

LECTURE III.

THE PROPHET—HIS YOUTH AND HIS CALL.

JEREMIAH was born soon after 650 B.C. of a priestly house at Anathoth, a village in the country of Benjamin near Jerusalem. Just before his birth Egypt and the small states of Palestine broke from allegiance to Assyria. War was imminent, and it may have been because of some hope in Israel of Divine intervention that several children born about the time received the name Yirmyahu—*Yahweh hurls* or *shoots*.¹ The boy's name and his father's, Hilki'ah, *Yahweh my portion*,² are tokens of the family's loyalty to the God of Israel, at a time when the outburst in Jewry of a very different class of personal names betrays on the part of many a lapse from the true faith, and when the loyal remnant of the people were being persecuted by King Manasseh. Probably the family were descended from Eli. For

¹ (1) Jeremiah of Libnah, father of Hamutal, II. Kings xxiii. 31 ; xxiv. 18 ; (2) Jeremiah, father of Jaazaniah, the Rechabite, Jer. xxxv. 3 ; (3) Jeremiah the prophet, son of Hilki'ah.

² Not to be confounded with the temple-priest, Hilki'ah, who was concerned with the finding of the Law.

Abiathar, the last of that descent to hold office as Priest of the Ark, had an ancestral estate at Anathoth, to which he retired upon his dismissal by Solomon.¹ The child of such a home would be brought up under godly influence and in high family traditions, with which much of the national history was interwoven. It may have been from his father that Jeremiah gained that knowledge of Israel's past, of her ideal days in the desert, of her subsequent declensions, and of the rallying prophecies of the eighth century, which is manifest in his earlier Oracles. Some have claimed a literary habit for the stock of Abiathar.² Yet the first words of God to Jeremiah—*before I formed thee in the body I knew thee, and before thou camest forth from the womb I hallowed thee*³—as well as the singular originality he developed, rather turn us away from his family traditions and influence.

What is more significant, for its effects appear over all his earlier prophecies, is the country-side on which the boy was born and reared.

'Anathoth, which still keeps its ancient name 'Anata, is a little village not four miles north-north-east of Jerusalem, upon the first of the rocky shelves by which the central range of Palestine declines through desert to the valley of the Jordan. The village is hidden from the main road between Jerusalem and the North, and lies

¹ I. Kings ii. 26 f.

² Duhm, p. 3.

³ Jer. i. 5.

on no cross-road to the East. One of its influences on the spirit of its greatest son was its exposure to the East and the Desert. The fields of Anathoth face the sunrise and quickly merge into the falling wilderness of Benjamin. It is the same open, arid landscape as that on which several prophets were bred: Amos a few miles farther south at Tekoa, John Baptist, and during His Temptation our Lord Himself. The tops of the broken desert hills to the east are lower than the village. The floor of the Jordan valley is not visible, but across its felt gulf the mountains of Gilead form a lofty horizon.

The descending foreground with no shelter against the hot desert winds, the village herds straying into the wilderness, the waste and crumbling hills shimmering in the heat, the open heavens and far line of the Gilead highlands, the hungry wolves from the waste and lions from the jungles of Jordan are all reflected in Jeremiah's poems:—

Light o' heel young camel,
Zig-zagging her tracks,
Heifer gone to school to the desert—
In the heat of her passion,
Snapping the breeze in her lust,
Who is to turn her?

Wind off the glow of the bare desert heights,
Direct on my people,

Neither to winnow nor to sift,
In full blast it meets me.

A lion from the jungle shall smite,
A wolf from the wastes undo them,
The leopard shall prowl round their towns,
All faring forth shall be torn.

Even the stork in the heavens
Knoweth her seasons,
And dove, swift and swallow
Keep time of their coming.

Is there no balm in Gilead,
No healer there? ¹

We need not search the botany of that province for the suggestion of this last verse. Gilead was the highland margin of the young prophet's view, his threshold of hope. The sun rose across it.

The tribal territory in which Anathoth lay was Benjamin's. Even where not actually desert the bleak and stony soil accords with the character given to the tribe and its few historical personages. *Benjamin shall ravine as a wolf.*² Of Benjamin were the mad King Saul, the cursing Shimei, Jeremiah's persecutors in Anathoth, and the other Saul who breathed threatenings and slaughter against the Church—while Jeremiah himself, in his moods of despair, seems to have caught the temper of the

¹ ii. 23, 24; iv. 11; v. 6; viii. 7, 22.

² Gen. xlix. 27.

tribe among whom his family dwelt. Whether in the land or in its sons it was hard, thorny soil that needed deep ploughing.¹ It was, too, as Isaiah had predicted, the main path of invasion from the North,² by Ai, Migron, Michmash, the Pass, Geba, Ramah, Gibeah of Saul, Laish, and *poor* Anathoth herself. It had been the scene of many massacres, and above all of the death of the Mother of the people, who returns to bewail their new disasters :—

A voice in Ramah is heard, lamentation
 And bitterest weeping,
 Rachel beweeeping her children,
 And will not be comforted,
 For they are not.³

The cold northern rains and the tears of a nation's history alike swept these bare uplands. The boy grew up with many ghosts about him—not Rachel's only but the Levite and his murdered wife, the slaughtered troops at Gibeah and Rimmon, Saul's sullen figure, Asahel stricken like a roe in the wilderness of Gibeon, and the other nameless fugitives, whom through more than one page of the earlier books we see cut down among the rocks of Benjamin.

The empty, shimmering desert and the stony land thronged with such tragedies—Jeremiah

¹ iv. 3.

² Is. x. 28-32.

³ xxxi. 15.

was born and brought up on the edge between them.

It was a nursery not unfit for one, who might have been (as many think), the greatest poet of his people, had not something deeper and wider been opened to him, with which Anathoth was also in touch. The village is not more than an hour's walk from Jerusalem. Social conditions change little in the East; then, as now, the traffic between village and city was daily and close—country produce taken to the capital; pottery, salted fish, spices, and the better cloths brought back in exchange. We see how the history of Jerusalem may have influenced the boy. Solomon's Temple was nearly four hundred years' old. There were the city walls, some of them still older, the Palace and the Tombs of the Kings—perhaps also access to the written rolls of chroniclers and prophets. Above all, Anathoth lay within the swirl of rumour of which the capital was the centre. Jerusalem has always been a tryst of the winds. It gathers echoes from the desert far into Arabia, and news blown up and down the great roads between Egypt and Damascus and beyond to the Euphrates; or when these roads are deserted and men fear to leave their villages, news vibrating as it vibrates only in the tremulous East, from hamlet to hamlet and camp to camp across incredible spaces. As one has finely said of a rumour of invasion:—

I saw the tents of Cushán in affliction,
The curtains of Midian's land were trembling.¹

To the north lay the more fruitful Ephraim—more fruitful and more famous in the past than her sister of Benjamin, but now in foreign hands, her own people long gone into exile. It was natural that her fate should lie heavy on the still free but threatened homes of Benjamin, whose northern windows looked towards her; and that a heart like Jeremiah's should exercise itself upon God's meaning by such a fate and the warning it carried for the two surviving tribes.² Moreover, Shiloh lay there, Shiloh where Eli and other priestly ancestors had served the Ark in a sanctuary now ruined.³

It was, too, across Ephraim with its mixed population in touch with the court and markets of Nineveh, that rumours of war usually reached Benjamin and Judah:—

Hark! They signal from Dan,
Mount Ephraim echoes disaster.⁴

After a period of peace, and as Jeremiah was growing to manhood, such rumours began to blow south again from the Euphrates. Some thirteen years or so earlier, Assurbanipal, the Sardanapalus of the Greeks, had accomplished the last Assyrian conquest in Palestine, 641 B.C.,

¹ Hab. iii. 7.

² See below on ch. iii.

³ vii. 12-15; xxvi. 6.

⁴ iv. 15.

and for an interval the land was quiet. But towards 625 word came that the Medes were threatening Nineveh, and, though they were repelled, in that year Asshurbanipal died and Nabopolassar of Babylon threw off the Assyrian yoke. Palestine felt the grasp of Nineveh relax. There was a stir in the air and men began to dream. But quick upon hope fell fear. Hordes of a new race whom—after the Greeks—we call Scythians, the Ashguzai of the Assyrian monuments, had half a century before swarmed over or round the Caucasus, and since then had been in touch, and even in some kind of alliance, with the Assyrians. Soon after 624 they forced the Medes to relinquish the siege of Nineveh. They were horsemen and archers, living in the saddle, and carrying their supplies behind them in wagons. After (as it seems) their effective appearance at Nineveh, they swept over the lands to the south, as Herodotus tells us;¹ and riding by the Syrian coast were only brought up by bribes on the border of Egypt.² This must have been soon after the young prophet's call in 627-6. In short, the world, and especially the North, was (to use Jeremiah's word) *boiling* with events and possibilities of which God alone knew the end. Prophets had been produced in Israel from

¹ i. 103-107 (after Hecatæus).

² See Appendix I—Medes and Scythians.

like conditions in the previous century, and now after a silence of nigh seventy years, prophets were again to appear: Zephaniah, Nahum, Habakkuk, and Jeremiah.

For these northern omens conspired with others, ethical and therefore more articulate, within Judah herself. It was two generations since Isaiah and Hezekiah had died, and with them the human possibilities of reform. For nearly fifty years Manasseh had opposed the pure religion of the prophets of the eighth century, by persecution, by the introduction of foreign and sensual cults, and especially by reviving in the name of Israel's God¹ the ancient sacrifice of children, in order to propitiate His anger. Thus it appears that the happier interests of religion—family feasts, pieties of seed-time and harvest, gratitude for light, fountains and rain, and for good fortune—were scattered among a host both of local and of foreign deities; while for the God of Israel, the God of Abraham, Moses and Isaiah, the most horrible of superstitious rites were reserved, as if all that His people could expect of Him was the abatement of a jealous and hungry wrath.

A few voices crying through the night had indeed reminded Judah of what He was and what He required. *He hath showed thee, O man,*

¹ 'Jerusalem,' ii. 263, 264.

*what is good; and what doth the Lord require but to do justly, and love mercy, and walk humbly with thy God.*¹

At last with the overthrow of Manasseh's successor, Amon, signs of a dawn appeared. The child of eight years who was heir to the throne was secured, perhaps through his mother's influence, by a party in Court and Temple that had kept loyal to the higher faith; and the people, probably weary of the fanatic extravagance of Manasseh, were content to have it so.

The young King Josiah, who to the end was to prove himself worthy of his training, and the boy in the priest's home at Anathoth were of an age: a fact not to be omitted from any estimate of the influences which moulded Jeremiah in his youth. But no trace of this appears in what he has left us; as a boy he may never have seen the King, and to the close of Josiah's reign he seems to have remained too obscure to be noticed by his monarch; yet at the last he has only good to say of Josiah:—

Did he not eat and drink,
And do judgment and justice?
The cause of the poor and the needy he judged—
Then was it well.²

Attempts at reform were made soon after Josiah's accession,³ but little was achieved, and that little only in the capital and its Temple.

¹ Micah vi. 8.

² xxii. 15, 16.

³ 'Jerusalem,' ii.

In the latter for 'four hundred' years no deity of the land had been worshipped save Yahweh, and He in no material form. It would be easy to remove from the streets of Jerusalem any recently introduced Baals and possibly, as Assyria's sovereignty relaxed, the worship of the Host of Heaven. But beyond Jerusalem the task was more difficult. Every village had the shrine of a deity before the God of Israel came to the land. The names of these local Baalim, or Lords, had mostly vanished,¹ and Israel claimed the rural sanctuaries for Yahweh. But the old rites, with the old conceptions of deity attached to them, seem to have been transferred to Him by the ignorant worshippers, till instead of one Yahweh—one Lord—unique in character and in power, there were as many as there had been Baalim, and they bore the same inferior and sometimes repulsive characters. We cannot exaggerate this division of the Godhead into countless local forms:—

As many as thy cities in number
So many O Judah thy gods!²

Their high places lay all round the Prophet and each had its bad influence, not religious only but ethical, not only idolatrous but immoral, with impure rites and orgies.

¹ Though not in every case, for Anathoth itself is but the plural of the Syrian goddess Anath, as Ashtaroth is the plural of Astart or Astarte.

² ii. 28 ; xi. 13.

Lift to the bare heights thine eyes,
Where not wast thou tumbled?
The land thou hast fouled with thy whoredoms,¹
—spiritual and physical both; the one led to the
other.

This dissipation of the national mind upon many deities was reflected in the nation's politics. With no faith in One Supreme God the statesmen of Judah, just as in Isaiah's earlier days, fluttered between the great powers which were bidding for the empire of the world. Egypt under Psamtik's vigorous direction pressed north, flying high promises for the restless vassals of Assyria. But Assyria, though weakened, had not become negligible. Between the two the anchorless policy of Judah helplessly drifted. To use Jeremiah's figure, suitable alike to her politics and her religion, she was a faithless wife, off from her husband to one paramour after another.

All this was chaos worse than the desert that crumbled before Anathoth, a tragedy more bitter than the past which moaned through the land behind. What had God to say? It was a singular mark of Israel, that the hope of a great prophet never died from her heart. Where earnest souls were left they prayed for his coming and looked for the Word of the Lord by him more than they who wait for the morning. The same

¹ iii. 2.

conditions prevailed out of which a century before had come an Amos, a Hosea, a Micah and an Isaiah. Israel needed judgment and the North again stirred with its possibilities. Who would rise and spell into a clear Word of God the thunder which to all ears was rumbling there ?

The call came to Jeremiah and, as he tells the story, came sudden and abrupt yet charged with the full range and weight of its ultimate meaning, so far as he himself was concerned :—

Before in the body I built thee, I knew thee,
 Before thou wast forth of the womb, I had
 hallowed thee,
 And a prophet to the nations had set thee.¹

A thought of God, ere time had anything to do with him, or the things of time, even father or mother, could make or could mar him ; God's alone, and sent to the world ; out of the eternities with the Divine will for these days of confusion and panic and for the peoples, small and great, that were struggling through them. It was a stupendous consciousness—this that then broke in the village of Anathoth and in the breast of the young son of one its priests ; the spring of it deeper and the range of it wider than even that similar assurance which centuries later filled another priest's home in the same hill country :—

¹i. 5.

And thou, child, shalt be called the prophet of the
Highest,
For thou shalt go before the face of the Lord,
To prepare His ways.¹

The questions of foreknowledge and predestination, with which Jeremiah engaged himself not a little, I leave for a future lecture.² Here we may consider the range of his mission.

This was very wide—not for Judah only, but *a prophet to the nations had I set thee*. The objection has been taken, that it is too wide to be original, and the alternative inferences drawn: either that it is the impression of his earliest consciousness as a prophet but formed by Jeremiah only after years of experience revealed all that had been involved in his call; or that it is not Jeremiah's own but the notion formed of him by a later exaggerating generation. It is true that Jeremiah did not dictate the first words of the Lord to him till some twenty-three years after he heard them, when it was possible and natural for him to expand them in terms of his intervening experience. And we must remember the summary bent of the Hebrew mind—how natural it was to that mind to describe processes as if they were acts of a day, done by a fiat as in the story of the Creation; or to state a system of law and custom, which took centuries to develop, as though it were the edict of a single

¹ Luke i. 76.

² See Lecture vii.

lawgiver and all spoken at once, when the development entered on a new and higher stage, as we see in the case of Deuteronomy and its attribution to Moses.

Yet the forebodings at least of a task so vast as that of *prophet to the nations* were anything but impossible to the moment of Jeremiah's call; for the time surged, as we have seen, with the movements of the nations and their omens for his own people. Indeed it would have been strange if the soul of any prophet, conscious of a charge from the Almighty, had not the instinct, that as the meaning of this charge was gradually unfolded to him, it would reveal, and require from him the utterance of, Divine purposes throughout a world so full even to the uninspired eye of the possibilities both of the ruin of old states and of the rise of new ones—a world so close about his own people, and so fraught with fate for them, that in speaking of *them* he could not fail to speak of the *whole of it* also. If at that time a Jew had at all the conviction that he was called to be a prophet, it must have been with a sense of the same responsibilities, to which the older prophets had felt themselves bound: men who knew themselves to be ministers of the Lord of Hosts, Lord of the Powers of the Universe, who had dealt not with Israel only but with Moab and Ammon and Aram, with Tyre and the Philistines and Egypt, and who had spoken of Assyria herself as

His staff and the rod of His judgment. Jeremiah's three contemporaries, Şephaniah, Nahum and Habakkuk, all deal with the foreign powers of their day—why should he in such an age not have been conscious from the first that his call from the Lord of Hosts involved a mission as wide as theirs? I am sure that if we had lived with this prophet through his pregnant times, as we have lived through these last ten years and have been compelled to think constantly not of our own nation alone—concentrated as we had to be on our duties to her—but of *all* the nations of the world as equally involved in the vast spiritual interests at stake, we should have no difficulty in understanding how possible and natural it was for Jeremiah to hear his mission *to the nations* clearly indicated in the very moment of his call.

And in fact Jeremiah's acknowledged Oracles—some of them among his earliest—travel far beyond Judah and show not merely a knowledge of, and vivid interest in, the qualities and fortunes of other peoples, but a wise judgment of their policies and therefore of what should be Judah's prudent attitude and duty towards them. For long before his call she had been intriguing with Egypt and Assyria.¹ Just then or immediately later the Scythians, after threatening the Medes, were sweeping over Western Asia as far as the frontier

¹ii. 18.

of Egypt, and in his Scythian songs Jeremiah¹ shows an intimate knowledge of their habits. In his Parable of the Potter (for which unfortunately there is no date) he declares God's power to mould or re-mould *any* nation.² And Baruch, writing of Jeremiah's earlier ministry, says that he spoke *concerning all nations*.³

No wonder that Jeremiah shrank from such a task: *Ah, Lord God, I know not to speak, I am too young*.⁴ His excuse is interesting. Had he not developed his gift for verse? Or, conscious of its rustic simplicity, did he fear to take the prophet's thunder on lips, that had hitherto moved only to the music of his country-side? In the light of his later experience the second alternative is not impossible. When much practice must have made him confident of his art as a singer, he tells us how burning he felt the Word of the Lord to be. But whatever was the motive of his reluctance it was overcome. As he afterwards said:—

Ah, Lord, Thou didst beguile me,
And beguiled I let myself be;
Thou wast too strong for me
And hast prevailed.⁵

¹ See his seven Scythian songs below, pp. 110 ff.

² xviii.

³ xxxvi. 2, a clause which Duhm merely on the grounds of his theory is obliged to regard as a later intrusion, though it bears no marks of being such.

⁴ So Cornill after the Greek.

⁵ xx. 7.

The following shows how this came about:—

And the Lord said unto me, Say not I am too young, for to all to which I send thee thou shalt go, and all I command thee thou shalt speak,

Be not afraid before them
For with thee am I to deliver,

Rede of the Lord. And the Lord put forth His hand and caused it to touch my mouth, and the Lord said to me, Lo, I have set My Word in thy mouth,

See I appoint thee this day
Over the nations and kingdoms,
To pull up and tear down and destroy,¹
To build and to plant.

To this also objection has been taken as still more incredible in the spiritual experience of so youthful a rustic. It has been deemed the exaggeration of a later age, and described as the 'gigantic figure' of a 'plenipotentiary to the nations,' utterly inconsistent with the modest singer of the genuine oracles of Jeremiah, 'a hero only in suffering, not in assault.'² Such an objection rather strains the meaning of the passage. According to this Jeremiah is to be the carrier of the Word of the Lord. That Word, rather than the man

¹ Hebrew adds the redundant *to pull down*; Greek omits.

² Duhm; see above, p. 40.

himself, is the power *to pull up and tear down and destroy, to build and to plant*¹—that Word which no Hebrew prophet received without an instinct of its world-wide range and its powers of both destruction and creation.

Two visions follow. To appreciate the first we must remember the natural anxiety of the prophets when charged with pronouncements so weighty and definite. The Word, the ethical purpose of God for Israel was clear, but how was it to be fulfilled? No strength appeared in the nation itself. The party, or parties, loyal to the Lord had been in power a dozen years and effected little in Jerusalem and nothing beyond. The people were not stirred and seemed hopeless. Living in a village where little changed through the years, but men followed the habits of their fathers, Jeremiah felt everything dead. Winter was on and the world asleep.

Then the Word of the Lord came to me saying, What art thou seeing, Jeremiah; and I said, I am seeing the branch of an almond tree. And the Lord said to me, Well hast thou seen, for I am awake over My Word to perform it.

The Hebrew for almond tree is *shākōdh*, which also means *awakeness* or *watchfulness*,² and the

¹ This is clear from other passages, v. 14; xviii. 7-10, etc.

² Ball happily translates *wake-tree*.

Lord was *awake* or was *watchful*—*shōkēdh*—the difference only of a vowel. In that first token of spring which a Palestine winter affords, the Prophet received the sacrament of his call and of the assurance that God was awake! That the sacrament took this form was natural. That of Isaiah of Jerusalem was the vision of a Throne and an Altar. That of Ezekiel, the exile, shone in the stormy skies of his captivity. This to the prophet of Anathoth burst with the first blossom on his wintry fields. The sense of unity in which he and his people conceived the natural and spiritual worlds came to his help; neither in the one world nor in the other did God slumber. God was watching.

The Second Vision needs no comment after our survey of the political conditions of the time. The North held the forces for the fulfilling of the Word. The Vision is followed by a charge to the Prophet himself.

And the word of the Lord came to me the second time, What art thou seeing? And I said, A caldron boiling and its face is from (?) the North.¹ And the Lord said unto me:—

¹The text reads, *its face is from the face of northwards*, which some would emend to *its face is turned northwards*, i.e. the side on which it is blown upon and made to boil. *Boiling* or *bubbling*, lit. *blown upon, fanned*.

Out of the North shall evil boil forth¹
 On all that dwell in the land ;
 For behold, I am calling
 All the realms² of the North.
 They shall come and each set his throne
 In the openings of the gates of Jerusalem,
 On all of her walls round about,
 And every township of Judah.
 And My judgments by them³ shall I utter
 On the evil of those who have left Me,
 Who have burned to other gods
 And bowed to the works of their hands.
 But thou shalt gird up thy loins,
 Stand up and speak⁴ all I charge thee.
 Be not dismayed before them,
 Lest to their face I dismay thee.
 See I have thee set this day
 A fenced city and walls of bronze
 To the kings and princes of Judah,
 Her priests and the folk of the land ;
 They shall fight but master thee never,
 For with thee am I to deliver—
 Rede of the Lord.⁵

¹ After the Greek ; Hebrew has *be opened*.

² Hebrew has *races and kingdoms* and adds *Rede of the Lord*.

³ Read **אֲנִי**.

⁴ Hebrew adds *to them* ; Greek omits.

⁵ The last three couplets are uncertain. In v. 18 Hebrew adds *a basalt pillar* and, after *bronze*, *against all the land*.

Jeremiah was silenced and went forth to his ministry—the Word upon his lips and the Lord by his side.

Two further observations are natural.

First, note the contrast between the two Visions—the blossoming twig and the boiling caldron brewing tempests from the North. Unrelated as these seem, they symbolise together Jeremiah's prophesying throughout. For in fact this was all blossom and storm, beauty and terror, tender yearning and thunders of doom—up to the very end. Or to state the same more deeply: while the caldron of the North never ceased boiling out over his world—consuming the peoples, his own among them, and finally sweeping him into exile and night—he never, for himself or for Israel, lost the clear note of his first Vision, that all was watched and controlled. There is his value to ourselves. Jeremiah was no prophet of hope, but he was the prophet of that without which hope is impossible—faith in Control—that be the times dark and confused as they may, and the world's movements ruthless, ruinous and inevitable, God yet watches and rules all to the fulfilment of His Will—though how we see not, nor can any prophet tell us.

Second, note how the story leaves the issue, not with one will only, but with two—God's and the Man's, whom God has called. His family has been discounted, his people and their authorities,

political and religious, are to be against him. *He* is to stand up and speak, *He* is not to let himself be dismayed before them, lest God make him dismayed. Under God, then, the Individual becomes everything. Here, at the start of his ministry, Jeremiah has pressed upon him, the separateness, the awful responsibility, the power, of the Single Soul. We shall see how the significance of this developed not for himself only, but for the whole religion of Israel.