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Hebrew Prophecy and Modern Criticism.

BY THE REV. F. H. WOODS, B.D., LATE FELLOW OF ST. JOHN'S COLLEGE, OXFORD.

I.

"Whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope."—ROM. xv. 4.

It has often been cast in the teeth of theology that, unlike other sciences, it is not progressive. Whether this is strictly true of what is sometimes called by way of distinction "pure theology," I need not now inquire. It is certainly not true of those auxiliary branches of study, without which the more fundamental facts of religion are in danger, to a thoughtful mind, of becoming barren or unreal. To isolate theology, to shut it up as in a sacred shrine, into which it is irreverent to gaze, is to deprive it of its proper use in raising man's spiritual being. And those who do not know its power soon begin, it may be unconsciously, to doubt its reality. If Christian Apologetics especially are to be of any practical value, they must advance with the age, they must be in harmony, so far as possible, with its spirit.

Now, if asked to characterise the spirit of our time, so far as it affects our present contention, we should say generally that it is marked by an increasingly felt need of consistency of thought. We feel that every truth must stand in some sort of relation to every other truth. It is not satisfactory to say that the tendencies of the age are too materialistic, or too irreligious. I doubt very much whether either proposition is truer of this than of many other previous ages. But it cannot be doubted that it is an age of unparalleled mental activity. The rapid succession of new discoveries, the fresh applications of known laws to new inventions, are giving a repeated stimulus to thought

and intellectual enterprise. We see one sign of this in the increasing demand for education on all sides: We see another, no less significant, in the changes which are gradually being effected in the character of education. It is becoming less and less the learning by rote of traditional facts, more and more the learning how to think. If the tendencies of the age are to solidarity in one direction, they are no less to individualism and independence of judgment in another.

All this cannot but have its effect on theology. The apparent difference in its character and its methods from other branches of study exposes it to a double danger. On the one hand, the mind shrinking from the difficulty of throwing itself into a separate sphere of thought may be disposed to abandon theology altogether; on the other hand, it may seek to reduce it to the level of all other branches of knowledge. Reverence seems instinctively to recommend the first of these alternatives. The second is more in accord with the spirit of the age. But is there no other alternative? Is it not possible, while treating religion with all the reverence which the sacredness of the subject demands, to regard it as a part, even though the highest part, of that one world of thought and feeling and experience in which each individual moves? In a word, may we not do away with that isolation of religion which makes it sometimes so unpractical and so unreal? If religion is to be real, it must be in touch with the whole of man's

being. It must be a religion which he can think as well as feel. And if so, the methods of theological inquiry cannot be so very unlike the methods of other studies. To translate the thought of religion into the best thought of his own day will always be one of the most important aims of theological effort. Perhaps there never was a time when such efforts were more needed.

The work of the Christian apologist, no less than that in other branches of theology, is affected by the currents of modern thought. Formerly it was the aim of the apologist to defend very clearly cut and defined truths against a definite set of hostile opinions. In these days both the method and the spirit of apology are undergoing a radical change. The line which divides settled and fundamental truth from the unknown and the speculative is less clearly and definitely drawn. The apologist is becoming more and more himself an investigator of truth, one who re-examines its evidences with the view of discovering how far they are affected by the ascertained discoveries of modern times, what their value still is, what they really prove. Again, those with whom he reasons are not treated as necessarily wilful maligners of God's truth, but as men who hold opinions which seem antagonistic to religious truth. These opinions must therefore also be sifted, to ascertain whether they are true; whether, if true, they are really antagonistic. Theological controversy is losing its proverbial bitterness without, let us hope, at the same time losing its earnestness. And so it often happens that the apologist and the supposed antagonist find themselves working side by side in the search after truth; and not unfrequently what seemed so hostile to religion proves eventually its ally.

The special argument from prophecy in the defence of Christianity is, as much as any other, undergoing such a change as I have described. In the last century it was very definite and very simple. The fulfilment of predictions made long before proved that those who made them had a supernatural power, and that the religion which they foretold was of God. But the religion which they foretold was evidently Christianity. Therefore Christianity was of God. Prophecy was regarded as the strongest of all supports to Christian truth, because it was an ever-abiding witness to a supernatural revelation. It was stronger even than miracles, because miracles appealed almost entirely

to those for and among whom they were wrought; but every fresh fulfilment of a prophecy is as it were a new miracle and a new proof of Christianity. Now let us briefly see whether prophecy still holds or ever could have rightly held this position—at any rate on these grounds—among Christian evidences. In the first place, will any one venture to affirm that fulfilments keep recurring of so clear a character as to convince any one who does not already firmly believe the truth of Christianity? Is it not a notorious fact that believers themselves differ very widely in their interpretation of a very large number of the prophecies most confidently adduced as proofs of predictive power? How are we to make up our minds, *e.g.* whether the man of sin is the Pope, or Napoleon, or the Sultan of Turkey, or some other of the numerous persons to whom that expression has been ascribed? And if we cannot, how can we reasonably urge St. Paul's description as a proof of a divinely-inspired foreknowledge? If we read almost any work on prophecy of the last century, we cannot help feeling that too great a strain was put upon the supernatural predictive power of the prophets. The objection here urged was really as strong then as now, but it was the habit of the controversialists of that age to attempt to strengthen their cause by piling up all that could possibly be urged on their own side. In these days the least suspicion of special pleading prejudices us at once against an argument. We will hardly listen to an advocate for truth, unless we are sure that he has thoroughly mastered the objections which he is refuting, and understands, and can even enter sympathetically into the difficulties which are felt on the other side. The purpose of the candid and no less earnest apologist is not to prove Christianity by a syllogism, but to convince men of the truth. But to do this with any success, he must be in touch with the best spirit of the age.

Now the spirit of the age is on the whole against the supernatural. This feeling sometimes takes a form definitely hostile to religion; but leaving this out of the question, there are many who feel that the claim which Christianity makes to supernaturalism, so far from being the main ground for believing it to be true, is rather a hindrance to accepting it. The discovery of so much fixed law in nature, that it seems all to be governed by fixed law, has much, of course, to do with this. The common desire to simplify and bring under

one mental horizon all that is the object of feeling and thought is, no doubt, another reason for it. A world of nature governed by a stern necessity of law—a spiritual world governed by the immediate decisions of an Almighty Being, are two sets of ideas which seem incompatible, or at least difficult to grasp under one view. But besides these, there is to the most earnest thinker the feeling that supernaturalism, as commonly understood, tends to banish God as it were out of the world and out of the human heart; that the supernatural world is apt to become too much a subject merely for pious reflection, or for Sunday devotion, instead of being a thing of the practical life. The realisation of a complete natural world governed by law seems to leave no room within it for a God of supernatural agency and environment. That prophecy should claim to be a voice from a far distant world, proving its claim by a miracle of foresight does not therefore commend itself altogether to the mind of the nineteenth century. Hence the argument from prophecy with that of miracles has been dethroned from its place of honour as among the chief of Christian evidences. The apologist of to-day appeals first and foremost to a different kind of evidence altogether. He dwells especially on the intrinsic value of Christian ideas and Christian hopes, and above all of the Christian character, on the inspiration which Christianity has given, and is giving to the nobler forms of Christian duty, and the way in which it satisfies man's highest needs. I shall hope to show that, rightly understood, the argument from prophecy really does belong partly to this latter class of evidence, while partly it supplements it.

But there is another cause which in recent times has tended to modify this argument, namely, the revolution which has been gradually going on in the whole spirit and method of biblical exegesis. The old method was, first, to assume a certain number of facts about the Bible, and then to study it with this understanding. These facts may be thus summarised:—(1) The Bible is the Word of God, and therefore absolutely true in all its details. (2) The Bible is God's Word to the individual Christian, and hence a sort of handbook of Christian doctrine and Christian devotion. (3) Connected with this second assumption, and partly the result of it, is the belief that the whole of the Old Testament is pervaded by the New. This is well expressed in the well-known saying of St. Augus-

tine, that "the New Testament is latent in the Old, the Old patent in the New."¹ The patriarchs believed in Christ beforehand. Moses instituted a system of sacrifices as symbols of the great sacrifice on the cross. The prophets and psalmists were raised up to foretell the advent of Christ and the fortunes of the Christian Church. The modern method of interpretation does not necessarily accept or reject any of these assumptions, but, at any rate, it does not allow them to prejudice the study of Scripture. Its aim is to read it, as far as possible, without prejudgments of any kind. The tendency of our day to regard the supernatural with suspicion has had something to do with this change of method, and the charge, therefore, that this very cause has sometimes created a new prejudice in the mind of the critic is not altogether groundless; but the change grew mainly out of the more accurate study of the Bible itself, and of other branches of knowledge pursued in connexion with it. The number of discrepancies in the Bible which were thus revealed seemed increasingly difficult to reconcile with an absolute standard of truth. The studies of geology, natural history, and anthropology, threw more and more doubt upon the scientific accuracy of the Bible. Comparative mythology and ancient history, together with monumental records, seemed to supply another and more simple account of the origin of its early literature, and finally the critical study of classical texts suggested the application of similar methods to biblical books, with a view to ascertain their component parts. This, again, has brought about results of the greatest importance to the Bible student. It has enabled him to recast the history of Israel, so as to obtain a natural and intelligible sequence.

The very processes which have led to the new construction of the history have been showing us step by step the incredibilities and perplexities of the old. Let us mention a few of these points of difficulty. According to the order of our Bible books and sections as they stand, we have to imagine a people first of all receiving in the wilderness a very simple code of religious and social laws adapted not to a nomad, but to a settled mode of life; then after nearly forty years of wandering, before they have had any opportunity of

¹ "Quamquam et in vetere [sc. testamento] novum lateat, et in novo vetus pateat." *Quæst in Exodum*, lib. ii. quæst lxxviii. (Ed. *Benedict.* iii. 445).

putting their laws into practice, receiving from the same lawgiver a code so profoundly spiritual, that we seem at once translated into the age of the prophets, who lived at the close of the monarchy. We find, moreover, this new code containing just those institutions, just those religious ideas which prevailed, or were most fully developed, at this later period. For example, we read in Ex. xx. 24-26 how the people were commanded to prepare altars of earth or unhewn stone in every place where God should cause His name to be remembered (R.V. margin). How astonishing it is that before any such local sanctuaries could have been dedicated to religious worship, they should, according to Deut. xii., have been commanded on entering the land to have only one altar and one centre of worship.

Our surprise increases when we find that no attempt is ever made to act upon this most solemn and oft-repeated command of the great Lawgiver, that Samuel does not scruple to offer sacrifices at Mizpah, Ramah, and Gilgal (1 Sam. vii. xiii.); that Elijah not only sacrifices on Mount Carmel, but speaks and acts throughout as though the temple of Jerusalem had no interest for the northern kingdom (1 Kings xviii.). In spite of Solomon's attempt to centralise the worship of Jahweh, we find in the south king after king continuing to sanction the worship at the high places. It was not till the time of Hezekiah at the earliest that any attempt was made to put it down.¹ It is curious to contrast the passing notice of Hezekiah's action in this respect with the full description of the far more drastic reforms of Josiah. With Hezekiah it is what any good king might be expected to do; with Josiah it is a religious revolution. It is not the necessary sequence of the restoration of the temple and its services—it has a definite starting-point and cause of its own, the discovery of the Book of the Law in the house of Jahweh. This discovery is a turning-point in the religious history not of Josiah only, but of the nation. The king, when he hears the contents of the book, is terror-struck; for he finds that it contains injunctions which his fathers had never observed, and terrible threats for neglecting them. Reforms are immediately set on foot to carry out these injunctions to the letter. The most sweep-

¹ In the face of 2 Kings xiv. 4, xv. 4, 35, the statement in 2 Chron. xvii. 6, that Jehoshaphat "took away the high places," must certainly be regarded as an anachronism.

ing change is made in religious worship, the high places are put down once for all, and the phrase "the place which Jahweh thy God shall choose to place His name there" now receives an obvious significance. Besides all this, we find beginning at this time a contemporary literature, which in tone, in thought, and even in style, bears a striking resemblance to the Book of Deuteronomy. How extremely unlikely is all this if this book was really written by Moses, or in his age. Whatever be its origin, it seems almost certain that the Book of the Law stood in close relation to that of Deuteronomy, and that it was written, at the earliest, not much before the time of Josiah. This is coming to be more and more generally admitted by all commentators, who feel that no particular theory of inspiration should prevent us from openly and honestly examining the books of the Bible.²

Very similar difficulties have long been felt about the Levitical laws of Moses, and have, since the days of Graf, been met in a very similar way. The Book of Leviticus and other parts of the Pentateuch suppose an extremely elaborate sacrificial system, of which there is hardly a trace in the whole history as narrated in the Books of Judges, Samuel, and Kings. Indeed these books contain much which seems absolutely to preclude such a code. The biblical student, for example, who has been accustomed to regard Shiloh as from the first the religious centre for all the tribes, is astonished to find that the writer of the last five chapters of Judges speaks of it as though it were a small, insignificant village, which his readers are not likely to have heard of. He therefore finds it necessary to describe its exact geographical position (Judg. xxi. 12, 19, R.V.). So little were the three great feasts prescribed in Exodus (xxiii. 14-17) and Leviticus (xxiii. 4-36) kept in Shiloh that we hear only of one yearly feast, and that, though certainly described as a feast of Jahweh, resembles far more nearly a country rout than the sacred solemnities of the Feast of Tabernacles.³ We do certainly find a sanctuary at Shiloh in 1 Sam. i.-iii., but it is clearly not the tabernacle, as, on the ground of Josh. xviii., is often supposed. It is

² It is of comparatively little importance whether we regard the Book of the Law as actually identical with Deuteronomy, or an early draft of it, afterwards revised and enlarged or merely the kernel out of which it sprung.

³ Cf. Judg. xxi. 21 with Lev. xxiii. 34-36.

rather a small local temple containing nothing, as far as we are told, beyond "the lamp of God," the ark, and, strange to say, the bed of their youthful guardian (1 Sam. iii. 1, R.V.).¹ Again, just as the Book of Jeremiah has a close connexion with Deuteronomy, so likewise we find a certain harmony of feeling and spirit, in spite of individual differences, between the Levitical parts of the Pentateuch and some of the books which followed or closely preceded the Return from the Captivity, such as Ezekiel, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi, and the editorial parts of the Books of Chronicles.

What I have already said is sufficient to show why I believe that the new method of biblical study is far more likely to yield satisfactory results than the old. Now it is of obvious importance that we should ascertain in what ways biblical criticism affects our view of the character of prophecy, and its value as a branch of religious evidences. But I must, first, revert once more to a very common objection. It is often stated that the critical argument is nothing else than a *petitio principii* on a large scale. It begins with the assumption that the supernatural is impossible, and hence seeks to explain the origin and growth of religion on purely natural grounds. To bring the results of criticism, therefore, to bear in any sense on such supernatural facts as prophecy is simply to argue in a faulty circle. But the Christian, it is maintained, stands upon a different ground altogether from the critic, and cannot admit his premises. Now it is certainly true that a Christian cannot deny that the supernatural is possible. To do so would be unphilosophical as well as irreligious. It is also true, as already pointed out, that a certain repugnance to the supernatural, but not necessarily an absolute denial of it, has often influenced critical investigations at the outset. But it cannot be said that a denial of the supernatural is a ground upon which the critical theory necessarily rests. The main arguments, as certainly in the instances already given, are usually of quite a different kind. The chief reason, for example, why critics maintain the late date of Deuteronomy, or of the last portion of Isaiah, is not that Moses could not have foretold the institution of the king and the prophet, or the final destruction of the high places, or Isaiah the state of things existing in the time of the Captivity; but

¹ It is assumed that the sacrificial altar was just outside.

that it is on other grounds extremely unlikely that they did so in point of fact. These grounds are in the one case the ignorance of Deuteronomy which the historical books seem to imply; in the other, that the chapters in question do not on the face of them foretell, but describe as a present fact, the circumstances which preceded the Return from the Captivity. The Christian who believes not only in the possibility of the supernatural, but in the actual existence of supernatural facts and powers among the Jews, may yet maintain, on perfectly logical grounds, the position of the advanced school of biblical criticism.² And this is being done by an increasing number of unexceptionally orthodox divines.

Whether the conclusions to which the critical arguments lead, as distinct from the arguments themselves, do not tend to modify our conception of the supernatural element of prophecy is quite another question, which it is most important for us to consider. But another phase of modern exegesis, equally important in its results, must first be touched upon. The whole tendency of literary and historical research has for a long time past been towards the investigation of a writer's works from his own point of view. It was Erasmus who perhaps first attempted consistently to carry out this method in biblical studies. But the religious habit which attempted to find in the Bible alone an absolute standard of personal religious faith and morals, one of the distinguishing features of the Puritanical school, threw back again the more intelligent study of the Bible which Erasmus and his friends first inaugurated. It is needless to say that this method has once again come to the front. The Old Testament we now read, not so much with the view of finding out what each writer has to say figuratively or predictively of Christ, as to learn from it the facts of Jewish history, together with the thoughts and feelings, to which each writer in turn gives expression. It is needless to say how much this method has been stimulated and assisted by the help of sources, the very existence of which was never dreamed of a while ago. The consequence is that the study of the Old Testament is prosecuted with an interest and vigour to which there has been no parallel in times past. The critical study of biblical books, and the

² That is the view generally connected with the names of Kuenen and Wellhausen, as contrasted with those of Ewald and earlier critics.

investigation of monumental remains, have gone hand in hand; and we are now beginning to understand the history of what even sceptics must admit to be one of the most interesting and remarkable peoples of ancient times.

There is no part of the Bible in which these new methods have produced more important results than the books of the prophets. These are no longer regarded as mosaics composed of isolated fragments of Christian teaching clothed in a more or less mystical dress; but the prophets themselves live again and move before our eyes, as men who shared the life of their own time, and understood its thoughts, even while they rose infinitely above them. So there is an increasing tendency to find in them more and more the spiritual guides and the practical advisers who directed the religious impulses and feelings of their own day, less and less the foretellers of a state of things which neither their readers nor themselves would have at all clearly understood.

To sum up what I have said. The tendency of modern exegesis obviously affects the argument from prophecy in two important respects. (1) It often shows that what were previously considered

to be predictions of future events fulfilled within the period of Jewish history were in all probability no predictions at all. (2) It makes it equally clear that what were believed to be simply predictions of a distant future have their most natural explanation in the historical events of their own time. It is obvious, therefore, that if we accept the results of modern criticism and scholarship, we must approach the subject of prophecy very differently from the way in which it would have been approached in Bishop Warburton's own day. That critical views of the Bible will ultimately win general acceptance, at least in principle, I cannot seriously doubt, and the apologist who wishes to gain the ear of those whose biblical studies are up to date, cannot afford to leave them unconsidered. Truth can never ultimately suffer by looking facts in the face. This at least will be my honest endeavour, and I shall feel that my work has not been altogether thrown away if I can do something, however small, towards showing that prophecy, under what I venture to call the light of modern criticism, while it gains immensely in its intrinsic value, still holds a very important place among the evidences for the Christian religion.

Christian Faith.

BY THE REV. FREDERIC RELTON, A.K.C., CURATE OF CHELSEA.

“Lord, increase our faith.”—LUKE xvii. 5.

THERE are perhaps few terms in the Christian vocabulary that have suffered more at the hands of system-makers and would-be theologians than the term “faith.” Let it be granted at the outset that the New Testament use of the term is by no means uniform: that it is sometimes used to express the faith, *i.e.* the creed, *in* which we believe, and sometimes the faith, *i.e.* the spiritual faculty, *by* which we believe our creed: that it is sometimes used to express the faith of God, or that belonging to God Himself, *i.e.* the faithfulness of God, and sometimes to express our human belief and trust in God's faithfulness: that there are several clearly marked stages in its development so tersely expressed in the famous dictum, *Credo Deum*, “I believe that God is”; *Credo Deo*, “I believe what God says”; and *Credo in Deum*, a pregnant construction, “I am in God, and therefore I have

trust or faith in Him”: that, further, its use is sometimes not altogether theological, but rather literary or fluid, and that we cannot bind down the sacred writers to theological precision: that sometimes it is very like love, at other times wondrously similar to hope, and that these three, faith, hope, and love, are not three distinct and separable metaphysical or spiritual entities capable of minute and exact discrimination, but that they run up into and are sometimes merged in each other, being all comprehended in the general spiritual character of man. Let all this be granted, and granted further that much of this distinction is very valuable to the theologian and to the exact student of Holy Scripture, and valuable to him not only as part of his system, but as bearing fruit in his life and gradually working its way downwards into the common knowledge and experience of the people;