

SUNDAY MORNING NO. 144 (380)

“I WROUGHT FOR MY NAME’S SAKE”

EZEKIEL 20. —The chapter that has been read this morning will be found on reflection to be one of the most extraordinary compositions ever submitted to human consideration. It is a historical review with comments. There are many historical reviews to be found among books; but they are all human: here is a historical review by the Creator of heaven and earth. It is a review of Israel’s history from its starting point in Egypt, down to the days of Ezekiel. There may seem nothing very extraordinary in this at first sight, but this impression will change on reflection.

In the first place there could be no more intrinsically interesting subject of review historically considered. All other histories are insignificant compared with the history of Israel. What other history occupies so large a space in the field of time? There are other histories of a certain importance, but they are all short lived. They are either of recent origin (if relating to nations important now), or of very short existence if of great antiquity.

The history of England is but of yesterday, as compared with Israel. The history of Babylon is a short story though going back to ancient times. The broad belt of Israel’s history comes down all the way from the earliest beginning, when modern Gentile nationalities were not, to the present moment, when Jewish affairs are an active element in Gentile problems among the strongest nations of the continent. No historical topic can compare, on even common grounds, with the history of the nation that wanders the world today in all lands after ages of national adversity that more than once threatened its entire extinction.

And to have such a history reviewed by its Originator, its Mover, its Moulder! To have such a history commented on and elucidated for us by God! Only incredulity of the fact (barbarous incredulity) could make the heart and judgment insensible to the greatness of this piece of literature. We have histories of the Jews by Gentiles and by Jews; but how different are these histories from this—how different in tone, spirit, and complexion! How different in the views presented! How necessarily different is a history written by the short-ranged vision of a mortal, from a history written by the all-embracing Penetration that sees everything at a glance, and knows the universe to its utmost depths, and the furthest bearing of all occurrences! Accordingly, we find this history, written by Ezekiel at the mouth of God, of a totally different character from anything written by Jew or Gentile.

A number of the elders of Israel had come on a visit to Ezekiel, recognising his character as a prophet and seeking through him to approach God and make enquiry of him. It is this visit that furnishes the occasion for the remarkable historic sketch contained in the chapter. The way the visit was received is quite striking. At first sight, it would appear a meritorious thing on the part of these elders to seek to enquire of God—a something that might be expected to be pleasing to God. In point of fact it was otherwise, and received a rude rebuff. There was something in the nature of their approach that made it offensive. Ezekiel was divinely directed on the subject as follows:

“Speak unto the elders of Israel and say unto them, are ye come to enquire of me? As I live, saith the Lord God, I will not be enquired of by you,”—

from which we may profitably draw this lesson, that it is not sufficient that men are willing to approach unto God. There is a way of doing it that it is necessary for it to be acceptable. God Himself has indicated the way and the spirit, --“*broken and contrite in heart and that trembleth at my word.*” A man need not hope to be accepted of God unless he recognise, with a deeply reverential mind, God’s immeasurable greatness and absolute sovereignty; and

unless he correspondingly realises his own utter smallness, both as to his belonging to the dust and as to his having no rights, being in fact a sinner whose being allowed to live at all is due to God's great patience.

These elders of Israel did not approach God in this spirit. They approached Him in the spirit that has characterised Israel in all their generations, so far as the bulk of the nation is concerned. They came to Him thinking themselves to be somewhat on account of extraction and on account of the divine favour shown to them in days past. They came to Him in a spirit of self-importance, while, at the same time, having no adequate or reasonable discernment of God's goodness, and little habit of obedience to His commandments. Therefore, Ezekiel is commanded to declare to them that God refused their advances; and he is further commissioned to exhibit to them the history of their nation, as it appeared in His eyes. It is in this way we get God's view of the most wonderful history on earth, and an explanation of God's own objects, in the various measures He took, and did not take, in the course of that history.

"Cause them to know the abomination of their fathers," says God; and He takes the recital right away back to Egypt.

*"In the day when I chose Israel, and lifted up mine hand unto the seed of the house of Jacob, and made myself known unto them in the land of Egypt, saying, I am the Lord your God . . . I said unto them, cast ye away every man the abominations of his eyes and defile not yourselves with the idols of Egypt. But they rebelled against me, and would not hearken unto me; they did not every man cast away the abominations of their eyes, neither did they forsake the idols of Egypt. Then I said, I will pour out my fury upon them, to accomplish my anger against them in the midst of the land of Egypt. **But I wrought for my name's sake that it should not be polluted before the heathen among whom they were, in whose sight I made myself known unto them in bringing them forth out of the land of Egypt. Wherefore I caused them to go forth out of the land of Egypt, and brought them into the Wilderness.**"*

Here is a keynote struck which governs the rest of the chapter. Israel were brought out of Egypt, not because they were an interesting and obedient race. So far were they from being this, that they deserved wholesale destruction, and God felt inclined in this direction. But He refrained Himself and preserved them, and brought them out of Egypt **that His name might not be dishonoured in the eyes of mankind, who knew that He had taken Israel by the hand.**

This is the very last explanation that occurs to a Jew or Gentile. A more unwelcome explanation—one more nauseous to the natural taste could not be put forward. Men could understand the prowess of Israel as an explanation of the exodus, if inclined to disbelieve it divine; or if more reverential to the Mosaic record, they could understand the excellence of the Jewish race, as inciting the divine favour in their behalf. But, that a stubborn and unacceptable people should be tolerated, and favoured, and protected, **for the honour of Jehovah's name**, is an idea entirely out of the range of human sympathies.

The Jews liked such a doctrine no better than the Gentiles do: and yet, dear brethren and sisters, it is God's own explanation. Here it is, without obscurity or the least dimness. It is not only the authentic explanation, but it is a rational explanation. It throws light where otherwise there is darkness, for look you; is it not the fact that Israel at the time of the exodus were unbelieving and rebellious? Did they not say to Moses, "*Let us alone that we may serve their idols*"? When he brought them out, did they not seek to stone him? This being the undoubted fact, of what explanation is the miraculous Egyptian exodus susceptible, if it were not that God was aiming at some other object than the mere well-being of the race of Israel? Apart from this, the divine favour to Israel in Egypt is inexplicable and mysterious, and a

stumbling block, as many people have found it to be. God's explanation explains all: "*I wrought for my Name's sake.*"

So it was at every subsequent stage, as the chapter goes on to exhibit. Redeemed from Egypt and brought into the wilderness, "*the house of Israel rebelled against me in the wilderness . . . Then I said I would pour out my fury upon them in the wilderness to consume them. But I wrought for my Name's sake, that it should not be polluted before the heathen, in whose sight I brought them out . . . Mine eye spared them from destroying them, neither did I make an end of them in the wilderness. But I said unto their children in the wilderness, walk ye not in the statutes of your fathers . . . Walk in my statutes . . . Notwithstanding, the children rebelled against me; they walked not in my statutes, neither kept my judgments . . . Then I said I would pour out my fury upon them . . . Nevertheless I withdrew my hand and wrought for my Name's sake.*"

Then the recital follows Israel into the land and shows that the same thing happened then: the nation disobediently went aside into ways displeasing to God and stirred him to continual anger. As He said by Jeremiah concerning Jerusalem,

"This city hath been a provocation of mine anger from the day they built it until now."

Then He brings the matter home to the elders standing before Ezekiel, accusing them of following the disobedient ways of their fathers.

"Ye pollute yourselves with all your idols, even unto this day, and shall I be enquired of by you, O house of Israel? As I live, saith the Lord God, I will not be enquired of by you."

Here, then, is a historical elucidation quite unlike anything we read of in Jewish or Gentile literature, but which has the advantage of being authoritative, reliable, and true, which can by no means be affirmed of ordinary historical disquisitions. Let us consider it a moment. At first sight, it seems a repulsive exhibition of the divine attitude. It seems all stern, unsympathetic, and discouraging. This constant jealousy of the divine honour: this constant anger at the people's waywardness: does not excite those gratified feelings which we associate with the sentiments of adoration and praise. Some, in fact, have been so oppressed in spirit from this cause as to have come to the conclusion that the chapter and much else in the Bible is the ebullition of human bitterness and not the disclosure of the divine mind.

This is a mistake altogether. The divinity of these writings is beyond all doubt and cavil, for reasons we have looked at in time past and need not now repeat. We must find some other explanation of the sternness than the wild suggestion that it is human and not divine—a suggestion altogether inconsistent with common experience of men. It is not in man—Jew or Gentile—to conceive, still less to assume earnestly, such an attitude of uncompromising severity as this chapter illustrates. The divinity of it is proved, among other things, by the severity, and letting our reason act, it is not difficult to see the reasonableness of it.

God is love, but not that only: he is a consuming fire. God is kind and merciful, but not unconditionally so. He must be held in reverence: he must be obeyed. This is revealed, and is it not according to reason? It is according to reason in two ways: first, heaven and earth are His: He made them all. There is not a thing in existence that is not the concrete form of His own eternal invisible energy. There is not a faculty or power or excellence in the possession of any creature but what has its root in God Himself, "*who giveth unto all, life and breath and all things.*" If then, it be true that "*of him and through him and to him are all things,*" is it not the most elementary maxim of reason that His praise should be uppermost; and that if this reasonable honour is not conceded by the creatures He has made (but disobedience, insult, and insubordination instead), that He should deal with them in anger?

The force of this argument is lost on the modern ear by reason of the conceptions of God that have become current. Men either join with David's "fool" and say "There is no

God,” but only things—stuff, --and force—that manage somehow or other to arrange and evolve themselves in wonderfully wise order; or, if they profess to believe in God, they regard Him as a passive element, such as oxygen or electricity, to be utilised by wise manipulation for human benefit. If this fog could be cleared away—if they could see the one great idea crystallised in the Mosaic economy—that God is a personal Majesty, an Individual Reality—with keener consciousness and a deeper intelligent versatility than all men put together—who from His central habitation of glory in heaven fills immensity by His spirit, radiant from and one with His resplendent and indestructible Person in the heart of the universe—who has for His pleasure embodied His eternal power in the splendid system of the universe, with the purpose of associating created intelligences in His own joy—I say, if they could realise the revealed conception of the Creator, their mind would be open to the evident conclusion that God should be jealous of His own honour, and that rebellion against Him should be a ground of His displeasure.

The other way which shows it to be according to reason is this: it is the indispensable condition of human well-being that God should be known, loved, and revered in the highest. Apart from this knowledge and reverence, man degenerates to darkness and misery. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, even as regards the little happiness that is possible in this mortal state. About this it is impossible for a reflecting mind to have the least doubt in view of either his own experience or the general experience of mankind, so far as an individual may have access to that. The highest happiness of man is to be found in the exercise of those faculties which give us relation to God, faith, mercy, and futurity. That God, therefore, should insist, by stern dispensation of His will, upon His honour being in the ascendant, is to perform the truest kindness it is possible for Him to show to man.

The light, therefore, which we see glowing in this 20th chapter of Ezekiel—the burning light of the divine glory, though a painful light to look at with the naked eye—is a beneficent light, like the Sun, which, though scorching in the wilderness, is a generator of life and beauty where water, soil, and the other conditions of life exist. The doctrine of God’s supremacy by itself, would be hard and burdensome for fainting flesh and blood; but it does not come by itself, it cannot come by itself. There is a blessing connected with it, as Moses earnestly showed to Israel in the wilderness, at the end of their journeyings. This is nothing but curse, and blight, and ruin, and death, away from God’s supremacy. Therefore God aims at establishing His supremacy in all He has done. This is the beginning and end of His purpose:

“As truly as I live, the whole earth shall be filled with my glory.”

He spared Israel in all their backslidings, because He wrought for His Name’s sake. He spared them that the true seed in their midst—men of Abraham’s faith and deeds—might be developed for His glory, generation after generation. For the same reason, He endures the wicked of these passing centuries, kind alike to all, in patience of the day when He will root transgressors out of the earth into the hands of His tried and faithful people at the resurrection.

The lesson of the chapter is by no means confined to the pre-Ezekiel history of Israel. It was written for those who should come after. It is an explanation for all time. In all the relations into which God may come with the human race. It has force here in our midst this morning. It is the explanation of this bread which we break: this wine which we drink.

“I wrought for my name’s sake.”

This might be written over and under the cross of Calvary, by which the world—the godless world of men upon earth—was crucified unto us and we unto the world. When we come unto God by Christ, we approach Him in a temple, as it were, having these words inscribed on the portals. They are the explanation of the bleeding lamb, which by faith we bring in our hands; away from them there is no explanation. By all natural thoughts, the shed blood of Christ is a

distressing mystery—“*to the Jews a stumbling block, to the Greeks (modern as well as ancient), foolishness,*” but, adds Paul, “*to us who are saved, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.*”

Natural thoughts ask “Why was a sinless man put to death? Why must blood be shed before God could be approached for eternal fellowship? Why could not the goodness of God come forth in unmixed beneficence? Why not our sins be forgiven of His own prerogative of mercy? Yea, why death, why evil, at all?” The word of wisdom answers natural thoughts. Natural thoughts are but the maunderings of mental power unsupplied with facts to work on. There are higher facts than the unenlightened natural brain of man can know. The history of Israel is the illustration and enforcement of these facts.

The first and great fact of facts which the natural mind disrelishes is that Jehovah is maker and possessor of heaven and earth, and will be approached by man in such consummate deference as He requires, the forms whereof He Himself appoints. We look on the extended form of Christ transfixed on Calvary, and behold the way of our approach. What did that crucifixion do? It declared the righteousness of God! (Rom. 3:25). How? By the condemnation of sin in its own flesh (Rom. 8:3). Was Jesus of that flesh? Undoubtedly: he was son of David, son of Abraham (Matt. 1:1), seed of David according to the flesh (Rom. 1:3): of the same flesh and blood as his brethren, made in all things like unto them (Heb. 2:14-17). Was he a sinner then? No: Son of God and Son of Man, and though tempted in all things like unto his brethren, he was without sin as to character, though made sin as to nature (2 Cor. 5:21). Though on his mother’s side he partook of the sin and death-stricken nature of Adam’s race; on his Father’s side, that nature had such impress and mould as made him Jehovah’s Holy One, fitted by his righteousness to bear away the sin of the world in death and resurrection.

Was it instead of us he died? No, brethren, it was for us, on behalf of us, on account of us—that God’s righteousness might be declared as the basis of forgiveness and reconciliation. God’s righteousness would not have been declared in substitution; that would rather have been a concealing or obscuring of His righteousness. And forgiveness in such a case would have been an illusion, for how can God or man be said to forgive a debt that another has paid? No, this is not substitution; for we have to take part in it and be one with it. We are buried WITH HIM in baptism; we are planted **in the similitude of his death**; we are made to partake in his crucifixion; and on this condition our sins are forgiven. He went through it all for us as our representative, only that in him was done that which could not be done in us. In him, death was abolished by resurrection after suffering, because of obedience. In us, death would have closed our eyes for ever, because of disobedience. In him, righteousness was declared both in death (because possessing our nature) and in resurrection (because having accomplished a perfect obedience). Therefore in him only is life, and God has given to him the power to bestow life on all who own themselves dead with the crucified Christ, and alive only and by his resurrection power.

God, in Christ has “wrought for his name’s sake”—for His honour—for His exaltation—for His ineffable and unquestionable supremacy. His righteous law made man mortal because this supremacy was set aside at the beginning: and He sets not this law aside, but has carried it out in the Son of His own providing, in a way that while opening the road to salvation, exalts God in the highest and abases man to the uttermost. This is the lesson of the cross—that God is great and dreadful and holy and unchangeable, though kind and merciful and forgiving to those who tremble before Him: and that man is small and insignificant and sinful and mortal, though invited to equality with the angels in glory and honour and immortality. The death of Christ tells us that the way of immortality is closed impenetrably against all sinners; and his resurrection, that God will only be approached through him who has been made by Him, “*righteousness and sanctification and wisdom and redemption*” for

all who humble themselves obediently to his way. Such only are forgiven: such only justified, and made heirs according to the hope of eternal life which God, who cannot lie, promised before the world began.

What is our wisdom, then, dear brethren and sisters, but to remove as far as possible from the example of the elders who waited on Ezekiel. Let us abandon the abominations of ancestry, sanctioned howsoever it may be by numbers and learning in the generations that are past. Let us recognise and conform to the divine rule in history—that sinners are spared only because of the divine purpose to fill the earth with His glory: and that the safety of the righteous is only to be found in a close and humble and contrite-hearted observance of God's will as revealed in Moses, the prophets, and the apostles—a will that we should be lowly and meek and thankful and obedient in all things.

“Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, neither let the mighty man glory in his might: let not the rich man glory in his riches. But let him that glorieth glory in this, that he understandeth and knoweth me, that I am the Lord which exercise loving kindness, judgment and righteousness in the earth: for in these things do I delight, saith the Lord.”

Taken from: - “The Christadelphian” of 1882

Pages 497-502

& “The Christadelphian” of 1906

Pages 436-440

By Bro. Robert Roberts