HEAVEN AND EARTH AS A KINGDOM
PART II CH. XXIX (Adapted.)

When the [prophets] describe the ruin of a kingdom or the destruction of a great nation [they use] phrases like the following:--"The stars have fallen," "The heavens are overthrown," "The sun is darkened," "The earth is waste, and trembles," and similar metaphors. The Arabs likewise say of a person who has met with a serious accident, "His heavens, together with his earth, have been covered"; and when they speak of the approach of a nation's prosperity, they say, "The light of the sun and moon has increased," "A new heaven and a new earth has been created," or similar phrases.

Heaven and Earth in Isaiah

Having spoken of the language of the prophets in general, I will now verify and prove my statement. Isaiah received the divine mission to prophesy the destruction of the Babylonian empire, the death of Sennacherib [705-681BC] and that of Nebuchadnezzar (634-562BC. who rose after the overthrow of Sennacherib.) He described their fall and the end of their dominion and their defeat... in these terms;

"For the stars of heaven, and the constellations thereof, shall not give their light: the sun is darkened in his going forth, and the moon shall not cause her light to shine" (xiii. 10); again, "Therefore I will shake the heavens, and the earth shall remove out of her place, in the wrath of the Lord of hosts, and in the day of his fierce anger" (xiii. 13).

I do not think that any person is so foolish and blind, and so much in favour of the literal sense of figurative and oratorical phrases, as to assume that at the fall of the Babylonian kingdom [539 BC] a change took place in the nature of the stars of heaven, or in the light of the sun and moon, or that the earth moved away from its centre. All this is merely the description of a country that has been defeated: the inhabitants undoubtedly find all light dark, and all sweet things bitter - the whole earth appears too narrow for them, and the heavens are changed in their eyes. Similarly he describes the poverty and humiliation of the people of Israel, their captivity and their defeat caused by the wicked Sennacherib when he ruled over all the fortified places of Judah, also the loss of the entire land of Israel when it too came into his possession. Isaiah says (xxiv. 17):

"Fear, and the pit, and the snare, are upon thee, O inhabitant of the earth. And it shall come to pass, that he who fleeth from the noise of the fear shall fall into the pit; and he that cometh out of the midst of the pit shall be taken in the snare: for the windows from on high are open, and the foundations of the earth do shake. The earth is utterly broken down, the earth is
clean dissolved, the earth is moved exceedingly. The earth shall reel to and fro like a drunkard."

At the end of the same prophecy, when Isaiah describes how God will punish Sennacherib, destroy his mighty empire, and reduce him to disgrace, he uses the following figure (xxiv. 23):

"Then the moon shall be confounded, and the sun ashamed, when the Lord of hosts shall reign,"

This verse is beautifully explained by Jonathan, the son of Uzziel; he says that when Sennacherib will meet with his fate because of Jerusalem, the idolaters will understand that this is the work of God; they will faint and be confounded. He therefore translates the verse thus:

"Those who worship the moon will be ashamed, and those who bow down to the sun will be humbled, when the kingdom of God shall reveal itself," etc.

The prophet then pictures the peace of the children of Israel after the death of Sennacherib, the fertility and the cultivation of their land, and the increasing power of their kingdom through Hezekiah. He employs here the figure of the increase of the light of the sun and moon. When speaking of the defeated, he says "For them the light of the sun and moon will be diminished and darkened:" in the same sense their light is said to increase for the victorious. We can frequently notice the correctness of this figure of speech. When great troubles befall us, our eyes become dim, and we cannot see clearly because the spiritus visus is made turbid by the prevailing vapours, and is weakened and diminished by great anxiety and straits of the soul: whilst in a state of gladness and comfort of the soul the spiritus visus becomes clear, and man feels as if the light had increased. Thus the good tidings that the people shall dwell in Zion, and in Jerusalem, and shall weep no more, etc., conclude in the following manner:

"Moreover, the light of the moon shall be as the light of the sun, and the light of the sun shall be sevenfold, as the light of seven days, in the day that the Lord bindeth up the breaches of his people, and healeth the stroke of their wound" (Isa. Xxx. 19, 26)

This is to say, God will raise them up again after they had fallen through the wicked Sennacherib. The, phrase "as the light of seven days" signifies, according to the commentators," very great light": for in this same sense the number "seven" is frequently used in Hebrew. I think that reference is made by this phrase to the seven days of the dedication of the temple in the reign of Solomon; for there was never a nation so great, prosperous, and happy as Israel was at that time, therefore the prophet says Israel's greatness and happiness will be the same as it was in those seven days. Speaking of wicked Edom, Israel's oppressor, Isaiah says:

"Their slain also shall be cast out, and their stink shall come up out of their carcases, and the mountains shall be melted with their blood. And all the host of heaven shall be dissolved, and the heavens shall be rolled together as a scroll: and all their host shall fall down, as a leaf falleth off from the vine, and as a fig falleth from the fig-tree. For my sword shall be bathed in heaven; behold, I shall come down upon Idumea, and upon the people of my curse, to judgment," etc. (Isa. xxxiv. 3-5).
Will any person who has eyes to see find in these verses any expression that is obscure, or that might lead him to think that they contain an account of what will befall the heavens? or anything but a figurative description of the ruin of the Edomites, the withdrawal of God's protection from them, their decline, and the sudden and rapid fall of their nobles? The prophet means to say that the individuals, who were like stars as regards their permanent, high, and undisturbed position, will quickly come down, as a leaf falleth from the vine, and as a fig falling from the fig-tree. This is self-evident; and there would be no need to mention it, much less to speak on it at length, had it not become necessary, owing to the fact that the common people and even distinguished scholars, quote this passage without regarding its context or its purpose, [in support of their view of the future destruction of the heavens]. They believe that Scripture describes here what will, in future, happen to the heavens, in the same manner as it informs us how the heavens have come into existence. Again, when Isaiah told the Israelites (what afterwards became a well-known fact--that Sennacherib, with his allied nations and kings, would perish, and that the Israelites would be helped by God alone) he employed figurative language, and said:

"See how the heavens decay and the earth withers away, and all beings on the earth die, and you are saved";

that is to say, those who have filled the earth, and have been considered, to use an hyperbole, as permanent and stable as the heavens, will quickly perish and disappear like smoke; and their famous power, that has been as stable as the earth, will be destroyed like a garment. The passage to which I refer begins:

"For the Lord hath comforted Zion; He hath comforted all her waste places," etc. "Hearken unto me, my people," etc. "My righteousness is near: my salvation is gone forth," etc.

It continues thus:

"Lift up your eyes to the heavens, and look upon the earth beneath; for the heavens shall vanish like smoke, and the earth shall wax old like a garment, and they that dwell therein shall die in like manner; for my salvation shall be for ever, and my righteousness shall not be abolished" (Isa. li. 3-6).

The restoration of the kingdom of Israel, its stability and permanence, is described as a creation of heaven and earth. For Isaiah frequently speaks of the land of a king as if it were the whole Universe, as if heaven and earth belonged to him. He therefore comforts Israel and says:

"I, even I, am he that comforteth you," etc. "And I have put my words in thy mouth, and I have covered thee in the shadow of mine hand, that I may plant the heavens, and lay the foundations of the earth, and say unto Zion, Thou art my people" (li. 12-16).

In the following verses, Isaiah declares that the dominion of Israel will continue, whilst that of the renowned and mighty people will cease: "For the mountains shall depart," etc. (liv.10). In order to express that the kingdom of the Messiah will be permanent, and that the kingdom of Israel will not be destroyed any more, he says, "Thy sun shall no more go down," etc. (lx. 20). In metaphors like these, (which are intelligible to those who understand the context) Isaiah continues to describe the details of the exile, the restoration, and the removal of all sorrow, and says figuratively as follows: "I will create new heavens and a new earth; for the first shall be forgotten,
and their memory shall be blotted out." He explains this in the course of the speech, by pointing out that by the phrase, "I will create," he means that God will give them perpetual gladness and joy in place of the previous grief and mourning, which shall no longer be remembered.

I will now describe the sequence of the ideas, and the order of the verses in which these ideas are contained. The prophet begins as follows: "I will mention the loving-kindnesses of the Lord," etc. (lxiii. 7). He then gives

(1) an account of God's past kindness to us, concluding with the words, "And he bare them and carried them all the days of old" (ver. 9).
(2) Next follows our rebellion: "But they rebelled, and vexed his holy spirit," etc. (ver. 10);
(3) the dominion of our enemies over us: "Our adversaries have trodden down thy sanctuary; we are like those over whom thou hast never ruled," etc. (vers. 18, 59);
(4) and the prophet's prayer on our account: "Be not wroth very sore," etc. (lxiv. 9).
(5) The prophet then describes how we deserved these punishments, and how we were called to the truth but did not respond: "I offered myself to be sought of them that asked not for me," etc. (lxv. i);
(6) promises mercy and pardon: "Thus saith the Lord, As the new wine is found in the cluster," etc. (ver. 8);
(7) predicts evil for our oppressors: "Behold, my servant shall eat, but ye shall be hungry," etc. (ver. 13);
(8) and moral improvement of our nation to such a degree that we shall be a blessing on the earth, and the previous troubles will be forgotten:

"And he shall call his servants by another name: that he who blesseth himself in the earth, shall bless himself in the God of truth; and he that sweareth in the earth, shall swear by the God of truth; because the former troubles are forgotten, and because they are hid from mine eyes. For, behold, I create new heavens, and a new earth: and the former shall not be remembered, nor come into mind. But be ye glad and rejoice for ever in that which I create: for, behold, I create Jerusalem a rejoicing, and her people a joy. And I will rejoice in Jerusalem, and joy in my people," etc. (lxv. 15-19).

The whole subject must now be clear and evident; for the words, "I create new heavens, and a new earth," etc., are followed by the explanation, "I create Jerusalem a rejoicing, and her people a joy," etc. The prophet then adds that the seed and name of Israel will be as permanent as their faith and as the rejoicing in it, which God promised to create and to spread over the whole earth: for faith in God and rejoicing in it are two possessions which, once obtained, are never lost or changed. This is expressed in the words:

"For as the new heavens and the new earth, which I will make, remain before me, saith the Lord, so shall your seed and your name remain" (lxvi. 22).

But of other nations, in some instances, the seed remains, whilst the name has perished; so, e.g., many people are of the seed of the Persians or Greeks, without being known by that special name; they bear the names of other nations, of which they form part. According to my opinion, we have here a prophecy that our religion, which gives us our special name, will remain permanently.

Heaven and Earth in other Writers
These figures are frequent in Isaiah ... but we meet with them also in the words of other prophets. Jeremiah, in describing the destruction of Jerusalem in consequence of our sins, says (iv. 23): "I beheld the earth, and, lo, it was without form, and void," etc. Ezekiel (xxxii. 7, 8) foretells the destruction of the kingdom of Egypt, and the death of Pharaoh, through Nebuchadnezzar, in the following words:

"And when I shall put thee out, I will cover the heaven, and make the stars thereof dark; I will cover the sun with a cloud, and the moon shall not give her light. All the bright lights of heaven will I make dark over thee, and set darkness upon thy land, saith the Lord."

Joel, the son of Pethuel (ii. 10), describes the multitude of locusts that came in his days as follows:

"The earth shall quake before them: the heavens shall tremble: the sun and the moon shall be dark, and the stars shall withdraw their shining."

Amos (viii. 9, 10), speaking of the destruction of Samaria, says:

"I will cause the sun to go down at noon, and I will darken the earth in the clear day; and I will turn your feasts," etc.

Micah (i. 3, 4), in relating the fall of Samaria, uses the following well-known rhetorical figures:

"For, behold, the Lord cometh forth out of his place, and will come down, and tread upon the high places of the earth. And the mountains shall be molten," etc.

Similarly Haggai (ii. 6, 7), in describing the destruction of the kingdom of the Medes and Persians:

"I will shake the heavens and the earth, and the sea, and the dry land: and I will shake all nations," etc.

When [David] (Ps. lx. 4) describes how, during the expedition of Joab against the Edomites, the nation was low and weak, and how he prayed to God for His assistance, he says:

"Thou hast made the earth to tremble; thou hast broken it: heal the breaches thereof: for it shaketh."

In another instance he expresses the idea that we need not fear when we see other nations die and perish, because we rely on God's support, and not on our sword and strength, in accordance with the words:

"A people saved by the Lord, the shield of thy help" (Deut. xxxiii. 29); he says (Ps. xlvi. 2):

"Therefore will we not fear, though the earth be removed, and though the mountains be shaken in the midst of the sea."

The following figurative language is employed in Scripture in referring to the death of the Egyptians in the Red Sea:

"The waters saw thee; they were afraid: the depths also were troubled, etc. The voice of thy thunder was in the heaven: the lightnings lightened the world; the earth trembled and shook" (Ps. lxxvii. 17-19). "Was the Lord displeased against the rivers?" etc. (Hab. iii. 8).

"There went up a smoke out of his nostrils," etc. (Ps. xviii. 9). "The earth trembled," etc. (Judges v. 4, in the Song of Deborah).

There are many other instances; but those which I have not quoted can be explained in accordance with those which I have cited.
Let us now consider the words of Joel (iii. 3-5):

“And I will show wonders in the heavens and in the earth, blood and fire, and pillars of smoke. The sun shall be turned into darkness, and the moon into blood, before the great and terrible day of the Lord come. And it shall come to pass, that whosoever shall call on the name of the Lord shall be delivered, for in Mount Zion and in Jerusalem shall be deliverance,” etc.

I refer them to the defeat of Sennacherib near Jerusalem; but they may be taken as an account of the defeat of Gog and Magog near Jerusalem in the days of the Messiah, if this appears preferable, although nothing is mentioned in this passage but great slaughter, destruction, fire, and the diminution of the light of the two luminaries. You may perhaps object: How can the day of the fall of Sennacherib, according to our explanation, be called "the great and the terrible day of the Lord?" But you must know that a day of great salvation or of great distress is called "the great and terrible day of the Lord." Thus Joel (ii. 11) says of the day on which the locusts came over the land, "For the day of the Lord is great and terrible, and who can abide it?"

Our opinion, in support of which we have quoted these passages, is clearly established, namely, that no prophet or sage has ever announced the destruction of the Universe, or a change of its present condition, or a permanent change of any of its properties.

End of Chapter XXIX, PART II.

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