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Who were the Prophets ?

I.—HEATHEN DIVINATION.

THE origin of prophecy goes back to hoary antiquity. Primitive man, desirous of unravelling the secret of the future and acquiring a knowledge of the Divine Will (especially with reference to the ordinary affairs of life), had recourse to men or women whom he believed to be in the secret of the Deity. So there arose among the heathen nations a class of men who pretended to possess the power of communicating with supernatural beings with a view to ascertaining their wills. These were consulted on every conceivable occasion. We therefore find among the non-Israelitish peoples countless forms of soothsaying and divination. As such practices were frequently attended by deception, superstition, and gross immorality (Lev. xviii. 24 *et seq.*), the Israelites were strictly forbidden to have anything to do with them. "There shall not be found with thee," runs the Lawgiver's injunction, "anyone that maketh his son or his daughter to pass through the fire, one that useth divination, or a soothsayer, or an enchanter, or a sorcerer, or a charmer,¹ or one that consulteth a ghost² or a familiar spirit,³ or a necromancer. For whosoever doeth these things is an abomination unto the Lord. . . . The Lord thy God will raise up unto thee a prophet from the midst of thee, of thy brethren, like unto me ; unto him ye shall hearken " (Deut. xviii. 10-15). Accordingly, the Hebrews, instead of consulting heathen diviners, were "to hearken" to God's prophet. "The prophet becomes thus a bulwark against the encroachments of heathenism" (Driver).

¹ *I.e.*, "one who ties magic knots or binds by a spell" (Driver).

² The Hebrew word "ōb," translated in R.V. "a familiar spirit," is rendered in Sept. ἐγγαστριμυδος = "ventriloquist."

³ "Yiddēōni," not "wizard" (A.V.), but a "familiar or intimate spirit," *i.e.*, "a spirit which is at the beck and call of a particular person" (Driver).

II.—WHAT IS A PROPHET?¹

Probably, if they were asked, most people would say that a "prophet" is a person who foretells some future event. A careful examination, however, will show that such a definition is inadequate, for although the power to predict the future was an important element in a prophet's office, it was not an *essential* element. Abraham, for instance, is called a "prophet" (Gen. xx. 7), yet we have no record of any predictions from him. He was not so much a *fore-teller* as a *forth-teller*; he was a medium of revelation from God that through his seed God was going to bless "all the families of the earth" (Gen. xii. 3). Similarly, Aaron is called a "prophet" to Moses because he speaks for him—he is Moses' spokesman (Exod. vii. 1). In fact, in Ps. cv. 15 the term "prophets" is applied to the Patriarchs generally. What, then, is a prophet? We will try to answer this question by examining the names by which a prophet is known in the Old Testament. He is known as—

(a) *A Man of God* (Sam. ii. 27).—This is the usual name in the early days. Moses, Samuel, Shemaiah, Elijah, and Elishah bear this designation.² This name suggests that the prophets stood in a closer fellowship with God than other men. As Jeremiah puts it, they "stood in the council of the Lord" and heard His word (xxiii. 18). They had experienced a definite fellowship with God, and thus had become "God's men," enjoying the privilege of unrestricted admittance to His presence and of intimate knowledge of His will. "Surely the Lord God will do nothing, but He revealeth His secret unto His servants the prophets" (Amos iii. 7). Before this experience, Samuel, we are told, "did not yet know the Lord" (1 Sam. iii. 7). By this statement we are not to understand that Samuel was unaware of God's existence, for in that case he could not have ministered unto Him (v. 1); but only he had not yet experi-

¹ See A. B. Davidson's "Old Testament Prophecy," chap. vii.

² See Deut. xxxiii. 1; 1 Sam. ix. 6; 1 Kings xii. 22, xvii. 18; 2 Kings iv. 7.

enced that close fellowship with God by virtue of which he became a "man of God."

(b) *A Servant of Jehovah* (Deut. xxxiv. 5; 2 Kings ix. 7; 1 Kings xviii. 36).—By the word "servant" it is implied that the prophets had some public *service* to perform for Jehovah. They were not hermits, dwelling in cells and away from human society. On the contrary, they were accessible to all who needed their help. In the earlier days they were consulted even for such mundane matters as the whereabouts of lost property (1 Sam. ix.).

(c) *A Messenger of Jehovah* (Isa. xlii. 19).—The kind of "service" which the prophet had to perform is defined by this title. He is a "messenger"; he does not speak his own words; he speaks the words which God has put in his mouth.¹ Sometimes the message which he is commissioned to deliver is so much against his personal inclination that he would fain be excused delivering it. For instance, when Jeremiah received the Divine intimation to announce the impending doom of the sinful nation, his whole being recoiled from such a task. "My bowels, my bowels!" he cried, "I am pained at my very heart; my heart is disquieted in me, I cannot hold my peace" (iv. 19). On another occasion he gave vent to his passionate grief in these words: "O that my head were waters, and mine eyes fountains of tears, that I might weep day and night for the slain of the daughter of my people!" (ix. 1). Likewise Hosea, in predicting the deserved punishment of his impenitent country, bursts into an impassioned cry: "How shall I give thee up, Ephraim? How shall I deliver thee,

¹ It is worth noting that of the private lives of most of the prophets we hardly know anything. The messenger is purposely put in the background so that the message may be thrown into greater prominence. It is said that a member of the late Rev. C. H. Spurgeon's Church was anxious that one of his friends should hear the famous preacher. That friend was somewhat prejudiced against Spurgeon. One Sunday, however, he consented to go to the Tabernacle. Service over, the friends were walking home. "Well, what did you think of Spurgeon?" asked the member. "Nothing at all," replied the friend, "I was so much drawn to the Lord he was preaching that I never thought of the preacher." Does not this explain the secret of Spurgeon's marvellous success?

Israel? . . . mine heart is turned within me, my compassions are kindled together" (ii. 8). Surely, nothing short of an intense conviction that the message was direct from God could have impelled these prophets to deliver them so faithfully.

(d) *A Seer* (1 Sam. ix. 9).—This term suggests a man of vision, a man endowed with Divine insight. This "insight was not the result of superior shrewdness or mental endowment of the ordinary kind" (Davidson). The "seer" had the Divinely-imparted capacity of piercing through the veil that hides the world of Divine things. Occasionally the veil is lifted up for him so that he can "obtain an inner knowledge of the realities beyond" (*cf.* 2 Kings vi. 17).

(e) *A Watchman* (Isa. xxi. 11; Ezek. iii. 17; *cf.* Hab. ii. 1).—The prophet is no mere visionary. Voluntary effort on his part is needed. He watches for God's revelation. He stands, as it were, on a tower to spy out and give notice of the first distant sign of danger or help. Being convinced that God rules in the kingdom of men, he regards no event as a mere occurrence. "Each great event of history is a theophany, a manifestation of God in His moral operation."¹ Accordingly, he turns his face heavenward and watches for some intimation of the Divine purpose touching that event. He views historical events and estimates them from God's standpoint, and not from man's. He is, therefore, sometimes called an "interpreter" (Isa. xliii. 27).

(f) *A Prophet*.—The Hebrew word "nābhī," translated "prophet" in the English Bible, is derived by some scholars from a root meaning "to announce," whereas others derive it from a cognate root signifying "to bubble up," "to pour forth"—*i.e.*, words under strong excitement or in an exalted state of feeling. It differs from "seer" in this respect that "seer" points to the method of *receiving* the Divine message, while the term "prophet" points to the *delivering* of that message.

To sum up, from the examination of the various names used

¹ Davidson, in Hastings' "Dictionary of the Bible," art. "Prophecy," p. 113.

in the Bible, we gather that a prophet is a man of God, has a public service to perform for God, and that service consists mainly of delivering God's message to men. He is on the watch for Divine intimation ; he sees the things of God, and speaks of the things of God to men. He could not be a prophet unless he spoke *from God*, he could not be a prophet unless he *spoke to men*. They were all impelled by an irresistible power of the Spirit to deliver their message unflinching and without any regard to their own personal safety.

III.—THE FUNCTIONS OF THE PROPHETS.

The prophets were men of diverse type of mind and character. They were not, like the priests, a tribe ; neither did they all spring from one class of society. *Isaiah*, for instance, was a member of the aristocracy ; *Amos*, his contemporary, was a herdman and a tender of sycamore-trees (*Amos vii. 14*) ; *Micah* was a peasant, whereas *Samuel* was a judge. Although hailing from different ranks of society, they were all men of great intellectual powers, of personal courage, and of wide sympathies. They were far above their contemporaries, and could act as statesmen, historians or poets, as the exigency of the time required. They were the foremost men in Israel, and they were all convinced of the following cardinal truths :

- (i.) Israel is the covenant people of Jehovah.
- (ii.) The purpose of that covenant is the establishment of the kingdom of God on earth.
- (iii.) That kingdom is destined ultimately to embrace *all* the world.

They were intent on safeguarding these truths, and on hastening their realization. For this purpose they assumed different rôles at different times.

They acted as :

(a) *Religious or Inspired Patriots*.—During the period of the Judges, when Israel was engaged in continual conflict with the neighbouring states, the task of the contemporary prophets was to preserve the religion of Israel from the peril of *external*

suppression, rather than of internal corruption (cf. Hos. xii. 13). So they may fairly be called national councillors and patriots. Let us take Deborah as an example. In her days the Canaanites were still in possession of a zone of fortified cities in the vicinity of Megiddo, and thus had cut off all intercourse between the tribes which had settled in the north of Palestine from those which had occupied the midlands. Deborah clearly saw that this constituted not only a menace to the religious unity of the tribes, but also threatened the very existence of Israel as a nation. So she called on Barak, the son of Abinoam, to lead the tribes of Israel against the common foe, and save Israel's existence and Israel's religion. After the victory, in a magnificent ode, she bestowed the meed of praise upon those tribes which had valiantly "jeoparded their lives unto the death," and heaped well-deserved reproaches upon the "shirkers." "Curse ye Meroz, said the angel of the Lord, curse ye bitterly the inhabitants thereof; because they came not to the help of the Lord, to the help of the Lord against the mighty" (Judges v. 23).

(b) *Defenders of Individual Rights and Guardians of Public Morality.*—On the accession of David to the throne and the establishment of his kingdom on a firm basis, the external conditions of Israel changed. There was no longer fear of the Israelitish religion being violently extinguished by foreign enemies. A new danger, however, threatened the life and liberty of the subject—the tyranny of the king. So the prophets became guardians of individual rights and of public morality. So, when David had sacrificed the honour of Bathsheba and the life of Uriah, the prophet Nathan confronted him and in the name of God denounced his sin. Again, when King Ahab cast covetous eyes on the vineyard of Naboth, and was about to take possession of it, Elijah appeared on the scene and censured the royal culprit. Further, he pronounced the Divine retribution on Jezebel, who had brought about the murder of Naboth: "The dogs shall eat Jezebel by the rampart of Jezreel" (1 Kings xxi. 23). Everywhere they denounced

wrongdoing, sensuality, and oppression. They were exponents of a genuine democracy and champions of social righteousness. They were more than this ; they were also—

(c) *Defenders of Pure Faith.*—During the eighth century B.C. the kingdom of Israel and the kingdom of Judah both passed through a period of great national prosperity. Isaiah draws a vivid picture of the wealth of the Judeans and of the self-indulgence and frivolity of the women of Jerusalem (iii. 16-26). In Samaria the social life was even more extravagant. Amos tells us that the rich lived in great luxury, reclining on ivory couches, feasting upon delicacies, drinking wine in bowls, and listening to strains of varied music (vi. 4-6). Side by side with this there was a semblance of religion. Observance of rites and ceremonies was fashionable. The ancient shrines of Bethel, Gilgal, Beer-sheba, and the Temple in Jerusalem were flocked by worshippers, who offered “multitudes of sacrifices.” A splendid service was punctiliously maintained, and the growth of national prosperity was popularly regarded as a mark of God’s favour. People came to believe that sacrifice and ritual were adequate substitutes for spiritual religion and social morality. Not so the prophets. One day, when the royal chapel at Bethel was crowded with worshippers, *Amos* presented himself with the Divine message : “I hate, I despise your feasts, and I will take no delight in your solemn assemblies . . . But let judgment roll on as waters, and righteousness as a mighty stream” (Amos v. 21-24). In a similar strain did *Hosea* proclaim the Divine requirement : “I desire mercy, and not sacrifice ; and the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings” (Hos. vi. 6). So also *Micah*. People’s consciences were stirred by Micah’s preaching ; wishing to gain the favour of Jehovah, they came to the prophet with the suggestion : “Wherewith shall I come before Jehovah, and bow myself down unto God on high ? Shall I come before Him with burnt offerings, with calves of a year old ? Will Jehovah accept thousands of rams, myriads of rivers of oil ? Shall I give my first-born for my transgression, the fruit of my

body for the sin of my soul?" (vi. 6-7). Micah replied that Jehovah was not a despot who required to be propitiated with lavish sacrifices. On the contrary: "He hath declared to thee, O man, what is good; and what does Jehovah require of thee, save to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?" (vi. 8).

(d) *Inspired Statesmen.*—Sometimes the prophets had to act as statesmen, although as a rule they did not meddle with politics. It was only during special crises that they came to the rescue and directed the national policy. For instance, *Samuel* placed Saul on the throne of Israel; *Elijah* was the national bulwark ("the chariots of Israel and the horsemen thereof," 1 Kings ii. 12); *Elishah* was the embodiment of the national spirit in the wars against Syria; *Nathan* decided the succession to the throne of David; and *Isaiah* wielded an immense influence on the political life of the nation during the Assyrian supremacy.

(e) *Pastors* (see Ezek. xxxiv.).—At the downfall of the Jewish state, and the dispersion of the Jews, the prophets turned their attention from the nation to the *individual*. They became *pastors* rather than inspired statesmen. They gave up themselves to justifying God's ways with men, to fostering a spirit of hope, and thus preserving the people from despondency and eventual apostasy.

(f) *Foretellers of the Kingdom of Christ.*—"All the prophets," said Rabbi Yochanan, "prophesied only with reference to the days of the Messiah" (Sanhedrin xcvi. 2). According to another Talmudical authority, the name of the Messiah was one of the seven things created *before* the world (Pessachim, fol. 54^a; cf. Rev. xiii. 8). Although the Plan of Salvation of the human race was determined in the foreknowledge of God before the foundation of the world, yet the revelation of that Plan was gradual and progressive. Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit the prophets came to recognize that in the election, the discipline, and the marvellous preservation of the Jewish nation there was a Divine purpose. That purpose was a purpose of

grace. God was going to establish His kingdom upon earth, and "bless all the families of the earth." Israel was to be the channel through which that blessing was to flow to the world at large. It was this conviction that cheered and inspired the prophets even in the moments of their darkest distress.

From time to time one of the kings of Judah, on his accession to the throne of David, showed such a zeal for the pure religion of Jehovah that it evoked in the contemporary prophets the hope that he might be the Anointed of the Lord, destined to usher in the world the desired Kingdom of Righteousness and Peace. But subsequent events shattered such a hope. So the seers were led to turn their gaze to a future Son of David, who, endued with supernatural powers (Isa. ii. 1-11), and Himself supernatural (Isa. ix. 6 ; Mic. v. 2), would be able to accomplish that which others had not been able to do. Accordingly, they draw exquisite pictures of the Messianic age, of the fertility of the earth, and of its immunity from moral and physical evil (Isa. ii. 2-4, ii. 1-11, lxv. 25 ; Mic. iv. 1-3, viii. 20-23, etc.).

To assure us of the Messiah's sympathies with the poor and the oppressed, *Micah* foretells that the coming Ruler will come forth not out of Jerusalem, the royal city, but out of the small and comparatively insignificant country town of Bethlehem (v. 2). Lest men should despise Him on that account, he adds that "His goings forth" (*i.e.*, His origins) have been "from of old, from everlasting." In other words, although the Messiah's birthplace may be obscure and lowly, yet His real origin is mysterious and from above. *Zechariah* also takes delight in depicting some of the characteristics of the "lowly" King, and the ultimate triumph of His sovereignty (ix. 9). In the fifty-third chapter of *Isaiah* we get a most minute description of the Servant of Jehovah's humiliation and glory. Had the ablest journalist of the twentieth century been present on Calvary on that first Good Friday, and had he attempted to report what took place there, he could not have given us a more vivid and more accurate description than the account which was written

centuries before that Crucifixion. The "Servant's" unostentatious beginning, His being despised and rejected of men, His voluntary sufferings, His vicarious and atoning death, His being reckoned with the criminals, His intercession for the transgressors, His resurrection, and His final triumph and exaltation, are all most graphically described. Of late years it has become fashionable among the critics to follow some Jewish controversial writers of the Middle Ages and say that the "servant" in this chapter is the *Jewish nation*. Apart from the fact that the sufferings of the Jewish nation were due to their own sins (Isa. lviii. 1, l. 1), and were neither voluntary nor vicarious, verse 10 is conclusive against the critical interpretation: "For the transgression of *My people* was He stricken." If the "servant" suffered for the transgression of the Jewish people, He must be distinguished from the Jewish nation.

Having now shown that the prophets foretold the kingdom of the Messiah, we will give here—

IV.—THE CHRONOLOGY OF THE HEBREW PROPHETS.

(1) *Prophets of the Pre-Assyrian Age*: Obadiah, 842 B.C.; Jonah, 840 B.C.; Joel, 810 B.C. (2) *Prophets of the Assyrian Age*: (a) In Israel—Amos, Hosea, 760-722 B.C.; (b) in Judah—Micah, Isaiah, 740-700 B.C. (3) *Prophets of the Decline (Chaldean Period)*: Nahum, 640 B.C.; Zephaniah, 630-622 B.C.; Habakkuk, 609 B.C.; Jeremiah, 627-577 B.C. (4) *Prophets of the Exile*: Ezekiel, 592-570 B.C.; Daniel, 606-534 B.C. (5) *Prophets after the Exile (Persian Period)*: Haggai, 520 B.C.; Zechariah, 520-518 B.C.; Malachi, 446 B.C.

There are great divergences of views as to the dates of Obadiah, Jonah, and Joel. The above dates are virtually the dates accepted by Kirkpatrick, Orelli, and Marcus Dods. Other scholars either refrain from fixing any date, or bring the dates down to after the Fall of Jerusalem. Some extreme critics go even further, and assign these books to the Greek Period.