

ON THE "ARISTOCRATIC" CHARACTER OF THE
OLD TESTAMENT.

MODERN views of the Old Testament involve a reconstruction of our ideas in many directions. Thus so long as we regarded the Hebrew Scriptures as a direct gift to the Chosen People from that God who is no "respector of persons," it was natural for us to consider them as concerned equally with the king on the throne and the beggar on the dunghill. Protestant individualism pointed in the same direction. All souls are equally precious in the sight of God, and the Bible could not be the book of a class.

But now that we have learned to look on the Old Testament as the revised version of the literature of an ancient state we are naturally faced by the reflection that the states of antiquity were essentially "aristocratic"; the class that *counted* was a comparatively small one. Was this the case in Israel? Is there evidence of the fact in the Old Testament? Does this consideration throw any light on Scripture or Scripture History?

Let us look from this point of view at the earliest group of writing prophets, Hosea, Amos and Micah. It has often been noticed, and indeed is obvious, that they condemn the sins of the rich. Refined sensuality, judicial corruption, and land-stealing are impossible vices for the lower classes. I think we may legitimately go further. The men who in Amos (ii. 8, v. 12) have control both of the temples and the law courts are apparently the same as the nobles who banquet with the king in Hosea (vii. 5) and the men who enclose the commonage in Micah (ii. 2). They are a privileged class. This is of the utmost importance, because it is *their* vices that are bringing Yahweh's wrath on Israel. The nobility is the only class that counts; the great bulk of the people are not responsible for the coming judgment and

yet are powerless to avert it. The prophets' view of Israel is thoroughly "aristocratic."

This consideration throws light on the moral condition of Israel, or rather it makes darkness visible. It is commonly assumed that the prophets supply us with irrefutable evidence that both Samaria and Jerusalem came to their end in a state of appalling corruption. But if the prophets are writing of the aristocracy, their accusations are no more illustrative of the state of Israel as a whole than—*magnis componere parca*—the attacks of "Rita" on the "Smart Set" are an indictment of the people of England.

And further. Even against the nobles themselves the prophets' statements carry but little weight, since the vices condemned are those *characteristic* of an aristocracy and more or less in evidence in every country and every age. We do not know what allowance the prophets were prepared to make for human frailty, and therefore we cannot on their evidence condemn the nobles of Israel as outrageous sinners. How would the contemporary Greeks and Italians have fared at the prophets' hands? Or the mediæval Barons? Or the members of the modern European Peerages? We have no direct means of knowing how any of these classes would have compared with the aristocracy of Israel. The whole question of the moral condition of Israel requires to be considered afresh.

As another illustration of the matter in hand, let us turn to the Law. Take the Deuteronomic statute of "Release." "Thoroughly unpractical," say the critics, as they do of so much of the Deuteronomic legislation. I confess I always begin the study of Deuteronomy from the opposite side; I assume that the law is thoroughly practical, having been carefully considered and discussed in that Upper Chamber at the gate of the Temple Court. On this hypothesis I try to restore a state of society to which the law would be

applicable. The law in this case orders that every seventh year all loans are to be cancelled. As between neighbours and equals this would be unpractical—and, indeed, something more. If X and Y are two men of the same class, who alternately lend each other a plough, or a guinea, or a jar of oil, as occasion requires, and the law orders that every seventh year the outstanding loan is to be cancelled, it would be not only “unpractical” but absolutely silly. But if all the lending is on one side, and all the borrowing on the other, the case is altered. Let us imagine that a chief lives amongst his clan. They are his dependents, and follow him in war; he is their earthly providence, for he is the only rich man among them. In time of drought he must lend them food and seed-corn for next season; in time of rinderpest he must lend them cattle to plough; a man who wishes to marry may have to borrow from the chief the present for the bride’s parents; and so on. The chief is under no legal obligation to lend, but there is a strong moral force compelling him, and if the people starve, or are wretched, he suffers in his prestige and character with the other chiefs. The temptation to such a chief is rather to lend too much than too little, to involve his people in such a hopeless network of debt that they become his slaves, and can call neither their cottages nor their families their own. It is against this that the statute is aimed. Every seven years patron and client are to start with a clean sheet. The admonition not to be niggardly because the year of release is at hand, would certainly be unpractical in a case between equals; but where the chief has some obligation to lend, and the retainer some claim to borrow, the matter is wholly different. The Deuteronomic legislation is an “aristocratic” law.

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It used to be supposed (and the Bible to some extent countenances the idea) that almost all the people were carried captive to Babylon, and that the land was practically deserted until the Return. It is now more correctly believed that only a comparatively small fraction of the inhabitants were deported. On this fact a number of somewhat extravagant theories have been based by well known writers. If (say they) at least four-fifths of the people remained in the land, then surely *they* rebuilt the Temple, supplied the restored prophecy, organized the restored Jerusalem. The Return, if indeed it can properly be said to have taken place at all, dwindles and dwindles in the hands of the critics until we are left with the solitary fact that a century and a half after the capture of Jerusalem the Persian governor was a man of Jewish descent.

These views will not, I believe, prove tenable. The Return will be regarded again as an important factor in Israel's history. The difficulty will be largely removed if we consider the aristocratic nature of Israel. It was the nobles that were deported, and they were the only class that counted. Without them any sort of *national* existence was impossible. It was the return of the nobility that was the signal for the restoration of prophecy (even if Haggai and Zechariah did not themselves come from Babylon) and for the rebuilding of the Temple. The stories in Ezra and Nehemiah will be found to be highly probable in themselves if we regard them as written by aristocrats about aristocrats.

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