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ARTICLE VI.

THE AUTHORITY OF THE HEBREW PROPHETS.¹

BY PROFESSOR FRANCIS B. DENIO, D.D.

THE foregoing discussion has been needful for the elucidation of important considerations subsidiary to the answer of the question which constitutes our theme. As I stated it, it was "the origin of the authority of the prophets of Israel to speak for God." The course of thought followed leads me to restate it: How did the Hebrew prophets arrive at their certainty that they had received the mind of God and had also received authority to declare his mind to men?

I have already sketched in meager outline the process by which we attain to personal knowledge of God. It is not a swift process. Did the prophets come into their knowledge of God in the same way in which we do? We have the Bible, Jesus Christ, the Christian church, for the Holy Spirit to employ. The many devout men of the past and the present who have an insight into the meaning of their experiences are our helpers. By virtue of all these we have that knowledge of God and our relation with him which enriches our lives. What aids had the Old Testament prophets?

It is only in the person of Jesus Christ that the revelation of the personal nature of God has been so presented as to make men at large know God so as to strive after a friendship with a holy God. What did the Hebrew prophets have in the place of the personal presence and words of Jesus Christ?

¹ Concluded from p. 125.

What also did they have in the place of the Bible? We cannot easily measure the power of the Bible in our religious life. In the words of the late Professor Stearns, "There is no reason to believe that Christianity would for any long time continue to exist as an active power in the world were the Bible to be blotted out of existence."¹

It used to be thought that the law of Moses was this substitute. The present trend of criticism would take that support away. Suppose that the prophets subsequent to Moses had that law, how much of a substitute was it for the entire Bible and Jesus Christ. How account for Moses, his knowledge and authority? If we had no external standard fixed and constantly open to appeal, the majority of earnest souls would have little or no safeguard against fanaticism. So far were the prophets from leaning upon a Bible that they were the principal agents in the production of the Bible.

Although the Old Testament prophets had not our wealth of external helps for coming to a personal knowledge of God and the personal relation with him, they were granted a degree of certainty, in their knowledge of God and of their relation with him, which only the choicest souls among us attain; and, within the limits of their authoritative message, the things which they knew of God are rarely equaled among our best and choicest spirits. These results attained with all the aids that we have would be wonderful, but they were surpassingly marvelous when they came without the aid of the revelation of God in Christ, without the aid of our Bible, without the aid of a long line of godly men who should assist them in understanding their own experience, and lead them to see the presence of God in it. The pioneers who could assist the pro-

¹ Evidence of Christian Experience, p. 314; quoted for support in Bruce's Apologetics, p. 354.

phets were few, and their assistance was but slight. Rather the prophets were the pioneers for us all.

Yet more noteworthy than their knowledge of God was the fact of their assured authority. Authority to speak for God, and obligation to speak for him, were marks of the Hebrew prophet. We have seen that authority has a personal origin. It presupposes personal relations and personal transmission. What was the mode of the "full and abundant contact with reality" which made them certain that this authority had been transmitted to them?

Let us examine the processes by which we recognize personality in one another. That thing perceived by one in another which is decisive in the recognition of personality is intelligent purposefulness with moral ends. The mechanical processes in the physical world do not prove personality. Indeed, in our mature years, where we see only mechanical uniformity we deny personality in direct manifestation. When we see the evident formation of purposes and their accomplishment in our presence, and all in consequence of our actions or words, there we infer personality.

We need to analyze the mental processes at an early stage of life, in order to see how personality is recognized. We then learned to interpret one particular class of phenomena as indicating the presence of persons. In this respect our knowledge of realities manifesting personality was precisely like our other knowledge.

A child feels discomfort and expresses itself. The discomfort is removed. It experiences similar discomfort, and this also is removed. Again and again this experience is repeated; conditions and sequences come with great uniformity. The child learns to look outside itself for the removal of its discomforts. Later its sense of discomfort is discriminated into

various forms, as hunger, aches or pains, and sharp distresses. The child becomes aware that the power outside itself is always ready to attempt to relieve all its discomforts, and, the worse its discomfort is, the more readiness is there to relieve it.

Coincident with these mental processes the child has a growing sense of power,—power to make its discomforts known, and to express desire for their relief. This sense of power contributes to the consciousness of its own will, and thus contributes to the development of the sense of personality. While he is growing conscious of his own personality, he is also interpreting personality into the acts of the beings about him. Just as he interpreted the order observed in the physical world by the rationality that was in himself, so he interprets the phenomena about him which indicate intelligence and purpose as the output of such personality as he is becoming conscious of within himself.

Thus at a very early stage did the child recognize the presence of another will intent upon ministering to its comfort. Through all the dawning knowledge of its own will it learned to recognize the action of other wills on its behalf. It recognized the signs of intelligence and purpose, of purposes which were modified by its presence, and especially was it impressed with those purposes which were formed or modified because of its expressed desires. This last point is that which is especially significant in the recognition of personality. It is the interaction of wills and the mutual modification of purposes which enable us to recognize personality. I doubt if we could ever recognize personality but for this interaction of wills and mutual modification of purposes. This interlinking of the phenomena of will and purpose is the essential element of the mutual revelation of personality. These psychological elements are present in our attainment of personal fellowship

with God. The interaction of the human and divine wills is manifested in prayer, and submission, and obedience on our part, and in the inner experiences of divine peace and favor which are given to us, and in the providences of our external life.

Let us now review our discussion, and note some of the facts which we have considered:—

We, at the present stage of spiritual development, are able to enter into a personal relation with God, so that we can know him, and know his mind in some degree, and perhaps sometimes even speak a word of authority from him. The means by which we enter into this knowledge is, of course, our experience; but, in order to understand our experience, we must have large recourse to the teachings of the Bible interpreted by the Holy Spirit and the assistance of those Christians who have most insight. The aid of the Scriptures is absolutely essential. The conditions so essential as the basis of the Spirit's operations were absolutely non-existent for the Hebrew prophets. Nevertheless, they had a degree of certainty in their knowledge, and an authority in their utterance, which is rarely equaled among us, and even those among us who might ever be thought to rival the prophets are largely indebted to the prophets. This means that the prophets had conscious personal relations with God, that they received knowledge and authority from him, and thus had absolute certainty in respect to both knowledge and authority. They did work which is a fundamental contribution to our coming into personal relation with God, and they were destitute of our advantages.

I believe that there are but two ways in which this certain knowledge of the divine fellowship, with its impartation of the sense of authority, could have come. One way is that in

which we come into our knowledge of God. This is, as we have seen, impossible in the circumstances of the Hebrew prophets. The second way is that by which we come into a personal knowledge of each other.

Before examining this second way, let us consider yet another way which is sometimes proposed. It is the way of reflection, by gleams of insight, or by flashes of intuition. Did Moses, Elijah, Amos, Isaiah, and the others pass long periods in brooding over the nature, mind, and purpose of God, until, by a sudden flash of illumination, they saw that God must be such a being as they then began to proclaim, and that he was working out such plans in the life of Israel as they made known? Did they also come to this sense of their authority and obligation to publish God's will and purpose by this process of reflection and intuition? Was all this due merely to the operation of the immanent Spirit of God? This is apparently the meaning of Kittel in his "History of the Hebrews," a writer whom I respect most highly, and to whose judgment I often and gladly defer. He says:—

"How did that new and lofty knowledge of God find its way into the soul of Moses? That remains the secret of his great spirit. Every genius on earth is a riddle for history. The religious genius is the greatest enigma of all. The history of its time enables you to explain in part each new creation of genius, but leaves an unexplained residuum. Yet the religious creation leaves the largest residuum, because it pierces deepest into the hidden foundations of life.

"The historian finds himself confronted here with a mystery to which there is hardly any parallel in history. A solution can be found only by inserting into that blank a factor, the historical justification of which we are not in a position to make out strictly. There are points in the life of mankind where history passes over into the philosophy of history, and speculation, with its interpreting light, must illuminate the steps of a historical process which otherwise would remain obscure. We have such a point here. Nothing but an immediate contact of God himself with man can produce the true knowledge of God or bring man a real

step nearer thereto. For in himself man finds only the world and his own individuality. Neither the one nor the other of these leads beyond heathenism: that to a lower, this to a higher form. When the thought flashed across the mind of Moses that God was neither the world nor an idealised image of man, but that he was Lord of life, the Author of the moral law, enthroned above the manifold and the world of sense, ennobling and not depressing man, that knowledge came neither from his age nor from himself. It came from the immediate revelation of this God in his own heart."¹

Without doubt, Kittel is right in saying that "a solution can be found only by inserting into that blank a factor, the historical justification of which we are not in a position to make out strictly."

We can agree with nearly all that he says, but draw back from following what he seems to say is the factor which is to be inserted. Apparently he proposes a certain speculation which is fascinating, and of which I have felt the fascination. It is that the same Spirit who brooded over the primeval chaos, and brought order and organization into the physical world, and who has always dwelt in human hearts, brooding over their chaotic thoughts and speculations, in Israel wrought in the minds of the great prophets and produced their convictions and certainties. The immanent Spirit of God now seizes upon external means and objective instrumentalities for our training, and accomplishes his results only through a long process of education. Did he then dispense with objective instruments and in some manner bring to pass an immediate impact of the personal Deity upon the spirit of man, thereby producing the sense of certainty of personal relations, of knowledge, and of authority? It is a speculation which relegates the explanation into a region where analogies are, to say the least, very rare, in order to evade difficulties derived

¹ Vol. i. pp. 227 f. Trans., Vol. i. pp. 251.

from a type of philosophy which claims to base itself upon the physical sciences as they have been observed during a few generations past.

Patient comparison of this theory with the statements of the Bible and with the known operations of the human mind has convinced me that it is a totally inadequate explanation of the facts that these prophets had the certainty of knowledge which they did have, that they had such an acquaintance with God as to discern his personal character, that they knew his will concerning the conduct of men, that they knew his purpose respecting human destiny, and that they had authority to declare God's mind and purpose. I cannot accept this speculation as the proper factor for the historian to insert as the solution of the mystery. It is not scientific to declare such a speculation to involve an impossibility. We have too limited knowledge to make a universal negative statement such as this. We may say that, so far as the present science of psychology goes, it offers no sufficient analogy for the proposed explanation.

This speculation may plead the support of some Old Testament passages which attribute the efficiency of the Old Testament leaders to some special gift of God's Spirit, qualifying them for service which was above their natural powers. This is not to the point. This Spirit which gave efficiency in service was neither declared nor implied to be the source of the convictions which preceded the service. This speculation ignores other declarations which are plain and often repeated in the Old Testament.

The Hebrew prophets showed themselves sincere and truthful. They declared explicitly that what they said had been given to them, and that it was not the outcome of their thinking. In fact, they charged their opponents, rivals for the lead-

ership of Israel, with finding their message in their own hearts; that is, with gaining their message by reflection, by thought, instead of receiving it from Jehovah, as they themselves had done. It is, of course, certain that they reflected long, and often sorrowfully, about the contents of their messages, and sometimes they wished to be silent rather than utter their messages. It is equally certain that they did not consider their messages to have been the result of reflection or of insight, of intuitions.

We have already noted the perils of subjective aberrations from truth when an external standard is lacking. Sandfordism, Doweism, Christian Science, and even the Plymouth Brethren illustrate perils of subjectivism when an objective standard is at hand and even in use. The Hebrew prophets felt this peril, and constantly referred to an objective source of their knowledge, teachings, and authority.

In our discussion comparatively little stress has been laid upon the source of the Hebrew prophet's knowledge of God. I agree with those who regard the conception of God's holiness so unique that it could have come only by revelation. But, supposing that that conception could have come in a flash of intuition, no known mental analogies exist, I believe, which make this explanation at all likely as an explanation of the certainty which we have discussed under the conditions in which it came to the Hebrew prophets. I know of no miracle which violates the order of nature as does the psychological wonder involved in this proposed explanation, which attributes such stupendous results to so inadequate antecedents. For one I can believe far more easily in the subjection of matter to spirit than in such violation of the order of spiritual processes.

The late A. B. Davidson, preëminent for sanity among the

Old Testament scholars of the past fifty years, has left a statement much better than that from Kittel:—

“The peculiarity of the Old Testament conception rather comes out when the question is raised, how God is known. Here we touch a fundamental idea of the Old Testament—the idea of revelation. If men know God, it is because he has made himself known to them. This knowledge is due to what he does, not to what men themselves achieve. As God is the source of all life, and as the knowledge of Him is the highest life, this knowledge cannot be reached by any mere effort of man. If man has anything of God, he has received it from God who communicates himself in love and grace. The idea of man reaching to a knowledge or fellowship of God through his own efforts is wholly foreign to the Old Testament. God speaks, He appears; man listens and beholds. God brings himself nigh to man; He enters into a covenant of personal relation with them; He lays commands upon them. They receive Him when He approaches; they accept His will and obey His behests. Moses and the prophets are nowhere represented as thoughtful minds reflecting on the Unseen, and forming conclusions regarding it, or ascending into elevated conceptions of Godhead. The Unseen manifests itself before them, and they know it.”¹

Let us examine one of the accounts which the Old Testament gives of the beginning of the personal authorization of a great prophet.

A man is in the desert caring for a flock. His eye is caught by an unwonted sight,—an acacia tree is ablaze with flame, yet continues unconsumed. Out from the midst of that flaming acacia into the silence of the desert air come intelligible sounds to his ears. In that solitude the man has a long conversation with an unseen person. The conversation runs on into argument and expostulation. A course of conduct is urged upon him. He objects; various modes of persuasion are manifested, including some events, which must be regarded as signs of the personal action of a superhuman intelligence, will, and power.

This narrative gives us processes which are psychologically

¹ Old Testament Theology, p. 34; see, also, pp. 35, 116, 296–298.

identical with those by which we in childhood learn the presence of persons. It is perhaps remarked that a superhuman personality is here represented as acting, and that supernatural events are introduced. How much would we know of human personalities if the orderly course of nature were never diverted or turned about by human wills? Do we not constantly introduce supernatural elements into the ongoings of the physical world? We certainly have some degree of freedom in the management of the physical world. Must we think that God has less freedom than we? Why should he not exercise greater freedom? What evidence of the divine personality would be possible, as conclusive as the evidence of a human person, if it were not by the manifestation of intelligent purposefulness and in some degree which is impossible for a human person? Is this not true of our own personal experience of the divine fellowship? How could Moses or any Hebrew prophet have had a conviction of authority if he had not the evidence of relation with a divine person as complete as he had of a human person?

This physical world may be thought of as the garment of God, exhibiting him freely advancing in the course of events, or it may be the mummy wrappings of a God who lies motionless, with less freedom of action in this visible world than man has. What evidence of the divine personality could be possible, as conclusive as the evidence of a human person, if it were not by the manifestation of intelligent purposefulness, and in some degree which is impossible for a human person? How could a man have conviction of authority if he had not the evidence of relation with a divine person as complete as he has of such relation with a human person?

We are thus brought face to face with two possibilities, both outside of the present experience of man. Either a creative cause

was directly operative upon the human soul, producing certainty of knowledge without the customary antecedent intellectual processes, or there was a superhuman use of physical forces for the higher spiritual ends, analogous to the principle according to which man uses such forces for his ends. Either God exercised some influence upon the human soul which we can regard as only magical in its nature, or God made a temporary manifestation of himself within the sphere of the senses in a manner which has been paralleled in no recent century.

The experience of Moses given just now was one of a series called "theophanies." It is to be noted that the theophanies belong to the earlier stages of Israel's history. Later, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel had experiences which we call "visions," in which they received their personal authorization to speak for Jehovah. If we study carefully all the recorded instances of the theophany and the vision, we see that, wherever the Old Testament purported to give an account of the experience by which a prophet came to his sense of his authority to speak for God, it was by some of the forms of communication by which he might receive personal authorization from a man. Whether the man received a revelation in his ordinary consciousness or in ecstatic consciousness, the forms of receiving communication were by sight or hearing. In short, God made a temporary descent into the sphere of the senses.

Let me call your attention to several similar occurrences recorded in the New Testament. John the Baptist saw the form of a dove descending upon Jesus at the Baptism, while Jesus heard the words: "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." At the Transfiguration the three disciples heard a voice, "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased; hear ye him." One of those who heard that voice

referred to it a generation later as the voice which he had heard borne from heaven when he was with Jesus in the holy mount. Again, in the temple during passion week Jesus prayed: "Father, glorify thy name," and then a voice, audible to others, intelligible to Jesus, came saying, "I have both glorified it, and will glorify it again." And still later Saul heard a voice on his way to Damascus, audible to others, intelligible to him alone.

The fact is that God either did or did not use a method of communicating with Moses psychologically equivalent to the method in which we make personal communications. We have not the sort of evidence which enables us to give what Kittel calls a "historical justification" to any explanation. We cannot say that we have full evidence of the sort we should like. In such circumstances two methods of treatment are possible. One method is to meet these Old Testament narratives by the affirmation of the impossibility of such events. This affirmation is a presupposition of the baldest kind. It is not legitimate science. It is not difficult by logic to show that motion is impossible. It was not difficult, even while Napoleon Bonaparte was still living, to show plausible ground in abundance for doubting that he ever existed. Logic might seem to disprove the Old Testament explanations. It is a superb instrument when employed for its own proper ends. For the analysis and verification of knowledge already attained it is of the highest value, for the broadening of knowledge it may be quite useful, but all the logic in the world cannot explain away a fact. A single moment of crisis in life will sometimes sweep away the elaborate structures of theory or prejudice which have stood many years. You can find no more puzzling questions than those which concern your personal identity. You can pursue a critical method until you are mentally befogged, but

the affirmation which your self-consciousness enables you to make is adequate to clear the atmosphere. Life is more than logic, as reality is greater than any formal statement of truth.

The other method is to leave presuppositions behind as much as we are able (nobody can put them all behind him), and take the facts, and study them. Attempt to gain their full meaning, take the important facts that are subsidiary to our purpose, and let them have their true weight. I have attempted to do this. I have brought before you the elements of the problem, the certainties which the Hebrew prophets declared, certainties to them long before history could verify them, and the conviction by which they awed an unbelieving audience, and the conviction with which they spoke. I have also set forth the methods in which the human mind is known to operate.

Do you not agree with me that these constitute decisive reasons for accepting the Old Testament statements of the the methods in which the prophets became qualified to speak with certainty and authority on the theme which was peculiarly theirs?

The explanation is so perfectly in harmony with the needs of the case that I am quite ready to express my belief that these narratives give us essential fact. Because they are psychologically so true, I believe them to be substantially true in fact. I shall not trouble myself to prove their accuracy in each detail of the narratives. I conclude that the representations of theophanies and visions record for us the fact that God temporarily entered into the sphere cognizable by human senses, and made personal communications to the great religious leaders of Israel, giving that amount of truth respecting his character, mind, and purpose which they were able to receive, and that he also, in like manner, authorized them to speak for him to their people.

By communicating with them in similar manner from time to time he supplied them with an objective standard, which we have seen to be so important, and which was otherwise lacking for them. In this way the objective standard was kept before them and its importance deeply impressed. And in this way was the sense of certainty produced, and also the sense of their authority and obligation to speak to their people.

Thus did God adapt himself to the psychological needs of these men, and thus did he give them that conviction which enabled them to face the unbelieving Israel, and convince a portion of the race of the fact of the revelation of God, and to lead them to accept the contents of this revelation. The intensity and force of their convictions were such that the portion of the race convinced by them was large enough to enable them to mold the development of Israel sufficiently to prepare for the coming of Christ.

In closing, I wish to call attention to the way in which these conclusions illustrate the law of spiritual development as stated by Paul: "That is not first which is spiritual, but that which is natural; then that which is spiritual" (1 Cor. xv. 46).

This truth stated by Paul is exemplified in our intellectual life. All our spiritual conceptions have been based on conceptions which have their antecedents in the facts of physical nature. This truth of Paul's words is exemplified in the very texture of the language we use. It might be illustrated often from the discussion in scores of words or phrases which I have used to set forth the thoughts I wished to present. Take the phrase just used, "set forth." Did we not learn that phrase and use it in the natural, the physical, the visible sense, for months and years before we learned to attach any figurative or spiritual sense to the phrase? It is the accepted

opinion, and I believe a correct one, that every word or phrase by which we express our spiritual ideas would be seen to have a similar history if we were able to trace its history.

Thus, also, the present spiritual mode of entrance into the personal knowledge of God and fellowship with him should not be regarded as the first mode of entrance into such relations. It is not in harmony with our normal development that our present method should have been the universal method from the beginning. The analogies of the spiritual development of the race point to a mode in which physical nature, sense perception, once played a larger part than now.

First, then, a few men as leaders received the manifestation of the personality of God in modes essentially and perceptibly like the modes in which they had learned to recognize personality in human beings. Next, God made himself known by a mode less perceptible to the ordinary senses, as in the visions such as are described in the opening of the ministry of Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, and like the experience of Peter on the roof of the house of Simon the tanner. Later came that revelation manifested bodily in Christ.

We know that the three years in which the apostles lived in close personal contact with Jesus Christ, the manifestation of God, were no more than they needed in order to make them susceptible to the guidance of the Spirit in preaching the gospel. We know, too, that their preaching was based on objective facts in the physical world; namely, the life, work, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

If all this is true, how much more was it needful, when God would originate true conceptions of himself and authorize men to speak for him, that he should reveal himself to human senses through some of the forms of personal action to the

Hebrew prophets in those stages of the Christian religion before Christ had been manifested?

Lastly, after the coming of Jesus, after there was a large variety of material for the Holy Spirit to use, beginning with the group of men who at the first knew Jesus Christ after the flesh, who had heard, had seen with their eyes, had beheld and handled with their hands, and thus had experience of Jesus Christ, and who later had had this knowledge lifted out of the senses by their subsequent experiences so that, although they had known Jesus Christ after the flesh, they came to know him after the Spirit,—when this transition had been made, then could begin in full the manner of spiritual personal intercourse with God in which we now live and which we enjoy.