

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

PayPal

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Expository Times* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expository-times_01.php

pdfs are named: [Volume]_[Issue]_[1st page of article].pdf

entering upon the hard slavery of the married state. As Wetzstein has described this custom from his own observations among the Syrians of to-day, so it was both in Syria and in Palestine two thousand years ago. Therefore we now know why the hero of the Song of Solomon is called a King. He is a young husband, it is the first week of his wedded life, and this book contains

the songs sung at his marriage festival. And it is in accord with Oriental hyperbole that he should be compared to the most magnificent of all the kings of Israel, and that his young wife should have her beauty praised as though she were herself the very person whose beauty had become a proverb in Israel—Abishag the Shunammite, the wife of David the King.

Hebrew Prophecy and Modern Criticism.

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

II.

"God, having of old time spoken unto the fathers in the prophets by divers portions and in divers manners, hath at the end of these days spoken unto us in His Son."—HEB. i. 1.

It is now becoming almost a commonplace among writers upon prophecy that the chief value of the prophets lies in their lofty spiritual and moral character. It is urged that the predictive element bears a smaller proportion in their writings than was once supposed, and from a religious point of view is less important than the spiritual or moral. I suggested in my last paper that both these elements have their bearing, though in different degrees, on the evidential value of the prophetic books. The fulfilment of predictions is what has been naturally most insisted upon by Christian apologists, and of this I propose to speak hereafter. In my present paper I hope to show what argument may be fairly drawn from the general tone and character of the prophetic books.

It requires no very minute study of their writings to see that the prophets participated in, and often directed, the great movements of their times. They were statesmen, social and moral reformers, quite as much as, or even more, than teachers of a recognised code of systematic theology or ethics. For example, we find Isaiah hinting to Ahaz the folly of bribing the Assyrian king, Tiglath-pileser, in order to ward off the temporary evils of the Syro-Ephraimitish war. If we accept the usual interpretation of Isa. vii. 6, he is equally opposed to the unpatriotic treachery of those conspirators who were for setting up a foreign pretender on the throne of David.¹ Later on, in

¹ The form of the name Tabeel seems to show that he was of Aramaic origin. See Cheyne, *in loco*.

the reign of Hezekiah, he treats with no less bold derision the alliance which king and princes were already making with Egypt, a power who could do nothing more helpful than "sitting still" (xxx. 7). The prophet Jeremiah is equally urgent in his protests against seeking Egyptian aid. But in another respect his policy is essentially different from that of Isaiah. The power of Assyria had by this time succumbed to its ancient vassal Babylonia, which had taken its place as the rival with Egypt for the empire of the East. We might have expected that Jeremiah, following Isaiah's policy, would have counselled resistance to the heathen Babylonia. But far from it; he insisted perpetually that the only chance of safety for Israel lay in loyal submission to Babylon; and when Jerusalem was actually being besieged by Nebuchadnezzar's army, without hesitation he counsels unconditional surrender (Jer. xxi. 9, etc.). With equal firmness he afterwards opposes all attempts to resist the Philo-Babylonian deputy, Gedaliah, and to go down into Egypt (Jer. xl. -xliv.). It was this political cowardice and want of patriotism, as it seemed, far more than any unpopularity in his religious teaching as such, which so irritated Jeremiah's opponents. (See, e.g., xxxvii. 11-21.)

It is clear from such examples as these that the prophets took a very prominent part in questions of foreign policy. And yet to speak of the prophets as politicians is in a way to mistake their true character. They were not politicians in the sense that Wolsey and Richelieu were politicians. Their

political attitude was in all cases the result of religious conviction. Isaiah maintained stoutly that to seek any foreign alliance at all was an irreligious act of distrust and disloyalty to God. It was to refuse the peaceful waters of Shiloah, which, by its very name, typified the safety of the people of God. It was to build on another foundation than the precious corner-stone which God laid in Zion. To seek the help of Egypt was, as he puts it, with characteristic irony, to trust in those who, after all, were only men, not God, and horses which were flesh and not spirit, and to refuse to look unto the Holy One of Israel. (See Isa. viii. 6; xxviii. 16; xxxi. 1-3.) It may be questioned to what extent the difference of Jeremiah's policy may be explained by a natural difference of temperament, or how far it was due to the altered circumstances of the time. But in any case it took a religious form, and was directly prompted by religious feeling. Jeremiah believed with unflinching certainty that Babylon was God's instrument designed to punish His people, who were now past reform. To resist Babylon, therefore, was to resist the power of God. To attempt to upset their government in Jerusalem was to rebel against God's punishment.

It is equally obvious, and yet equally important to bear in mind, that in matters of moral and social reform the prophets were none the less acting under religious motives. If we extend the word religion so as to include all social and moral duty, this is, of course, a truism. But the prophets were religious in a higher, if also a narrower, sense of the word. The gross immoralities and cruelties of their time were wrong, because they were violations of God's law. The prophets do not appeal to an abstract principle of right and wrong, nor even to the law of conscience as St. Paul conceived it in the Epistle to the Romans, for example, but to a recognised divine standard of right, that which God teaches, the Instruction or Torah.¹ Now modern criticism tends to show more and more clearly that this Instruction is the religious tradition as taught by the prophets.² By this is meant, not of course, as the Rabbinical schools believed, a great collection of oral precepts supplementary to the Pentateuch, and handed down verbatim from

the time of Moses. It was rather, it would seem, a revelation of religious duty which had begun most probably with Moses, and had been developed by the great religious teachers acting under Divine Providence. That such was the opinion in the later days of the monarchy is clear from the well-known words of Deuteronomy xviii. 15, if we accept the late date now usually assigned to that book, "Jahweh 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." Whatever view we take of the date of Deuteronomy, these words can hardly be referred solely to Christ; for it would have been little consolation to those who lost their teacher in Moses to know that another equally great would arise many centuries after their time. It is now generally admitted that the words must be so understood as to include the whole prophetic order, which did as a fact prepare the way for a Prophet who was far greater than Moses. The passage shows that at the time when this book was written it was believed that the prophets were designed to continue the revelation of religion which had been begun in Moses.

It has often been insisted upon by theological writers, from Bishop Butler downwards, that the prophets lay greater stress on the moral law than on what are known as positive precepts, that is to say, precepts laid down by external, even though divine, authority, as especially the ceremonial laws of the Jews, and claiming obedience only because of that authority.³ Such a distinction expresses, from our point of view, a very real truth; but it was not felt, as we feel it, by the prophets themselves. The very passage from Hosea which Butler takes as the keynote of this distinction, "I desire mercy, and not sacrifice," shows clearly the prophet's view of the subject. The superiority of mercy (if that and not rather piety is the true meaning of the Hebrew חסד) over sacrifice lay in the very fact that it was God's will, not, of course, as by an arbitrary decree, but as flowing out of the whole character and being of God. On the other hand, sacrifices were not in the same sense divine. They were not a distinctive mark of God's people. They were common, at the time when the earlier prophets wrote, to all the nations around them; and, as far as can be gathered, there was no very obvious difference between the worship of Jahweh, at least at the several

¹ The meaning of the word תורה is obscured in our English Bibles by the translation "law."

² See Robertson Smith, *Old Testament in Jewish Church*, 2nd ed. p. 299.

³ See, e.g., Butler's *Analogy*, pt. ii. ch. i. (Angus's ed. p. 161).

sanctuaries scattered throughout the northern kingdom, and that of the heathen gods. Indeed it is often very difficult to determine with certainty with which of the two the rites condemned by the prophets were connected. For example, a cursory reading of the prophet Hosea might lead us to suppose that the chief object of his prophecies was to condemn heathen worship. But a closer examination makes it evident that the people addressed were, at least in theory, worshippers of Jahweh. What is condemned is the want of reality in the worship, and its association with all forms of ungodliness in the Jewish sense of the word. "They have not cried unto Me with their heart, but they howl upon their beds; they assemble themselves for corn and wine, they rebel against Me" (vii. 14). Their religious service was at best a mere gathering together to get what they could out of God. And the natural punishment of all this is that God will not accept their sacrifices. "As for the sacrifices of mine offerings, they sacrifice flesh and eat it; but Jahweh accepteth them not: now will He remember their iniquity and visit their sins" (viii. 13). And so Hosea foretells that the sanctuaries, with all their paraphernalia of worship, altars, pillars, and calves, would be swept away (x. 1, 25).

It is sometimes maintained that what Hosea condemns is the worship of the calves, as a distinct cult, and that on the grounds of its being schismatical, or even heathenish. It is quite true that the calf-worship of Bethel, or Beth-Aven as Hosea nicknames it, was his great aversion; but he speaks in very disparaging terms also of other sanctuaries, such as Gilgal (iv. 15) and Shechem (vi. 9), and yet he never objects to them or to Bethel on the ground that they were schismatical.¹ Heathenish, no doubt, he felt them to be, not, however, because false deities were worshipped there, but because Jahweh was worshipped under a degrading symbolism. Even could we suppose that Hosea is attacking the great national schism, there can at least be no doubt about Isaiah. And yet, while speaking unmistakably of the orthodox temple worship of Jerusalem, Isaiah uses language of, if possible, still greater severity. "To what purpose is the multitude of your sacrifices unto ME? saith Jahweh: I am full of the burnt-offerings of rams, and the fat of fed beasts; and I

¹ The allusion in iii. 5 is to the monarchical government of David, not the temple worship of Jerusalem.

delight not in the blood of bullocks, or of lambs, or of he-goats. When ye come to see My face, who hath required this at your hand, to trample My courts? Bring no more vain oblations; incense is an abomination unto Me; new moon and sabbath, the calling of assemblies,—I cannot away with iniquity and the solemn meeting. Your new moons and your appointed feasts My soul hateth: they are a trouble unto Me; I am weary to bear them. And when ye spread forth your hands, I will hide mine eyes from you: yea, when ye make many prayers, I will not hear: your hands are full of blood" (i. 11-15).

It may be said, and quite justly, that the language of the prophets in such passages is rhetorical, and that they would not have seriously advocated the abolition of sacrifices. But at any rate it is hardly conceivable that the prophets would have spoken so had they believed, as the later Jews believed, that all the details of religious worship had been ordained by Moses under the direct sanction of God. Indeed, there are passages which seem expressly to deny this. In v. 25, 26, Amos says: "Did ye bring unto *Me* sacrifices and offerings in the wilderness forty years, O house of Israel? Yea, ye have borne Siccuth your king and Chiun your images, the star of your god, which ye made to yourselves." Whatever be the meaning of the difficult expressions of this last verse, the passage shows clearly enough that Amos knew nothing of an elaborate system of tabernacle worship carried on during the forty years of the wanderings. And, as has been frequently pointed out by Kuenen and others, if such a system existed, Jeremiah must have made a very serious historical blunder when he said: "For I spake not unto your fathers, nor commanded them in the day that I brought them out of the land of Egypt, concerning burnt-offerings or sacrifices: but this thing I commanded them, saying, Harken unto my voice, and I will be your God, and ye shall be My people: and walk ye in all the way that I command you, that it may be well with you."²

The essential difference between the Jewish and the heathen religions lay not so much in their manner of religious devotion as in their conception of God. The Jewish conception may not perhaps have been perfectly clear, or even always consistent

² Jer. vii. 22, 23; See Kuenen, *Hexateuch*, English Translation, p. 175.

as an object of thought, but it was intensely spiritual, inspiring, and real. God is now a righteous King, the source of just government, now a loving Father, the pattern of tenderness and affection. "When Israel was a child, then I loved him, and called My son out of Egypt" (Hosea xi. 1). At other times He is the Director of natural forces, the God of Nature, or again (as in Amos ix. 7), one who orders and disposes of the nations of the world. "Are ye not as the children of the Ethiopians unto Me, O children of Israel, saith Jahweh! Have not I brought up Israel out of the land of Egypt, and the Philistines from Caphtor, and the Syrians from Kir?" Such was the God of the prophets, and for man to be unlike God was an offence against God's holiness. Immorality, therefore, whether it take the form of lust or of an unjust rapacity, or of violence and murder, or any other form, is irreligious, and God cannot endure it. This is not the way in which we should generally argue now. We should probably rather say that morality depends ultimately on the sense of right and wrong, and that one great argument for Christianity is that judged by our moral standard, its conception of God and duty is so high. But the Jew reversed this argument. That these qualities belonged to God needed for him no proof; and they were right and moral in his eyes, just because they belonged to God. Of course we must not suppose that such religious conceptions were universal among the people, or had always been clearly understood. The warnings of the prophets show only too clearly how irreligious, in the prophet's sense of the word, the people often were. But yet the prophets do not come forward as the teachers of a new religion, but to restore or confirm the national religion of the people. They can and do frequently appeal to existing religious ideas and feelings, and in doing so they develop these on their logical lines, and so, step by step, the thought of the one omnipotent and just King of all the peoples of the earth takes the place of the narrower conception of a merely local deity, jealous if his nation had anything to do with foreign gods, or if other nations interfered with his own peculiar property.

In a word, there are two important facts to be observed about the religion of the Israelites: (1) that they had far nobler conceptions of God and moral duty than were generally current among any other ancient people; and (2) that it was

the prophets who expanded these conceptions, and so impressed them that they have become the common heritage of all highly-civilised races. No one of average intelligence and taste can now read the prophets with the help of the best commentaries without feeling that he has in them a perfect mine of spiritual wealth and beauty. And yet it is a strange thing that, with all our talk about the Englishman's love for the Bible, I do not suppose that by intelligent students one-tenth part of the time and attention is devoted to the Jewish prophets that is freely given to Shakespeare or to Browning.

Let us now see how far what has been said bears upon the evidential value of the prophets (remembering that we are not at present taking into account the fulfilment of predictions). An objector might urge that what has been said hitherto only shows the high literary and religious value of the prophets themselves, but this is no proof of the truth of Christianity. To this it might be replied that, taken by itself, it certainly does not constitute a logical proof. If the Christian apologist of to-day is required, like the apologists of the last century, to prove the truth of Christianity by a syllogism, such evidence might very probably be useless. But for all that it may be employed as part of a very practical proof. If a person were to lay claim to certain supernatural powers, or, at any rate, to being a special instrument of Divine Providence, and his life was immoral or his teaching irreligious, we should be certainly justified in regarding him as an impostor. But if, on the other hand, his character and teaching were uniquely pure and spiritual, exercising an exceptionally high and religious influence on others, we should feel it only right to carefully examine his claims. Now it is important to notice that the criterion laid down in Deuteronomy for testing a prophet is not so much his supernatural power of vaticination, as the religious soundness of his teaching (Deut. xiii. 1-3). "If there arise in the midst of thee a prophet, or a dreamer of dreams, and he give thee a sign or a wonder, and the sign or the wonder come to pass, whereof he spake unto thee, saying, Let us go after other gods, which thou hast not known, and let us serve them; thou shalt not hearken unto the words of that prophet, or unto that dreamer of dreams." These words become all the more significant if it is true that Deuteronomy was written in what has been called the golden age of Hebrew prophecy.

What, then, the religious character of the prophets does for the proof of Christianity is at least this,—to make us listen with reverence to whatever testimony they have to give us. It prejudices us, and rightly prejudices us, in their favour. One of the greatest hindrances to faith, in the last century, was an irreverent spirit; and, though this is much less prevalent in the present day, it is very far from having died out. We cannot read much of the sceptical and atheistic literature of our own time without feeling that even now unbelief is often due far more fundamentally to a want of religious feeling than to any intellectual doubt. To one religiously, though not intellectually deficient, a serious study of the prophets might prove a new and inspiring power leading him to that higher religion which was fulfilled in Jesus Christ. And here I cannot forbear noticing what a very great service the higher criticism of Old Testament has rendered us. It cannot be doubted that, at any rate until recently, the Old Testament was fast losing its hold on the most thoughtful men of our time. It was horrible to think that the wholesale massacre of the Canaanites could have been a direct command from God; that we should have held up for our admiration the cold-blooded treachery of a Jael; that a man of David's moral character could have been a man after God's own heart; or that God should have concerned Himself in a blood-feud which involved such a tragedy as that of Rizpah, the daughter of Aiah. Such things have repeatedly shocked the moral sense and chilled the most earnest faith, and have too often practically shut up the Old Testament, if not the Bible altogether. But criticism has come in time to save us. It has shown how God step by step led His people out of a crude state of civilisation to a purer religion and a nobler life. This last we find in the prophets. They stand on that higher level of Jewish theology and Jewish religion which was

reached even in the Old Testament. This may be called an exaggeration, and it may be objected that in the case of Hosea we find an immoral action distinctly said to have been commanded by God (Hos. i. 2). But it is almost certain that, rightly understood, Hosea's conduct was no breach of social sanctity, but rather an act of unselfish tenderness, for which he was only too cruelly requited by his unfaithful wife.

But the higher religious tone of the prophets does more than predispose the serious to consider their testimony for Christianity; it is also part of a direct proof which may be summarised thus. The prophets are witnesses to their own generation of a clearer knowledge of God and a nobler standard of religious duty. At the same time, they claim to be the mouthpieces of God, declaring His will. If we believe that there is a Source of all good, guiding man through history to a higher life and a more perfect knowledge of Himself, there are the strongest reasons for thinking that this claim is a just one. If so, the religion which they taught was a revelation from God, and is at least relatively true,—relatively, that is, to the capacity of their contemporaries to receive it. This is all that as Christians we need desire to prove. For if Christ could say even of the new revelation, "I have yet many things to say unto you, but ye cannot bear them now," we must expect that the earlier revelation would have left something better for men to strive after and learn. The very imperfection, then, of the prophets' teaching, as judged by the more perfect standard of the New Testament, is in reality a strong argument in favour of Christianity. For it shows us that prophecy represents only a stage in the history of a revelation spoken by divers portions and in divers manners, and which only found its completeness in the teaching of the Son of God.

The Books of the Month.

PART I.

THE PERFECTION OF MAN BY CHARITY. BY F. H. REGINALD BUCKLER, O.P. (*Burns & Oates*. Crown 8vo, pp. xiv, 352.) "In other works," says St. Jerome, "a man may bring excuse, but from *love* no one may excuse

himself. One might say, 'I cannot fast'; but who could say 'I cannot love'?" And since the whole work of our perfection is reduced to the development of that one central virtue of Love, "the present Treatise aims at nothing more than a