

**THE MODERN READER'S BIBLE: A
SERIES OF WORKS FROM THE
SACRED SCRIPTURES PRESENTED
IN MODERN LITERARY FORM,
JEREMIAH**

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The modern reader's Bible: a series of works from the sacred Scriptures presented in modern literary form, Jeremiah by Richard G. Moulton

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RICHARD G. MOULTON

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The Modern Reader's Bible

Prophecy Series

Jeremiah

•The  Co. •

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A SERIES OF WORKS FROM THE SACRED SCRIPTURES PRESENTED
IN MODERN LITERARY FORM

JEREMIAH

EDITED, WITH AN INTRODUCTION AND NOTES

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INTRODUCTION

THE *Book of Jeremiah* needs little in the way of introduction. Its most important interest is also that which lies most upon the surface, — the personality of the prophet himself. There is no other of the sacred authors who has taken us with such intimacy into his life, both public and private. We know not only the discourses of Jeremiah, but also the details of their reception; we hear the prophet's bursts of despondency, his secret communings with God; he is not only influenced by the history of his time, but also helps to make it. We must of course not assume that the successive portions of the book stand exactly in the order of their composition: there are places — for example, Book VI — where obviously chronology is subordinated to similarity of subject-matter. Such cases, however, cause no real difficulty; and, broadly viewed, the *Book of Jeremiah* is a prophetic autobiography.

Here, however, an important distinction must be taken. It is customary to think of the prophets of Israel as the preachers of their times, — preachers and statesmen, since they ministered among a people with whom the modern distinction of sacred and secular had no legitimate place. This was no doubt their most general function. But

some of them, notably Isaiah and Jeremiah, added to this another function: they were poets. By this I do not merely mean that in their discourses these prophets allowed themselves a wider scope for poetic modes of expression than has been customary with other orators. What I desire to emphasise is that portions of the prophetic works stand altogether apart from the literature of address; they consist of ideal imaginings, musical singing, all that the student understands as creative poetry. Very few of the Doom Prophecies contain any suggestion of being addressed to the peoples they denounce; and I have in a previous volume spoken of the 'Rhapsodies' of Isaiah as spiritual dramas. The subject-matter of such prophecies may very likely have entered again and again into oral discourse, but in their present form they are independent of it. It is hardly necessary to remark that such portions of the prophetic writings are not less sacred than the rest: the claim of Divine inspiration covers them, and these as all other kinds of prophecy rest on the one basis, 'Thus saith the Lord.' The distinction is one of literary form. But to the literary reader there is a wide difference between the discourse that is addressed to an audience, and the pure poetry that offers itself as food for devout meditation and imagination. Milton "justified the ways of God to men," as he understood them, in the idealised scenes of the *Paradise Lost*; and so may the prophetic poet embody thoughts with

Introduction 5-

which he feels inspired in forms that appeal to the imagination as well as to the reason.

Of poetry, in this sense, Jeremiah, besides the Doom Songs, has given us only two considerable examples.* The shorter of these is the 'Rhapsody of the Drought': a poem of wonderful tenderness, which, starting from a vivid picture of drought, presents Repentant Israel pleading with a God who turns away, and will answer only through the prophet, until at last he is softened, and recognises a purged remnant who "take forth the precious from the vile." The other is the lengthy composition which follows immediately after the call of the prophet, and which I have entitled 'The Prophet's Manifesto' as embodying the full message of his ministry. In form it is an elaborate rhapsody. The first of its seven divisions is made up of pleadings with Judah: great wealth of imagery is used to express the Divine remonstrance and pity. In the second section the example of (northern) Israel is held up, already cast off for her sins; the example becomes the more pointed when at the close Israel suddenly appears repentant, and is forgiven. The third section returns to Judah: and the successive sections dramatically present, along with Divine pleading and panic-stricken woe, a constantly advancing judgment:

* Shorter examples are II. iii, iv, viii. A Rhapsody I have described as the fusion of all literary forms in one: in those of Jeremiah discourse is more prominent than in other rhapsodies.