

THE HEBREW PROPHETS AND NATIONAL CRISES

THE subject of the Hebrew Prophets and National Crises is one that could hardly be exhausted in a book of slender bulk. I can, therefore, only sketch out some outline of this great and, at the present time, very important matter.

First of all, we have to consider the wonderful phenomenon of these Prophets. It is not just a natural thing. It has a supernatural element, made up of all that is natural. The supernatural is not built *on* the natural, but *with* it. To some, the prophecies, as recorded, would seem to be nothing more than a very fine forecast by one who paid attention to the laws of nature; just as you might account merely by chemical laws for the writing which a person makes on a page, but that would not account for everything, all the intellectual and spiritual values, contained in it.

Another unique element is that, in almost every page, there is a denunciation of the people that recorded those things. You have the phenomenon of a little people transmitting to posterity only one group of writings (I do not think we have any other Hebrew literature of the time of Isaias), and those writings a most appalling account of their own doings. Now that is a very strange phenomenon because, in point of fact, if you asked England to-night to set up a book in English about the size of the Bible, and to transmit it to posterity, what would they put in it? Would it be dominated by the idea that the English people had been rather scandalous and had done everything wrong? It would be quite impossible for any country, as such, to do that. In this Book we have that as a phenomenon to be thought over again and again, a phenomenon which makes these books, written by a self-accusing people, of extreme value for all students of human nature.

Have you ever thought of the training of a modern statesman? Have you ever asked what form of training a modern statesman has? Perhaps it would be considered an altogether impertinent question. It is a very remarkable thing that that art, which would require the greatest training, seems to have least. No art is so difficult as the art of guiding human beings. As they say in my Profession: 'One soul is a very large parish.' Imagine the guidance of some forty million people in the hands of men who have had no preparation. The only training they have is in History; even that is now fading into the background. Statesmen have been known to be chosen because they have been very successful in the steel business, or have made a corner in wheat. Then they are sent out as foreign ambassadors! Yet the slender history they did study was a sort of preparation. It did reveal the operations of human nature.

Now the prophets were, in a sense, experts in History. If you know History well, you can prophesy quite a number of things. Human nature does not change. But the History the statesmen of to-day learnt left out the most important elements in History, the Existence of God and of Free Will; and it is very remarkable how all people nowadays, appealing to be reformers, generally wish to give some sort of interpretation of History. Karl Marx gave an interpretation of History with those two great elements left out. But on these historical principles of his it was quite superfluous to write the book. Modern lectures on the Sacred Scriptures seem to have as their chief aim to prove that the Sacred Scriptures are not worth lecturing about! History, without a study of God and Free Will in it, is like *Hamlet* with the Prince of Denmark left out.

Hence these old Prophets had the great quality of History. They believed in a good God, a God who was always good. The Pagans had no God. They only had gods, and goddesses. The God of the Prophets was the First Cause Who made everything, and He was good. He was

not capricious, but just and merciful. He made all men; and made them to have Free Will. But their Free Will was not always a good will. It could be a bad will. As Nature, and as it came from God, it was good; but it could be put to a bad use. Free Will, as Free Will, is quite good; but our free willing may be bad will.

These Prophets were acquainted with the history of their own people. They understood that God was in it, and that Free Will was in it. By that alone they were qualified to give an expert opinion on the great Crises.

I will put down the three great National Crises, which are always existent.

**RELIGION.
RICHES AND POVERTY.
GOVERNMENT.**

In setting down these three Crises, I do not say that when these crises occur they are observable by those that cause them or experience them. In the Crisis of 1870, when the Elementary Education Bill came into force, the only group of citizens who made any resistance to the principles of the Bill were the Catholics. Then, for the first time in the history of this country, we had a thing called Education which, in the end, was going to weaken and perhaps dethrone the authority of the parent. We now have millions of children with mechanised minds. I would rather, at the age of 72, bump my way home from Hyde Park, as I have done and am going to do again, than have a mechanised mind. Even in matters of health, the crisis is not when the lump appears on the outside, or when there is a haemorrhage, but at some time when nobody noticed anything; just a slight swelling here, which could easily be overlooked.

The Prophets' wills trained their minds, so that they saw Crises, and they went to complain to God: ' They are making fun of me. They say, "All this prophecy—and nothing happens! "'

The Prophets had the right idea about Religion. They never just glorified church-going. Isaias jumps right into it:

I, 11. 'To what purpose do you offer Me the multitude of your victims, said the Lord. (13) Offer sacrifice no more in vain. Incense is an abomination to Me. The new moons and the sabbaths and other festivals I will not abide. Your assemblies are wicked. (14) My soul hateth your new moons and your solemnities.

I like that! He is speaking in the open, like some street-corner orator in the East End.

(15) And when you multiply prayer, I will not hear.

When our Blessed Lord speaks of Prayer, He says: 'You have not asked in the name of Christ. You have not protected the widows and the fatherless.' There is Religion—the doing of things. It is not church-going, or psalm-singing—though these are quite compatible with Religion.

The Prophets were right. All Crises are crises of Religion. They saw that going off the other way, the way of irreligion, would mean the destruction of the people. Their Religion was based on God Who had a good character, and Who stood firmly by the Moral Law. All these idols were not gods. When the people gave up worshipping the true God, there would have to be some form of national religion to take the place of the true Religion. Now there is an attempt to establish an invertebrate national religion in Germany, and an invertebrate national irreligion in Russia. Which of the two is the more deadly and anti-social, I do not know.

In *Baruch* VI, 5, you will see that the Prophet makes fun of the gods men were making. To-day, people have mascots, and we have to stop their making them into idols.

POVERTY.

The Prophets were quite sound on the Crisis of Rich and Poor. A complete study of that would be simply amazing. If you begin with Isaias and work through the

other Prophets, you will see the same idea running through.

Isaias i, 17. Relieve the oppressed. Judge for the fatherless. Defend the widow. (19) If you be willing and will hearken to Me, you shall eat the good things of the land. How is the faithful city, that was full of judgment, become a harlot?

Ah! the City and the Land. That is *Isaias*.

Then, in that Prophet which we find placed last in the Old Testament:

Malachi iii, 4. And I will come to you in judgment and will be a speedy witness against sorcerers and adulterers and false swearers, and them that oppress the hireling in his wages, the widows and the fatherless. (7) For, from the days of your fathers, you have departed from My ordinances.

God's ordinances were the widows and the fatherless. If men came to Him with their prayers and sacrifices they must pay proper wages to the hireling; they must not foster the unjust relation of human beings to one another.

And, again, see the last of the Prophets, *St. James*, who has written a glorious Epistle, full of fire, and whom I regard as a Prophet:

James v, 1. Go to, now, ye rich men, weep and howl in your miseries, which shall come upon you. (4) Behold the hire of the labourers who have reaped down your fields, which by fraud has been kept back by you, crieth, and the cry of them hath entered into the ears of the Lord of Sabaoth. (6) You have condemned and put to death the Just One; and He resisted you not.

Our dear Lord was put to death by rich men! *St. James* says so. I should not dare to have said all that out of my own head; or even out of my own heart.

Here is the great Crisis of Poverty and Riches. It is the great crisis now; the greatest of all in the world, far greater than the War. The War may probably make it worse; I do not know. It is a far greater crisis than the Siegfried Line.

St. James goes on (v, 7): Behold the husbandman waiteth for the precious fruit of the earth.

Ever the Land! I can't go into the Land Crisis very much. It is behind every line of Amos, who gives us an almost photographic description of what happened in this England, whose land-workers once made England the Garden of Europe.

The Prophets were of all classes; the four Major Prophets were, I think, all of noble birth. Some were Priests. But Amos was a herdsman; his examples, taken from the shepherd craft, are characteristic and most powerful.

Amos v, 11. Therefore, because you robbed the poor and took the choice prey from him, you shall build houses with square stone and shall not dwell in them.

These houses of squared stone must have been very costly. When people get more money, they usually move into bigger houses, generally much more uncomfortable. When people robbed the English monasteries of their lands they built enormous houses; you can get them now for a song. They overbuilt themselves, and found them too expensive. The aristocracy came, when the lands were grabbed, and built great houses, with great desmesnes around them, which were in the beginning expensive and, in the end, impossible.

Amos v, 12. Because I know your manifold crimes and your grievous sins; enemies of the just, taking bribes, and oppressing the poor in the gate.

'The gate' means the LAW, which should be a defence of the poor against the rich, and not a defence of the rich against the poor.

There is finally the lovely passage at the end: (v, 23), 'Take away from Me the tumult of thy songs'—all those beautiful choral melodies. Amos, the herdsman, is not far from Bethlehem, the home of carolling, where the Angels gave Christmas carols to the great kingdom of song.

So there is the crisis of Poverty and Riches, and with it the great crisis of Liberty. If the Holy Father spoke of a small number of very rich laying upon the poor a yoke no better than that of slavery, it is quite evident that he was referring to Liberty and Slavery—economic slavery. In neglecting the Pope's prophetic warnings we are now heading for the yoke of absolute slavery. To prevent that ultimate slavery, the Pope enters the sphere of Politics, but only with a principle of Ethics. He is obliged to enter, because he knows that, although not all Ethics are political, all Politics should be ethical.

The second great Crisis, then, is that of Poverty and Riches, with its sequel, Slavery.

The third great Crisis is the Crisis of GOVERNMENT. Who is going to govern? I have always kept aloof from Politics. The arrangement of the world is in such a tangled fashion, you do not know where you are. The ethical aspects of the present War are very difficult indeed, very intricate. I simply obey the lawful ecclesiastical and civil authority. I do not criticise. The world is perishing because it has lost the idea of authority; with a consequent lack of fullness of true criticism and famine of true obedience.

In the first book of Kings you read of the people wanting a King; it does not just mean a King, but a Governor, some sort of totalitarian person, the Strong Man. I do not like the strong man, or the strong woman. I like the good man and the good woman. What is the good of being strong if you had?

I Kings viii, 4. Then all the ancients of Israel, being assembled, came to Samuel to Ramatha. (5) And they said to him, . . . Make us a king to judge us, as all nations have.

This God of Israel has such a sense of humour! He says: 'Let them have their will; soon they will be sorry for it!' They are going to make the State their god. This man-made god will enslave his makers,

I Kings viii, 11. This will be the right of the king that shall reign over you. He will take your sons and put them in his chariots, and will make them his horsemen and his running footmen to run before his chariots.

Conscription!

(12). And he will appoint of them to be his tribunes, and centurions, and to plough his fields, and to reap his corn, and to make him arms and chariots.

Armament Firms!

(14). And he will take your fields and your vineyards and your best oliveyards, and give them to his servants.

The Ministry of Agriculture! Big-scale training is the ruin of Agriculture.

Within two generations, the King had killed the nation.

There are wonderful things, too, in the Prophets about Alliances. The whole question is one of Religion. The Prophets warned the people against making Alliances. On Christmas Day, in his Broadcast Message, His Majesty the King spoke of just taking the hand of God, and being thereby safe. The Prophets warn the people against trusting in man, without trust in God.

Sometimes, when their defeat is inevitable—the chastisement of God—Jeremias recommends them to keep quiet. But they must not compromise in the matter of religion. Political forms do not matter if there is freedom for God, for what is *primary*—God, family life, liberty. Jeremias has that last and most difficult task of reconciling them to take the state of subjugation voluntarily. He is not exactly a Pacifist, but something very amazing. Our Lord seemed to accentuate that. He did not speak a word against the Roman occupation. When they asked Him about the authority due to Caesar He gave no direct answer; it was not His duty to tell them about civil authority. He said, in effect: ‘Gentlemen, the question of accepting Caesar or not is your affair, not Mine. As you are using Roman

money, making money out of them, you seem to have already answered the question you wish Me to answer! ’

You see the great Prophets dealing with the greatest of all national crises; RELIGION and the CLASSES; and those classes are, of course, accidental. God did not make rich and poor. Sin made them. Authority and subjection are, in a sense, made by God, but not riches and poverty. Men are not to be called rich because more things are necessary to them for fulfilling their duty. The Prophets deal with the great Crisis of Poverty unflinchingly; and then that generally leads on, as it is leading on now, to the question of government. Some people will see a disease and be able to describe it most accurately; then they think they can prescribe the remedy, and therefore they will change the form of government, catastrophically, dramatically, with human blood.

The prudent thing is to see how little you can pull down. The old is better. It has lasted.

Thus imperfectly I have suggested some aspects of this great question of the Prophets in National Crises. These Prophets, seeking to serve God and their birth-land by the highest truth, were granted by God visions into what was coming because their vision was fixed in the past. To see God in the past is almost as much a prophetic gift as to see God in the future.

So, too, in our own lives we can see in the past His watching over us and loving us, even in the day when we were very wilful and wandering, and had left Him. Perhaps it needs more childlike Faith to see Him there, than in the present and the future.

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