the circumstances of this story, the narratives in 2 Chron. 25 and 2 Kings 14 should be read together. They are inter-related and, conjointly, apart from textual criticisms, they aid us in understanding the salient historical references. From them we learn how success crowned the campaigning of both Jehoash of Israel and Amaziah of Judah. The former reigned at a time when Israel had reached a great height of military power and national splendour. He had delivered his country from bondage to Syria, and although religion was at a low ebb because of national godlessness, yet he is portrayed as one who would have preferred to leave Amaziah undisturbed, and Judah in the peaceful position of a vassal state to Israel. Amaziah had also cast off a yoke by defeating the Edomites. He had engaged mercenary troops from among the Ephraimites, but on the advice of a prophet he dismissed them and was victorious without their aid. His success opened the door to idolworship and to irreverence towards God; and the dismissal of the mercenaries led to destructive raids both in Judah and in Israel by those bands of men who were thus deprived of their anticipated spoils and rewards. Thus with an offended God and an aggrieved king of Israel, the outlook for Amaziah was not propitious. He himself aggravated the position by the tactlessness and folly which too often accompany success and precede ignominious failure and defeat. He rejected the warnings of God’s messenger who reminded him that the idols which failed to save Edom from his (Amaziah’ s) own hands could not now defend Judah. In response to

his threat to punish the prophet, he was given the warning of God's vengeance upon himself, and what resulted later is described thus: " It came of God."

Having surveyed the historical relationships and purveyed the setting incidental to our story, we may now consider a sentence upon the interpretation of which there is no agreement among scholars and which has a very direct bearing, not so much upon the meaning of the story as upon our appreciation and application of it.

Amaziah's words: " Let us look one another in the face " have been variously interpreted as signifying any one of the following:

(1) A challenge to fight Israel either to avenge the raids of the Ephraimites, or to assert independence; or simply a provocative step following upon his recent successes.

(2) A request for a conference to adjust the difficulties which had resulted from the raids upon Judean and Israelitish towns.

(3) An approach for consideration of a marriage alliance between the two kingdoms.

If it is permissible to deduce from the fable, there seems to be no escape from the third suggestion, but its consequences appear to be altogether out of proportion as well as out of relationship to such a claim or approach. The fable reveals a certain detachment of interest in its second part which meets this objection. The destruction of the thistle is not carried out by the cedar but by a third party who has not entered into the question of the council. This is a simple and natural possibility. A marriage alliance would be rendered impossible in consequence of the beast's intervention; but such a condition would invalidate the development whereby the intervention was actually effected by the king, who is represented by the cedar.

There may be a confusion of metaphors, and it is always possible that, as ' it is of God,' so God can choose Jehoash as His instrument to accomplish His purpose. May not the explanation of the parable lie in the thought that Amaziah sought a conference to deal with the raids upon his towns, and that as a condition of agreement he insisted upon a marriage alliance? By this means we can comprehend the force, irony, disdain and haughtiness of the words used by Jehoash. He stands like one of the mighty cedars of Lebanon such as that ' Grand Old Man ' of Lebanon, who has been described in modern times as keeping his lonely vigil outside the enclosure of cedars, 6,000 feet above the Mediterranean where " he not only guards the wood, but also surveys the land " and still, " under their shade grow barberry, wild rose and bramble giant monarch and impudent impostor." To such a tree the beast of the plain is harmless, but alike to the sapling cedars and all small shrubs he is a serious menace. Even to-day, wild goats break through the breaches in the enclosure walls and trample down the growing bushes. This point is made explicit in the fable. Not the cedar, but an animal of the field crushes the thistle and the cedar continues to reign undisturbed.

Objection may be taken to the moral and spiritual application of this parable on the ground that it was spoken ostensibly for a specific occasion and to an interested individual. In reply it may be argued that the parable of the Good Samaritan was also spoken under such circumstances and was even applied by Jesus to an individual case " Go and do thou likewise " but that the value of the story has been universally recognised and appreciated and so the story has become part of

the universal library of the codes of good conduct. In a similar sense, we may regard this Old Testament Parable because it has for us in our day a message as clear and definite as it had for Amaziah in his.

“ Pride goeth before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall,” Pro 16:18. There are conditions of life in which success is more dangerous than failure. Wherever success engenders presumption, vaulting ambition, or conceit, the danger signal is present. Success may beget arrogance, boasting and indiscretion which prompt men to enter the lists with those who are their superiors alike in strength, character and position. Only a superior could make the demand, “ Give thy daughter to my son to wife “ yet, as in the parable, there are those who, dazzled by the glare of their own successes, claim either for themselves or others such positions or rewards as they are quite unsuited to hold. They intermeddle to their discomfiture and hurt. Cedars have no need to worry about the ambitions of thistles: they may grow close together, but their sphere and purpose are quite distinct. It is as absurd for the thistle to think of an alliance with the cedar as for the cedar to form an alliance with the thistle. We must resist every temptation to imagine ourselves superior to what we are.

Without any discussion of what is termed * class ’ distinction or * social difference ’ we have to recognise that when God created a thistle He had no intention of making it into a lordly cedar, either in height or in utility. Jesus Christ sought to stress the need for each man to fill his own niche which no other can fill so well.

He indicated also that just in proportion as we may thus fulfil our allotted duty and bear its responsibility, shall we be promoted or given increased responsibilities. We must suppress and extinguish within ourselves that fire which “ Preys upon high adventure...

... a fever at the core, Fatal to him who bears, to all who ever bore.”

BYRON. An important point in the parable of the Pharisee and the Publican is that the latter knew and faithfully observed his position before God, whereas the former was blind to the truth of the situation. He knew neither humility nor reverence towards God. A little success or a little righteousness may deceive us into thinking ourselves stronger or better than we are. To flaunt our self-righteousness before God or man is sure to incur for us a well-merited punishment. In Amaziah’s case, his kingdom was taken from him and Jerusalem was devastated. No matter where men go they find here a cedar, and there a thistle: in the crowded city life and in the seclusion of rural life; in the market and in the shop; in the church, the school and the home; and in the many forms of social life and human endeavour it is always the same here a cedar, and there a thistle men and women with various thoughts, tastes, pursuits and gifts. Some are intoxicated with success whilst others are humbled. The former acquire foolish pride and assume superior, unbecoming airs; they scorn advice and kindly warnings; they are thistle characters, incapable of development and growth. They differ from the cedars in height, depth and girth. They cannot soar so high; their roots are not so deeply entrenched and established, and their influence is not so farreaching.

Just as Amaziah’s heart was not right with God, so there are those whose religion is not deeply rooted but very near the surface, often hypocritical. The crux of this matter lies in the hidden depth. The roots are not seen.

Selfishness and harsh, cruel, intemperate and evil desires or motives may not be obvious to the public or to the congregation. Yet, “ by their fruits ye shall know them.” The girth of a tree depends upon its roots. Travellers have reported upon cedars which are 41 feet in girth with large, spreading branches. Our girth is our measure of influence. History is full of lordly* cedars, the great, noble minds and hearts who have brought rich blessings to mankind and who have laboured steadfastly independent of all the envyings, criticisms, and petty ambitions of the conceited and puffed-up thistles.

Especially true is this in the case of Christian lives by means of which the branches of Christ’s Kingdom are stretching out so that all nations may rest in their shade.

10. The Soiled Waist-Cloth

CHAPTER X (a) “THE SOILED WAIST-CLOTH”

“ THUS said the Lord unto me ’ Go and acquire for thyself a linen waist-cloth and put it upon thy loins, but thou shalt not cause it to come through water ’. So I acquired the waist-cloth according to the word of the Lord, and I set it upon my loins, and the word of the Lord came unto me a second time saying ’ Take the waist-cloth which thou hast acquired, which is upon thy loins, and arise, go to Euphrates and bury it there in a hole of the rock ’. And I went and buried it in Euphrates according as the Lord commanded me. Then it came to pass after many days that the Lord said unto me * Arise, go to Euphrates and take thence the waist-cloth which I commanded thee to bury there ’. So I went to Euphrates and I digged and took the waist-cloth from the place wherein I had buried it, and behold, the waist-cloth was marred; it was not profitable for anything at all.

“And the word of the Lord came unto me saying ’ Thus saith the Lord; After this manner shall I mar the pride of Judah and the great pride of Jerusalem. This evil people who refuse to hear my words, who walk in the stubbornness of their heart and have gone after other gods to serve them and worship them shall be as this waist-cloth which is not profitable for anything at all. For as the waist-cloth cleaveth unto the loins of a man, so have I caused to cleave unto me the whole house of Israel and the whole house of Judah,’ saith the Lord, I that they might be unto me for a people and for a name, and for a praise and for a glory; but they did not give ear. As the first among ’ Parables of Fancy,’ this interesting narrative about the waist-cloth that was marred challenges us to prove that it is such a parable rather than one of fact. Did Jeremiah really go through the action of the story, or was it given him in vision, or is it a story narrated as though it had been experienced for the purpose of teaching the nation a necessary and very urgent lesson? The answers to such questions require reference to a perplexing interpretation. The Hebrew word Perath, translated Euphrates in our text, is regarded by many modern scholars as a reference to the Wady Farah which is only a few miles distant from Anathoth, the home of Jeremiah. There are found a fountain and stream “ which soak into the sand and fissured rock of the surrounding desert.” On the other hand, Euphrates is about 250 miles distant and is not enclosed by rock as the story requires.

It is not easy to believe that the prophet walked such a great distance on two occasions in order to learn an obvious lesson and a lesson which could have been so easily demonstrated nearer home. If Euphrates is the correct rendering, then the story is a parable of fancy rather than of fact, and if the Wady Farah is intended, we have either a parable of fancy (given as vision) or a parable of fact in which the prophet acted the story under divine guidance. We are constrained to accept the conclusion of Principal G. A. Smith “ That the Wady Farah was the scene of the parable is possible, though not certain. But the ambiguity of these details does not interfere with the moral of the whole.” Remembering that the whole narrative is recorded as being under the constraint of God’s direction, and that the story has reference to the burial of Israel in a place where the nation becomes quite unprofitable, we retain in our text the word Euphrates as symbolising the land of

captivity and we incline towards regarding the whole story as visionary in its inception though narrated as having been experienced.

Another word whose interpretation makes a radical difference in the meaning and application of the story is that which is given as l waistcloth.' Cheyne holds the view that no word is so appropriate and dignified as * waistwrapper ' and he quotes the Arabic proverb ' He is unto me as a waist-wrapper.' The waist-cloth was bound very close to the body under other clothing, and it must be distinguished from the girdle, which was a waist-belt wrapped around and over other garments. The girdle was often adorned and ornamented, a circumstance which might justify the description of Judah and Israel as a praise and a glory for God, but this is to read into the word * waistcloth ' the idea of such ornamentation as necessitates the meaning waist-belt or girdle. So very clear is the command to put it upon the loins that there can scarcely be any doubt that it is the ' waist-cloth ' which is bound close to the skin; for it was caused ' to cleave unto me ' which can scarcely be said of the ordinary waist-belt or girdle.

Emphasis is laid upon the material of which the waist-cloth consists. It is linen. All the priestly garments were linen and because of that linen symbolised holiness. Possibly this does not wholly explain why linen is mentioned in the parable. Israel was indeed expected to be holy unto the Lord, but two of the useful qualities of linen are that it wears well and can be long preserved. It was used in the burial of mummies, and there have been instances in which new linen has withstood the ravages of time over many centuries. When washed it is again practically new, but if it is left soiled and contaminated in any way with damp, it will rot. Jeremiah makes good use of the recognised qualities of linen. The waistcloth which he acquires or buys must not be put in water after he has worn it. He buries it soiled in a hole or chink of rock. May not Euphrates mean simply, in the land with which the river is identified rather than mean a reference to the near presence of water? He buries it where it should be dry and long-preserved, but after many days he digs it up only to find that it is altogether useless. Is not the suggestion here that the uselessness of the linen has resulted from its earlier corruption rather than from its contact with water or damp? It was buried in an unclean and soiled condition, the consequences of which were decay and rottenness. The parable has thus a vivid application to the condition of Judah since it indicates that the corruption of the nation will not result from its exile in a distant land where it will be buried, but from the sin which has already wrought uncleanness among the people before they are removed. Their only chance of life and preservation lies in an immediate cleansing.

Once the national life is defiled, no hiding or burial even in a distant land will arrest the process of decay and death. The canker will work its deadliest havoc unless it is treated in the earliest stages when the nation is still closely bound to righteousness and purity. Thus the Lord is described as emphasising primarily that the nation is an evil people, disobedient, haughty and stubborn, idolatrous and impertinent. God had chosen them to be a peculiar people unto Himself and had bound them closely to Himself by His love and tokens of mercy. He sought them as a great praise and glory, but sin had already so corrupted their life that He foresees the final issue never again can the nation be a praise and glory for God upon the earth. We are given a glimpse of God dealing patiently and lovingly with His people, delivering to them through teachers and prophets His messages of reconciliation and restoration; pleading with them to repent and be converted, but all His appeals fall upon deaf ears and cold, stubborn hearts. They did not hear it is God's deep grief for His people. We feel that the final words are drawn most reluctantly from Him, and they are

echoed in the words of Jesus in His lament over Jerusalem “ But ye would not.” A nation which had been separated as a holy people through whom God’s name was to be praised and honoured will now be completely unprofitable in consequence of their refusal to obey and honour Him. Does the parable fail when we observe that it is God who will mar the pride of Judah? No: because the humiliation is put upon Judah and Jerusalem not by God but by their own neglect of God. He states the issue. It was their duty to seek the cleansing, not His to purify them when their hearts were turned away from Him. In a sense peculiar to the New Testament and its message of grace, God has again caused a people to cleave unto Him for the purpose “ that they might be for a people, and for a name and for a praise and for a glory “ because in Jesus He has taken His Church to be “ a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people: that ye should shew forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvellous light.” Individual members of the Church can cleave unto God by faith in Jesus Christ. A Church which neglects the call and service of God, which boasts in its own strength, which compromises with sin and which corrupts the faith once delivered through the Lord is a Church like Jeremiah’s waist-cloth. Amid the godless and irreligious where it lies in its corrupt state, it will become completely unprofitable to God and humanity. The same words apply to every professing believer in Jesus Christ whose profession means that he is knit to the Lord and that God’s Holy Name can be honoured and glorified in and through him. In modern times we seldom hear the confesison that we are unprofitable servants. Among the lessons to be derived from this parable of the Soiled WaistCloth may well be a new conception of the honour and majesty of God, a fresh sense of our responsibility to maintain the glory of God’s name, and a wish, by pure life and consecrated service, to keep ourselves closely bound to Him in that love which has manifested a desire never to let us go.

11. The Potter

CHAPTER XI (b) “THE POTTER”

“ THE word which came unto Jeremiah from the Lord, saying, ’ Arise, and go down to the potter’s house and there shall I cause thee to hear my words.’

“ So I went down to the potter’s house, and behold, he was executing a work upon the wheels; and the vessel which he was making of clay was marred in the hand of the potter: so he (began) again and he made it another vessel as it seemed good in the eyes of the potter to make.

“ And the word of the Lord came unto me saying, ’ Am I not able to do to you, house of Israel, even as this potter? ’ saith the Lord.

* Behold, as the clay in the hand of the potter so are ye in my hand, house of Israel. Immediately I shall speak concerning a nation and concerning a kingdom either to root up, or to break down, or to destroy, and that nation shall return from its evil concerning which I have spoken, then shall I repent of the evil which I promised to do to it. Again, immediately, I shall speak concerning a nation and concerning a kingdom to build or to plant, and it do evil in my sight so that it do not hearken to my voice then shall I repent the good with which I have said I would do it good.’ “ Jer 18:1-10. The relation of the potter to the clay with all its inherent possibilities and suggestiveness, is one which has been rendered most strikingly in such writings as the Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam and Browning’s Rabbi Ben Ezra. It was very commonly used by the Hebrews, and in the Bible there are several references to the potter and the clay. Had Jeremiah merely narrated the potter’s action, we should have possessed another parable of fact, but he states that he was directed by the Lord to go down to the potter’s house and that the lesson would be borne in upon his own mind as he looked on and meditated.

It was not necessary for him actually to go down since it is almost certain that he knew the potter’s practice; but whether he went down to the potter’s house in fact or in fancy, leaves the story as a parable of fancy given under suggestion from the word of the Lord. He projects the thoughts which came to him upon the relationship existing between God and Israel, and indicates very clearly and effectively the providence, patience and mercy of God towards a people who had placed much strain upon His love and compassion.

It is unnecessary to enter upon critical analysis of the parable, discussing whether Jeremiah was responsible only for the first four or six verses. To exclude the remaining verses leaves the story suspended in the air. The whole narrative is part of a complete section embraced by chapters 18:-xx. and in chapter xix. there is presented a symbolical act in which the smashing of a potter’s earthen bottle proclaims emphatically to the priests and ancients of the people that when their nation’s heart is hardened and God’s word is not obeyed, destruction must inevitably ensue. Our parable is preparatory to that awful day and is delivered in the hope that the people will repent and turn to God that His will may be wrought through them. To assign the parable to any particular period in Jeremiah’s life is not easy, though it is probably to be associated with the early years of

Jehoiakim. It indicates that the nation was passing through a critical period when a new vision, high ideal and consecration of national life might lead to a glorious revival with recovery of honour and prestige. The house of the potter was probably situated in the valley of Hinnom, south of Jerusalem.

There is the traditional site of the potter's field mentioned in Mat 27:7, where many evidences of the existence of potteries have been unearthed, and above them there is what is believed to have been the gate of the potsherd. The potter did his work upon wheels. These were two discs of which the larger and lower was usually made of stone (though later of wood). With his feet he turned this wheel, and as it was connected by a central support to the upper disc (which was often made of wood) this upper wheel was set in motion. Upon the latter he shaped, moulded and dressed the clay, having both hands free for his work. In Thomson's Land and the Book, p. 521, there is a description of the potter as seen at his task, and the writer tells that after waiting for a long time the incident described in our parable happened at last " From some defect in the clay, or because he had taken too little, the potter suddenly changed his mind, crushed his growing jar instantly into a shapeless mass of mud, and beginning anew, fashioned it into a totally different vessel."

Jeremiah had doubtless looked upon such a scene before, but he had not then received from it its message as given by God. On this special occasion he is caused to hear God's voice. The potter proceeds with his labour altogether unconscious of its influence upon an observer's mind. By simple everyday facts of common experience we may learn God's ways. Michael Fairless's Roadmender preaches silently while he sits breaking stones near the white gate.

There are always spectators who, unknown to the workman, are being impressed and taught.

If we visit the potter's workshop in the company of Jeremiah, we see how the artist uses and works upon the clay with deft hands. He has a plan for the clay in his mind, and he seeks to reveal it and give it substance in an earthen vessel.

Alas, for some reason not given to us he finds that it is marred. There is a flaw:

" What strain o' the stuff, what warpings past the aim! " No longer can it fulfil its destined purpose in accordance with the craftsman's plan; but he is not finished with it. He does not discard it. On the contrary, he conceives for it immediately another purpose. This may not mean a vessel so beautiful in its workmanship or so delicate in its lines as would have been the other, but it may be as useful to men. The clay is fashioned into another vessel. Looking on admiring, we hear suddenly the words which flash through Jeremiah's mind as he, too, beholds " Am I not able to do to you, house of Israel, even as this potter? Behold, as the clay in the hand of the potter so are ye in my hand." Not spoken, yet quite audible, are the words which we are constrained by God to hear. For that very purpose God has caused Jeremiah to go down to the potter's house. He is permitted a glimpse of God's way in dealing with men and nations. When applied to the house of Israel there is no difficulty in recognising the parable's meaning, challenge and supplication. The nation was chosen by God for a very high and important function to be a separate people through whose might, beauty and holiness their God would be reverenced throughout the world. Clay has no freedom of will whereby it can resist the potter's efforts. It may be refractory and difficult to work according as it is good or poor clay for the purpose. If it be the proper clay for what is planned,

then it will in all probability be used again for the same purpose, but the parable indicates that the potter has met with a disappointment. He cannot make what was expected; he will therefore form what is within the compass of the class of material in his hand. This defect appears only when the clay has been put to the test. A nation's condition differs from that of clay. A nation has a will and can refuse permission to God to mould it. It is easier also for God to exercise sovereignty over an individual's life than over a nation's because the latter embraces so many complexities and vagaries of mind and will that to get a whole nation's will harnessed to God's will, is very difficult. It demands infinite patience, and it premises the right of God to claim that His will be done. The parable deals with both of these features.

Over against a national departure from obedience to God's law and teaching, we hear God asserting His authority and sovereignty. His people cannot evade or disregard Him. What He must do will be done immediately. Should they persist in resistance to His purpose, He will act speedily. He will repent of the high ideal and make of them another vessel. If, however, an unsatisfactory nation, such as the house of Israel was, repents and turns to God He will in this case also immediately set to work to bless that people and to annul whatever evil their own wickedness had been bringing upon them.

We may so interpret verse 10 as to read into it a meaning suggesting destruction, death and a closed door against hope and restoration; nevertheless it must be observed that the parable's most powerful meaning lies in its supplication to a nation to appreciate the mercy and loving-kindness of God as He assures them that though He has been frustrated in His first design for their life, they may, by His grace, be re-made and restored as an honour to Him.

It is the gospel of a second chance proclaiming God's everlasting mercy, patience and love.

He may be forced to repent of His goodness, but He prefers to relent from His judgments.

Since individual citizens constitute a nation the parable speaks also to each man and woman.

We are so unstable and refractory that we deny to God the best we can give Him. Our lives break or are marred upon the wheels. By adversity, failure or deliberate evil we soil our lives. We lose contact with the great forces which might mould us aright. Broken hearts, soiled souls, marred lives, shattered visions, low ideals and fading hopes result from flaws which were unseen or unknown. We are subject to many influences which rob us of our beauty and strength. Of ourselves we may be proud, self-centred and stubborn, declining to allow God's spirit free course in our lives. We are conscious of what He wishes to make us, for in Jesus Christ we possess the Divine Pattern.

We lie in His hand marred, soiled, broken.

Such is our estimate of ourselves. What is His?

He, the Divine Potter, sees new possibilities even in the broken, inert clay. There is no waste in that workshop. The potter's house is a place of hope, revival and restoration. In His loving and tender hand the blemishes are used to remake us. Out of ruin, despair, wreck and calamity of soul and out of maimed lives He can produce new souls and strong lives.

We cannot define or limit the bounds of His judgment if we refuse Him the opportunity to recreate us. This is a truth revealed in several of the parables of Jesus. To those who repent of sin and disobedience, yielding their lives to God in Jesus, who is the revelation of His love and patience, there is the assured promise of a new life and fresh discovery of the value of one's own soul. Readers of modern writings such as Broken Earthenware (H. Begbie), The Everlasting Mercy (J. Masefield), God in the Slums (H. Redwood) and One Thing I Know (A. J.

Russell) cannot fail to appreciate the moral and influence of this Old Testament Parable which is perennially fresh and ever new. It throbs with the optimism of Browning's Rabbi Ben Ezra and the radiant hope of Jesus Christ rather than with the gloom and pessimism of Omar Khayyam " So take and use Thy work, Amend what flaws may lurk, What strain o' the stuff, what warpings past the aim! My times be in Thy hand!

Perfect the cup as planned."

Ben Ezra.

' If any man be in Christ he is a new creation.'

2Co 5:17:121

12. Micaiah, a Faithful minister of God

CHAPTER XII (c) “ MICAIAH A FAITHFUL MINISTER OF GOD

“ I SAW all Israel scattered upon the mountains as a flock which had no shepherd; and the Lord said: “ These have no master; let them return each to his house in peace.” 1Ki 22:17.

“ I saw the Lord seated upon His throne and all the heavenly host stood by Him on the right hand and on the left. And the Lord said: “ Who will entice Ahab that he will go up and fall in Ramoth-gilead? “ And one spoke in this manner and another in that manner; then the spirit came forth and stood before the Lord and said: “ I shall entice him.” But the Lord said unto him: “ In what way? “ And he said: “I shall go out and become a lying spirit in the mouth of all his prophets.” And He said: “ Thou shalt entice and also prevail. Go forth and do accordingly.” 1Ki 22:19-22.

Divided as it is into two sections, this narrative is one of the most alluring and illuminating of all the stories regarding God’s messengers. The first part is the real parable and the second part, which is also parabolic, explains the first by shewing under what misleading and dangerous counsel the conditions described in the first part were set up. The charm of the narrative so holds readers that the prophetic and visionary elements sink into obscurity. A few explanatory words about the history of the period enable us to follow the stories with understanding and appreciation. When first spoken they would require no specific reference to contemporary events because they would be self-revealing and explanatory. When originally narrated their appeal to men’s minds would be much richer than it can possibly be at this distance from the events referred to. THE BACKGROUND. The background of the canvas is easily portrayed. It reveals more clearly all that occurred at the momentous meeting of Jehoshaphat of Judah with Ahab of Israel, which forms the foreground. Jehoshaphat had prospered and established his kingdom. He was a pious king and he consolidated the strength of Judah alike in defence, in war, in religion, in law and in wealth. Though Judah and Israel had been previously hostile, they were now friendly and at peace. Indeed, the royal houses were united by a marriage alliance between children of the kings. Ahab, King of Israel, had treated his conquered enemy, Benhadad of Syria, too leniently, and allowed the Syrians to continue comfortably in Ramothgilead upon a promise that they would restore the city. Now he sought to reclaim the city and desired the aid of Jehoshaphat in his campaign. Ignorant of his ally’s fears and suspicions, Ahab was not fully prepared for the question of Jehoshaphat which asked whether the venture was acceptable to God. THE FOREGROUND.

We regard now the scene in the foreground the meeting of the kings. Ahab knows that he cannot anticipate God’s blessing upon his latest adventure, and he resorts to the device of summoning 400 mercenary prophets whose views will coincide with his own. They tell him to go up and conquer, but their plausibility and servility are all too apparent to Jehoshaphat, who suspects mischief and asks most slightingly if there is not besides a “ prophet of the Lord.” The 400 were doubtless prophets of the Lord, but with their first loyalty to the King. Is there not an approved prophet of the Lord known for his devotion to God? One can visualise that scene where the strong, religious king asks the arrogant, idol-worshipping king for a true messenger from the Lord. The

question gets under Ahab's armour and guise, unveiling a fear in his heart. He admits that he has not summoned one man whom he knows to be true to God and whom he hates just because of his courageous stand for God and righteousness. His words are an admission of previous wrong-doing when conviction came home to him through that man of God Micaiah, who was possibly the unknown prophet who narrated to Ahab the parable of the escaped prisoner. Secretly urged to side with the 400 prophets, Micaiah proves himself a valiant hero for his Lord; one of that noble line of courageous servants who, like Elijah at Carmel, Stephen at Jerusalem, Luther at Worms and Knox at Edinburgh, fear not majorities or rulers so long as they are themselves true to God he proclaims in parable the fatal issue to Ahab's adventure, and Ahab recognises instinctively what the parable means for himself. That Ahab sensed the danger is proved by his disguise for the battle and his attempt to contrive Jehoshaphat's death in place of his own. The short parable has its paradoxical difficulties. Sheep are not expected to come into the pens of their own accord from the outlying grazings far scattered upon the hillsides. Again, there is small comfort in appending the words "^in peace " to a return home from destruction. As a probable interpretation, the parable should be regarded more as a warning than as a sequel to the king's folly. It is symbolical of the condition of God's people when they are under the leadership of a king who has already ceased to perform the duties of God's anointed to his nation. Ere it is too late, the army should be disbanded and each man go home in peace.

Opposed to the king's policy, which means the complete dismemberment of the nation, Micaiah advises peace and preservation. In view of the warning thus given, it is truly astonishing that Jehoshaphat united with Ahab to attack Ramoth-gilead. Much more astounding is that action when the prophet's words are considered. They confirm the suspicions of Jehoshaphat regarding the 400 prophets into whom the lying spirit had entered. This idea of a lying spirit is most repugnant to us, but it was common, acceptable and even agreeable to the Hebrew mind. To understand this as the work of the Lord whereby He allows prophets to be deceived in order that His purpose may ultimately be achieved does not deprive the text of its meaning. But this interpretation would react very harshly upon the true prophet's declarations and would condemn rather than justify his allegiance to God. Apart from textual uncertainties, it may be concluded that behind the parable " lies a great truth to which religious experience of all ages bears witness. The man who sells himself to work evil, loses his power of discerning between good and evil; the flattering tongue of a number of worldly prophets prevails with such a man over the utterance of the one spiritually minded seer " (Barnes). New Testament writers made use of the doctrine of a false spirit entering into the Church and into the hearts of Church leaders to deceive them and to seek to bring about the overthrow of God's citadel upon earth by giving a wrong conception of God's purpose.

GOD'S FAITHFUL SERVANT.

Micaiah can be dissociated from his parable only with the greatest difficulty. His life and power are closely linked to the incidents to which his words are related; and he impresses us by reason of his courage, steadfastness to God's cause, indomitable perseverance in face of overwhelming odds and cheerful submission to affliction. In him we possess a noble type of servant in God's Kingdom. He will not pander to any class or section. Gold cannot buy his loyalty, nor can flattery divert him from his duty. Unafraid of the foe's big battalions and their treachery and wiles, he fears only God.

Invited to side with the majority, he prefers to be on God's side. He fears neither king or prophets because it is his joy to serve God whom he beheld in vision and whose voice he obeyed. His defence lies in the words " I saw the Lord." Such visions have been the inspiration and security of all faithful servants of God. Though alone in witnessing for God, they have the vision of the Lord beside them, and this makes all the difference. Seeing the Lord did more for Moses and Paul in a few minutes than did years of religious education and care. To the Christian Church of modern times the parable bears its precious moral. Material and worldly forces have become so established within the citadel that there are many and serious temptations to God's messengers to compromise. In the guise of true servants there are treacherous deceivers who urge the faithful servant to bow to their opinion by denying obedience to God's voice. We recall that the essence of all the temptations of Jesus Christ lay in the offers to Him of power and worship if He would but surrender. He warned His disciples against the leaven (the spirit of false teaching) of the Pharisees. He told them not to fear those who would cast them into prison or lay hands upon them, but to fear Him who had power over their souls. No wrong merits so great condemnation as an evil suggestion which is sugar-coated with a religious profession. Such a deceiving spirit passed through a crowd one day in Jerusalem, and the crowd were enticed and tricked into exclaiming " Crucify him! " and " We have no king but Caesar! "

If ever in history God's people needed careful shepherding, now is the time. We read that " when He saw the multitudes, He was moved with compassion on them, because they fainted and were scattered abroad, as sheep having no shepherd." Mat 9:36. As truly as there was need for fidelity and enthusiasm in Christ's time, so also to-day the compassion and love of Christ's ambassadors are needed in the world.

13. The Ploughman

CHAPTER XIII (d) “THE PLOUGHMAN”

“ GIVE ear and hear my voice; hearken and hear my word.

“ Does the ploughman plough all the day to sow? Does he lay open and break up his soil? When he has levelled its surface does he not scatter black cummin and sprinkle cummin, set the wheat in rows, the barley in marked-out order and rye in its borders? And his God trains him aright; He teaches him; for black cummin is not threshed with a sharp stone nor is a wagon-wheel turned about upon cummin. But black cummin is beaten out with a staff and cummin with a rod. Bread corn is beaten out because he will not ever be treading it out, and though he urge forward the wheel of his wagon and his horses, he does not crush it.

“ This also came forth from the Lord of Hosts.

He makes wisdom distinguished; He exalts understanding.” Isa 28:23-29. In justification of the inclusion of this homely agricultural song among the Parables of the Old Testament, reference need only be made to the Gospel of Mark 4:26-33, where Jesus is reported to have spoken in parables when He used forms of speech not dissimilar to that form which appears in the closing verses of Isaiah xxviii. Mark does not describe the parables as having been delivered in the form of narratives of fact, but rather as an appeal to the minds of Christ’s listeners. ’ So is the Kingdom of God, as if a man should cast seed into the ground...’ As Jesus applied the routine of agricultural labour to express a truth, even so in our parable did Isaiah also utilise it to show that each class of seed requires its own soil, treatment, harvest and threshing, and to direct the thought of his audience to God, whose wisdom is manifested in all the care and prevision which inspire the ploughman in his tasks. With a thrust which is straight and unerring he points the nation to God’s unfailing mercy and protection of those who trust in Him.

Commentators are almost unanimous in their appreciation of this parable alike for its song, its comfort and its lesson. There are divers opinions regarding its historical setting and textual associations, but in respect of its spiritual value and message there is agreement. Orelli regards the chapter as a gloomy discourse which closes with a sunbeam in the form of “ a calmlyconceived and instructive parable,” while Delitzsch says that Isaiah here proves himself a master of the mashal by giving a mashal-song, which is left for interpretation by his hearers.

God in its heart is the inspiration, key and director of all. The song’s theme revolves around revelations of God and of His wonderful goodness. The ploughman’s art is shown to be God-inspired, not self-created or self-suggested.

“ His God trains him aright.” God’s purposes are declared to be consistent with rational laws, and what is regarded as thus divinely provided in the simple functions of husbandry, is set forth as applicable in the life of nations and of individuals. Where men see chaos, upheaval, disaster, disappointment and decay, God works consistently towards a definite achievement. His methods

are not stereotyped but varied, just as the agriculturist must study seasons, seeds and soils as well as the different modes of treatment and development to get the best results.

Harvesting and threshing processes are also varied delicate grains will not be threshed with a sharp stone and the wagon-wheel will not be turned about upon them. In like manner God's dealings with the many types of men are shown to be exercised in accordance with human capacity and divine requirement. In order to receive from a nation or an individual that response to His love and care which God anticipates He deals with His people in accordance with natural and acquired endowments, opportunities and character.

Whatever may have been its historical background, the parable appears to have been written in defence of God's control and direction of national affairs. It is no merely modern complaint against God that He measures out His mercies unequally and unjustly. Some people are called upon to endure more suffering and loss than others, and there are many seemingly inconsistent circumstances. By means of the parable Isaiah indicates that in all God's dealings there is consistency of aim if not of method, and that God's works must be contemplated not by their divergent operations but by their ultimate purpose. Thus might men be encouraged to put their trust in God. For its practical information upon agricultural work, the parable has a special value quite apart from its parabolical meaning. It sheds light upon a domestic and social aspect of Hebrew life, which is nowhere else in the Bible so well portrayed. The opening clause arrests a modern reader by its question, " Does the ploughman plough all the day to sow? " This is doubtless a reference to the practice of sowing the seeds first and thereafter ploughing so as to cover the seeds as a protection against the ravages of insects and birds and as a means of conserving moisture for the seeds. The ploughshare did not go deep, and sometimes it became necessary to have more than one ploughing to secure a safe sowing. It is very doubtful if there was any harrowing in the modern sense of that word. The soil having been levelled in a simple and rather rough manner, the seed was sown according to its kind and covered in the process of subsequent ploughing. To conclude the first clause with the word ' day ' and carry forward the words * to sow ' into the next clause renders a more intelligible meaning which coincides with the Septuagint translation, " Does the ploughman plough all the day (i.e. continuously)? Does he make ready the sowing before the working of the soil? " Here we learn that God's plough must follow the sowing of the seeds in human hearts, and that what men may think will destroy will be for their protection and prosperity.

Each class of seed requires its own particular form of sowing in order that it may bear fruit.

Some seeds must be broadly scattered whereas others need only be slightly sprinkled black cummin is scattered and cummin is sprinkled. The former seed is supposed to have been a type of fennel-flower which was used for seasoning purposes by bakers, although some commentators have regarded it as black poppy seed.

Cummin is grown for use as a condiment. Other seeds such as barley, wheat and rye, which were more valuable and were sown in the winter, had to be laid in furrows by hand. This explains the term ' marked out ' because each seed had its own place in the row. Just as a heavier and rougher type of oats is frequently sown around fields of good grain in this country, so rye was set in the borders as a protection from birds, rodents and wild animals. The ploughman followed the sower and his plough turned over the soil upon the seeds. Unless given their particular forms of

treatment the seeds would not germinate properly, and from this fact the parable goes on to answer the natural questions, “ How does the agriculturist know all this? Who has taught him? “ The answer is that God has trained him, that the farmer depends upon God, and that his faith in God encourages him to sow the seeds. As with the sowing so it was with the harvesting and threshing. There cannot be similarity and identity of harvest processes, since what might suffice for one crop may be injurious to another. The harvest-period was usually free from rain, and threshing took place in the open air. Spread out upon the threshing-floor the finer crops were threshed by means of a flail or rod or by treading under foot; the coarser and heavier crops required either the threshingsledge or the threshing- wagon. The former consisted of wooden planks joined together, which had stones or knives set in the under-side, and it could be drawn by man or beast, usually beast. The latter was the ’ wagon-wheel,’ and to-day it consists of several parallel rollers each of which has three or four iron discs so arranged that the discs of one roller extend into the spaces left by the others. This explains the introduction of the words ’ wheel of the wagon ’ and ’ his horses,’ although some authorities omit reference to the horses and suggest a change of text. But the point of this threshing reference is quite clear. Under a process which might be expected to destroy it, the bread-corn (as distinguished from the spice-corn) is safe from injury. From an experience so simple and so common in a land of husbandry, there is no difficulty in deducing a spiritual lesson.

Since the husbandman knows this to be an instinct-experience given him by God, surely the God who has taught him and so planned to provide harvest fruits by means which would threaten to destroy them, is a God of such wisdom and understanding that man may say, “ Though He slay me yet will I trust in Him.” Not only is God’s wisdom unsearchable but His counsel to men is most wonderful and through them He exalts understanding. In his poem “ The Everlasting Mercy “ our Poet Laureate, Mr. John Masefield, describes a lesson derived from the ploughman’s task. He refers to Jesus as the “ ploughman of the sinner’s soul “ and indicates how necessary it becomes that the plough’s colter should be driven deep in certain lives before they can provide satisfactory fruit. When Saul Kane beheld an old ploughman at his task he meditated upon the parable of that task to his own soul. If our study of Isaiah’s parable has spoken a message to our souls regarding God’s wonderful and merciful works in our lives we shall henceforth “ welcome each rebuff “believing that “ all things work together for good to them that love God.”

14. The Great Eagles

CHAPTER XIV (e) “ THE GREAT EAGLES “

“ THE word of the Lord came unto me saying ’ Son of man, put forth a riddle and speak a parable unto the house of Israel; and thus shalt thou say Thus saith the Lord Jehovah.

1 The great eagle of the great wings and long pinion full of plumage of variegated hues came unto Lebanon and took the boughs of the cedar. He plucked off the head of its young shoots and carried it unto a land of merchandise.

He set it in a city of merchants and he took from the seed of the land and planted it in a field of seed. It took hold by many waters.

He set it a water-side plant and it sprouted and became a creeping vine of low stature, its branches turning towards him and its roots were under him. And it became a vine and brought forth branches and shot forth green boughs.

“ * There was also another great eagle of great wings and much plumage, and lo, this vine bent its roots towards him and set forth its branches to him that he might water it (from the bed of its planting). This was planted in a good field beside many waters in order that it should bear shoots and produce fruit and become an honourable vine. Say thou, Thus saith the Lord Jehovah; Shall it thrive? Shall he not dig up its roots and cut off its fruit so that it shall wither? All its freshspringing leaves shall wither and that without great force or many people to pluck it up from its roots. Yea, behold, planted, shall it prosper? Shall it not utterly wither as the east wind touches it? It shall wither upon the bed of its sprouting’.” Eze 17:1-10. This story appears in one of the most arresting chapters of the book of Ezekiel, containing as it does many unique Hebrew words which are found nowhere else in the Old Testament and some words which are peculiar to Ezekiel.

There is also in the story’s sequel a striking resemblance to the conclusion of Christ’s parable of the Mustard Seed wherein He speaks of the fowls of the air finding shelter in the shadow of the tree’s branches. Again, the true prophetic note rings throughout the story while we are provided with a vividly historical parabolical narrative which the prophet’s simple interpretation elucidates. There are textual and metaphorical difficulties, but the message is not obscured by them and we are left with a parable which was spoken for a momentous occasion of national responsibility and national decision. It indicates an attempt on the part of Ezekiel to save Jerusalem from destruction and to preserve the glory of Israel as the people of God. It affords a valuable glimpse of the true prophet of God as a man who is so concerned about the honour of his God that he comes as a fearless messenger to exhort, rebuke, warn and appeal. Another unusual feature of this chapter is its parabolical appendix (vs. 22-24) in which God announces what will be the ultimate conclusion to the story, a conclusion which finds its fullest consummation only in and through the gift of Jesus Christ and in the extension of His Kingdom throughout the world. We cannot trace any other historical application for the closing sentences of the chapter than that which is found in Him who is the Hope of the Ages. THE DATE

Most scholars suggest as the probable date of the parable a time within a few years before the destruction of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar in the year 587 B.C. Whether Ezekiel narrated his story in Babylon, where he shared captivity with some of his people, or spoke it in Jerusalem and Judah is a point which must be left undecided. In the former case he may have heard of the perfidy and disloyalty of King Zedekiah, and he may have had inner knowledge of the intentions of Nebuchadnezzar; in the latter he would speak with more immediate realisation of the impending doom; but the question of the prophet's domicile does not affect the value of the narrative because the interpretation of the parable leaves no doubt regarding the historical reference, and we are not justified in asserting that the parable was spoken after the destruction of the Holy City.

Attempts have been made to give a later date to the whole chapter on the ground that it is not a homogeneous work and that the closing verses, 22-24, must have been a later addition.

There appears to be no valid reason for thinking that the chapter was the work of more than one writer. It is definite that the thoughts if not the actual words of the closing verses were familiar in the time of Jesus and as words of prophecy they could be recorded five centuries, as easily as one century, before Christ. THE OCCASION When Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, overran Judah, he removed into captivity in Babylon the king, Jehoiachin, and all the chief men of Judah including the expert artisans and technicians. He set the king's uncle over Judah and gave him a new name, Zedekiah for Mattaniah. But he was to rule as a vassal under covenant to serve the king of Babylon faithfully so long as he was in possession of that territory. The country was sorely stricken, yet there were great hopes for the future, dependent upon diligence and fidelity. Indications given in the parable are to the effect that Zedekiah could and did prosper through his attachment to Babylon, although he was restricted in suzerainty and in scope for development.

Instead of being true to the covenant, he schemed an alliance with Hophra, the Pharaoh of Egypt, who failed in the end to render that aid which Zedekiah anticipated, and so the latter was left to incur punishment for his treachery and brought upon Jerusalem its destruction. Ezekiel is constrained to shew that this breach of covenant with Nebuchadnezzar was also a sin against God in whose name the covenant was drawn up and accepted.

God is revealed as the guiding power behind the national experience. Thus infidelity to Babylon's king is faithlessness towards God for which Judah must suffer. Breach of a covenant's sanctity merits judgment because a covenant is sacred not only before men but also before God. Had Zedekiah given heed to this parable, Jerusalem would probably have been saved, although it is obvious that the king had already turned his heart towards Egypt and begun his insurrection against Nebuchadnezzar. The parable assumes the natural consequences to such mistrust and perfidy, and it proclaims the doom of the city whilst it also promises a redemptive work of restoration and healing through which God's people will become a blessing to all nations. THE EAGLE The symbolism of the eagle need not be regarded either as an influence of Babylonish thought upon the prophet or as definitely Babylonish in its conception, because Assyria had its eagle-headed god, Nisroch, and in the Old Testament the eagle was a symbol of God's power and watchfulness. He bears His people on eagle's wings (Exo 19:4). He watcheth over His people even as an eagle stirreth up her nest, fluttereth over her young, spreadeth abroad her wings, taketh them, beareth them on her wings (Deut. xxxii. n, 12). As a royal bird the eagle was a suitable symbol for the King of Kings and for the rulers of great dominions. In such a sense the two

eagles are introduced in the parable. One is great, long-winged, rich in plumage and handsomely coloured, whereas the other is also great, longwinged and rich in plumage, but lacks the many colours of the former. One is * the great eagle ' and the other is simply ' a great eagle/ The great eagle symbolises Nebuchadnezzar and the might of Babylon whose dominion held sway over many nations with their varied languages and customs. Egypt is the second eagle. Its power had been reduced and its territory seriously diminished after the battle of Charchemish in 605 B.C. when Nebuchadnezzar inflicted upon Egypt a great defeat and extended his own rule through Assyria right to the Egyptian boundary at the Wady of Arish. In the year 597 B.C, Nebuchadnezzar, the great eagle, carried into captivity King Jehoiachin of Judah with all his best men and the leaders in various spheres of life, leaving " the poorest sort of the people of the land." The captives are the boughs or " the picked parts " of the cedar of Lebanon and the King is " the head of its young shoots "as described in the parable. Jehoiachin had reigned only three months and he was eighteen years old, truly the head of Judah's young shoots.

LEBANON AND ITS CEDARS Reference has been made to the Cedars of Lebanon in the story of the Thistle and Cedar.

Here it need merely be stated that the woodwork of the royal palace at Jerusalem was of cedarwood, and that * Lebanon ' was a term used to denote Jerusalem by reason of the presence in that city of so much work in cedarwood. One of the greatest of Solomon's palaces was known as ' the house of the forest of Lebanon.' Because of its height and stately appearance the Cedar of Lebanon symbolised the royal house and supplied the metaphor which identified it with the king as the highest in social rank. A special feature of its life and growth is that it must have dry soil, and will not thrive beside water. There was, therefore, very sound reason in the action of the great eagle who took of the seed of the land and planted it as a ' water-side plant,' not as a cedar. THE VINE

Without any attempt to explain the absurdity of an eagle having conscious knowledge of arboriculture, or of a vine possessing the wit to turn towards a particular class of eagle although it has been demonstrated scientifically that plants have nerves and that bees and birds play an important part in the development of plants we learn that this ' seed of the land ' was set where it had a chance of prosperous growth. It would not become a great vine, but as a low, creeping vine it might yet bear a fullness of fruit, becoming an honourable vine.

Nebuchadnezzar appointed Zedekiah, a native of the land, to rule over Judah within the restricted limits that whilst he was a humble and feudatory dependent monarch, he might still enjoy happiness and flourish. At first the result was very promising because * the vine brought forth branches and shot forth green boughs; " but that success engendered conceit in Zedekiah and he began to be restless under his covenant with Nebuchadnezzar. He chafed and squirmed, then looked for a new superior by directing his thoughts towards an alliance with Egypt. A relationship with that great country was entered upon "lo, this vine bent its roots towards him " and emphasis may be laid upon that word ' bent,' which signifies a yearning attitude. It pined for the other eagle like a thirsty plant, when close beside it were many waters in the " bed of its plantation." SHALL IT THRIVE? This question explains the use of the word ' riddle ' in verse 2, and the purpose of the parable is to answer the question by showing that just as Nebuchadnezzar will not tolerate such treachery and perfidy, so, too, God will not fail to visit His wrath upon the covenant-breaking king.

Zedekiah had pledged himself to fidelity in God's name, and the God whom he had wronged would be avenged. The description of that issue is very graphic. The vine must be uprooted and its fruit stripped off; a withering east wind will devastate its fresh, sprouting leaves, which will crumble into dust. Even in that place where it was flourishing " upon the bed of its sprouting " it must wither. Zedekiah's prosperity was brief. Egypt failed to support him, and his base ingratitude and unfaithfulness received their merit. He had apparently not known what had already been revealed to the prophets that Egypt's power was waning, and that help from that direction was not possible. His sons were slain before his eyes. He himself was blinded, bound in brass fetters and borne away captive to Babylon. Jeremiah asserts that Zedekiah was weak-willed, vacillating and unable to withstand his princes. Because of his selfish nature he had no serious concern for the nation's welfare and he acted falsely and deceitfully with those who trusted him.

COVENANT SANCTITIES

Zedekiah's disloyalty affected more than himself. It brought a nation and its proud city to the dust. National covenants are often made to depend upon the will of one man or a small coterie of men. Failure to implement the conditions of the covenant may plunge thousands into misery. History is replete with instances of such broken covenants, and rarely has the destroyer of a sacred pledge been known to escape the evil consequences of such an act of insincerity. Nations have wallowed in warfare, social conditions have been upheaved, domestic relationships have been devastated in consequence of disloyalty to solemn agreements. In very recent years the outbreak of a worldwide war costing ten million lives, with the additional losses and sorrows which follow inevitably upon war, resulted from breach of a sacred covenant. Movements such as the League of Nations may accomplish much good for mankind if the sanctity of covenants international, personal and social can be brought home to everyone. But no league can substitute God or usurp His supreme command. Wherever His Holy Name is invoked in sealing a covenant He becomes the Supreme King and Judge of men's acts. He can cause the very wrath of men to praise Him, and He can bring to naught the evil works of darkness. Inspiration and courage are born when men feel that loyalty to God's covenant must simply must, because of God's own being and nature work out for good to mankind. THE PLANTING OF THE LORD In contrast to the failure of the seed which Nebuchadnezzar set, Ezekiel was moved to tell of the plant which God set. The chapter which opens with judgment concludes with mercy, tenderness, promise and growing beauty. There is a touch of the Eternal Love of God in the closing verses which must not be missed. There is a reversion to the thought of a cedar and its topmost young twigs. From the latter God selects a tender shoot which is planted, not by water, but upon a prominent hill where it will thrive and grow, true to its species as a good cedar. Its branches will shelter all sorts of birds, and this work of the Lord will be known to all the trees. Thus did God promise to the house of Judah a Saviour under the spreading branches of whose Church all nations of the earth will come to rest and all nations will behold the amazing works of God. " The kingdom of heaven is like to a grain of mustard seed, which a man took, and sowed in his field: which indeed is the least of all seeds; but when it is grown, it is the greatest among herbs, and becometh a tree, so that the birds of the air come and lodge in the branches thereof." (Mat 13:31-32).

Chapter 15

Conclusion

CONCLUSION THIS study of the Old Testament Parables could not conclude with a better promise and brighter hope than are contained in the closing verses of Ezekiel xvii. We have reached the stage where we anticipate a new revelation which will fulfil God's promises. This new revelation will be more precious to us on account of what the old one has meant to our souls. Doubtless, in the course of reading this book we have traced a historical process of divine revelation and of human development which constrains us to await patiently and wistfully the coming of Him of whom it was written " Without a parable spake He not unto them."

We have journeyed along a road upon which we have met with men not altogether unlike ourselves in their desires and practices. We have been privileged to behold moral and spiritual conflicts in the souls of men. We have discerned the wondrous works of God in His dealings with individuals and nations, and we have seen the gradual unfolding of the unfailing love of God.

Looking back over the pages of this book we may conclude that its parables of fact deal with moral issues, and its parables of fancy with the spiritual relationship between God and man.

If our study has deepened our interest in the Old Testament, and given us cause for a fuller appreciation of the parables spoken by Jesus, we shall not have read in vain.

Printed in Great Britain by the Devonshire Press, Torquay. BY THE SAME AUTHOR THE MODERN CONFLICT LIGHT FROM THE EPISTLE OF

ST. JAMES Crown 8vo. Cloth boards. 35:6d. net.

" A useful expansion of one of the finest portions of Scripture."

Glasgow Herald.

" An exposition of the Epistle of St. James which possesses several striking merits. Its style is terse and vivid; its outlook is distinctly evangelical; and its applications are exceedingly practical and up-to-date." The Scotsman.

" There can be nothing but praise for its scholarship and enthusiasm. ' ' Dundee A dvertiser.

" They are worth publishing. Mr. MacDougall has studied the Epistle, and he has interpreted it for his own times. "Expository Times.

" This study of the Epistle is throughout sensible, and a type of really useful Bible Class teaching." Life and Work.

" Anyone who desires to see how the early Church applied the Sermon on the Mount to contemporary conditions, and what light the Epistle of James can throw on present-day life and problems, will be well advised to buy this valuable book." The Presbyterian Messenger.

“ The addresses reveal careful study of the Epistle, and expound its teachings with felicity and vigour.” Methodist Recorder.

“ The author is as frank, fearless and sincere as James himself.”

Aberdeen Free Press.

JAMES CLARKE & CO.. LIMITED 9 ESSEX STREET, LONDON, W 100:2