

Masterpieces of Hebrew Literature

X. The Comfort of Jerusalem

Isaiah 40.

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THE THOUGHT.

THE chapter deals with the message of comfort to those who have for a dejected and hopeless people who have been sharply and for long years penalized for national sin. It does not matter much whether the passage is read as the utterance of the prophet Isaiah in anticipation both of the coming suffering and of the final far-off relief of his beloved Judah, or read with the higher critics, as the production of the "Second Isaiah" or "Great Unknown" who is supposed to have written about one hundred and fifty years after Isaiah's day, when the long night of the Babylonian captivity was about to end through Cyrus' conquest of Babylonia. However read, the chapter is undoubtedly a message of comfort to a people who have lost both heart and hope. Its theme is the *dependability of Jehovah*—His sure might, and the unwearied faithfulness of His mercy. Indeed, the whole thought of the chapter might well be summed up in the words of the familiar hymn:

"He is able; He is willing;
Doubt no more."

Assuming then that this is a prophetic message delivered for the encouragement of the exiles in Babylonia, a brief glance at these latter will light up the verses of our chapter wonderfully.

Two very strong fears had been developed in the hearts of the exiles. There were some who feared that the gods of the heathen had proved after all to be too much for Jehovah; it was hard for them to otherwise account for the long-continued triumph of the heathen, for the destruction of the temple, and for the seemingly irrevocable downfall of Judah. But there were others who still believed in the power of Jehovah, but who had come to fear that He no longer cared—that He had cast off His people, and had forgotten His promise to be gracious. And there were some in whose tortured minds the two fears alternated. This chapter is the prophet's inspired answer to those who thus "dwell in the dust." Its first great message is that it is the fulness of time, and the seemingly quiescent Jehovah who has really been responsible for all their sufferings, is about to step in for their relief. The years of national discipline for sin are accomplished, and God is about to unbar the door of their chamber of discipline; no more divine denunciation, no more condemnation, no more pain, but comfort and cheer. "Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem," the prophet hears Jehovah say, "and cry unto her that her warfare is accomplished, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she hath received of the Lord's hand double for all her sins." "The mouth of the Lord hath spoken" a proclamation for the construction of a royal pathway for His use when He comes to visit His people and to lead them through the wilderness to their Judean home again. There may be no well-founded hope in man, nor in themselves, for the exiles, because "all flesh is grass," but it is not on man but on the word of God the disheartened exiles are to build again their trust, and "the word of our God shall stand forever."

Let the prophet, then, as tidings-bringer, climb some high mountain, and cry with loud voice to far-off Jerusalem and to the cities of Judah, "Behold your God"—not now the God of vengeance and of punishment, nor the vanquished

God of their fear, but the "Mighty One" who is also so wondrously tender and compassionate that in the long wearying homeward journey to Jerusalem:

"He shall feed His flock like a shepherd;
He shall gather the lambs in His arm,
And carry them in His bosom,
And shall gently lead those that give suck."

But fears such as possessed the Hebrew people in Babylon do not die easily. They are indeed more than one killing; so require the prophet turns in verse 12 to point out how the creative power of Jehovah illustrates His providential or governmental might. Upon what human will or advice, he asks, did Jehovah wait when He measured the waters in the hollow of His infinite hand, and meted out the heavens with a span, and weighed the mountains in His divine scales? Will He now have to wait upon the will of the nations, or be under the necessity of winning their consent before He can bring back His expatriated people?

"Behold the nations are as a drop of a bucket, and are counted as the small dust of the balance; behold he taketh up the isles as a very little thing."

The boasted power of Babylonia will not be able to withstand Him, for "All nations are as nothing before him; they are counted to him less than nothing, and vanity."

Let not the exiles think that these idol gods of Babylon, with which they have become familiar, adequately set forth divine might. They are but the sorry works of men's hands. It is Jehovah's power that reveals itself in the stupendous works of Nature, and it is His might also that operates in the kingdom of men. It is He and He only "that bringeth princes to nothing"; He only "maketh the judges of the earth as vanity" . . . "Moreover he bloweth upon them and they wither, and the whirlwind taketh them away."

Jehovah, indeed, is *The Incomparable One*, both in His might and in the minuteness of His care:

"Lift up your eyes on high and see who created these (the heavenly bodies), that bringeth out their host by number; He calleth them all by name, by the greatness of his might, and for that he is strong in power, *not one is lacking.*"

Let not Jacob (i.e., the people of Judah) think then that their "way is hid from Jehovah," or that He no longer cares:

"The everlasting God, the Lord, the Creator of the ends of the earth fainteth not, neither is weary; there is no searching of his understanding. He giveth power to the faint."

Youth's strength spends itself, and comes at last to naught, but he whose strength comes from waiting upon God is perennially strong, for his strength renews itself from the exhaustless storehouse of divine energy. *Let Judah only believe; all things are possible to those who believe.*

THE LITERARY FORM.

Such is the comforting message of this notable chapter. But to us, in this study, the paramount object of interest is supposed to be, not the message, but the literary form in which the message is couched. And yet the beauty of the form

could not have been brought out better than by a simple modernizing of its thought, such as has been attempted above. Prof. Moulton thinks that we have in this chapter the prelude to what he calls "The Rhapsody of Zion Redeemed"—the Rhapsody extending from chapter 40 to the end of our book of Isaiah. He uses the term "rhapsody" to describe a type of Hebrew literature which has no exact parallel in either classical or modern times; a type of literature indeed with perhaps a dramatic element paramount in it, but which nevertheless embodies practically every other kind of literary element as well. It embraces dialogue, monologue, scenic description, the lyric song, oratorical discourse, etc.—all fused together so as to make a distinctly new literary product. A full treatment of this rhapsodic form in Hebrew literature will be found in Prof. Moulton's "The Literary Study of the Bible," chapter xviii. Its nature will, however, be sufficiently apparent from a glance at his treatment of our chapter in his "Modern Reader's Bible."

First he gives to verses 1 to 11 the title "Prelude.—A Cry of Comfort to Jerusalem." Then he analyses the chapter from the rhapsodic viewpoint as follows:

Jehovah—"Comfort ye, comfort ye, etc. (verses 1 and 3).

A voice of one crying—"Prepare ye in the wilderness the way of the Lord," etc. (verses 3 to 5).

A second voice (in the distance)—"Cry! *A despairing voice*"—"What shall I cry? All flesh is grass," etc. (verses 6 and 7).

The second voice—"The grass withereth But the word of our God shall stand forever" (verse 8).

Fourth voice (still more distant)—"Oh thou that tellest good tidings to Zion, Get thee up," etc. (verse 9).

Fifth voice—"Behold, the Lord God will come as a mighty one," etc. (verses 10 and 11).

The remaining part of the chapter (verses 12 to 31) he divides into—*Visions 1*—The Servant of Jehovah Delivered from Bondage.—Introduction.

A reading of the passage by the help of the above analysis will greatly enhance its force and clear up much that seems hazy in our ordinary English versions. It will be noticed that Prof. Moulton interprets the words, "The voice of one that crieth in the wilderness" (verse 3), "The voice said" (verse 6), and also the words, "And he said" (verse 6) as a kind of stage directions, not properly speaking as parts of the rhapsody itself.

FURTHER LITERARY FEATURES.

The rhetoric, too, of the chapter is superb and varied. One might write a long essay on its figures of speech and its felicitous expressions. Could the statoriness of things be better described than in the sixth and seventh verses? What a fine apostrophe we have in verse 9, and how effectively the prophet uses the rhetorical question in verses 12 to 13, and again in verses 21 and 25? The irony of the description of the making of an idol in verse 19 is memorable, and the description of the Incomparable God in verses 22 to 25 is beyond praise. Most Bible readers in whose memory the beauties of this chapter linger like a lovely melody, and who recall the later utterances of this "rhapsody" (for instance in chapter 53) will agree that what ever the unquestioned excellences of the earlier chapters of Isaiah may be, Prof. Moulton is right when he says that nowhere else in the literature of the world have so many colossal great ideas been brought together within the limits of a single work as one finds in this Rhapsody of the Redeemed, of which our chapter forms the striking introductory part.