Hebrew Prophecy and Modern Criticism.

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XII.

'Prove all things; hold fast that which is good.'—1 Thess. v. 21.

It will be my aim in this last paper to put together in some practical form the evidential value of prophecy. Christian evidences are not at present a very attractive branch of theology. They are often associated with books which to us of the present day seem hard and dry, to lack life and humanity, to be out of touch with our own thought and experience. More serious than this, the argument from prophecy as frequently put forward in them is, in the light of modern criticism and scholarship, not only useless, but mischievous. I may, then, perhaps be pardoned if I even go so far in an opposite direction as to avoid altogether a formal argument, and endeavour to express in a different manner what I conceive to be the relation of prophecy to other branches of evidence. What is needed is not so much an academic formula, as a convincing proof of the power of prophecy to promote faith in God and Christ. And I think I shall be most likely to show adequately what I believe this power may be, if, by taking a typical case, I can show it, so to speak, at work in human life.

Let us then, by way of example, suppose a young man with an average general and religious education, who, after having for many years learnt what others have thought, has now begun definitely to think for himself, and finds himself for the first time face to face with the religious problem. He is startled to discover some sort of discrepancies between his religious ideas and his ordinary modes of thought. He searches himself, and takes count of himself to find out, not what he has been taught to believe, or ought to believe, or thinks that he believes, but what he does believe.

Now, such a person might very reasonably argue much in this way. 'I find in myself a natural love of goodness. I feel a pleasure in the sense of doing good, whether in the present or prospectively, which I cannot satisfactorily compare with any other pleasure. The difference cannot be expressed to my mind by any words implying merely greater or less intensity. Other pleasures may, indeed, be far more intense. It is obviously a difference of kind, not of degree only, which I might perhaps best express by the word "pure." This pleasure is closely connected in my mind with an inward conviction that there is in me a tendency towards good. And I find, by what others say and do, that my own experience in this respect is by no means exceptional, but that in different degrees it is so common as to be practically universal. I may, therefore, without exaggeration regard it as a law of human nature. Those who argue that goodness is merely a form of selfishness, as that word is commonly understood, seem to me to be mere theorists, and to shut out of sight one side of human nature, quite as much so as that erudite German philosopher who wrote a book to prove that all morality is a function of the digestive organs. I find, moreover, that this moral sense has a tendency to develop under favourable circumstances both in human history and in the individual. In other words, I see in the world an evident evolution of moral good.

'I turn to the physical world, and there I find a similar tendency—the gradual dying out of the weak and sickly, that the strong may survive and the race may become stronger. What the agriculturist and the horticulturist do artificially, Nature has been doing for herself for thousands upon thousands of years. And the climax of this process is man, who has been all along becoming as a whole more perfect in powers of thought, organisation, and moral capacity. There is between the highest civilised man and the primitive savage a difference almost as great as between the latter and the highest existing animal. The more I consider the facts, the more clearly it appears to me that the evolution in nature and in moral goodness are connected together, and are the results of one great principle inherent in all things.

'So much I learn from science and the ordinary experience of life; but can they tell me more? Can they account for this principle? Can they tell me whence it came? To what it finally tends? No. Science most emphatically claims only a knowledge of the "how." The original "whence" and the ultimate "whither" are beyond her ken.

Still less have I learnt these from the ordinary experience of life. My own innate consciousness may have told me more, but being what I am, I cannot separate this altogether from what has come to me through my religious training. But religion does claim to give me an answer. She refers this great natural and moral principle to a Being whom she calls God, and she seeks in various ways to define what God is. So far as she does this, she does not contradict science. It may be true that science knows no God, but it is equally true that she does not deny God. Science alone is agnostic no doubt, she is not atheistic.

'But then at this point I am confronted with a new difficulty. Different men, and men in different ages and in different countries, have found or accepted very divergent opinions about God. To speak of no more subtle distinctions, how am I to choose between polytheism, pantheism, monotheism? The mere fact that I have been brought up as a monotheist is not a sufficient reason for choosing the last; for a savage pagan has just as good a reason to be a polytheist. I must decide the matter on other grounds.

'Polytheism is clearly out of the question. It is althogether too gross and anthropomorphic. It satisfies neither my thought nor my moral nor religious feeling, and is in fact utterly repulsive. It is only where its distinctive features have been explained away as symbols, and it has been refined into something approaching very closely to monotheism or pantheism, that I can seriously look upon it as a religion at all. It is clearly a rudimentary stage through which races in their childhood pass, in their evolution of religious ideas and religious worship. Outwardly, it seems in most cases to have originated from a combination of ghost and nature-worship; inwardly, from a crude semi-religious fear of beings more powerful than men, which they tried to propitiate.

'I turn, therefore, to pantheism and monotheism. Which am I to choose? There is this difficulty at the outset, that though these terms can be so used as to express widely divergent views of God, yet, in fact, the religions and philosophies which are described by them often approach very closely, and even shade off into, each other. The opinions which represent the farthest poles of either tendency may be rejected at once. I cannot believe God to be either, on the one hand, a pure abstraction or an automatic quasi-physical force, conceivably comparable to electricity. Nor, on the other hand, can I think of God as a humanlike being, a merely glorified man. The God I seek is neither neuter nor anthropomorphic. Nor, again, in choosing between pantheism and monotheism, am I much helped by what is, roughly speaking, called Natural Religion. The natural religious tendency, as clearly seen by those who have thought out religion for themselves,—the Greeks, for example,—is from polytheism to pantheism. Indeed, in some cases, as especially in modern Germany, it seems to be from monotheism to pantheism. But in thinking the matter over, I am inclined to believe this last change is a reaction from a popular semi-polytheistic and anthropomorphic to a more philosophical view of God. If so, it bears some analogy to the religious evolution of the ancient Greeks. And this makes me wonder whether, after all, there may not be truth on both sides. Personality, as generally understood, may be, from the philosophical point of view, a crude anthropomorphic conception of God. It does not help us, except by very imperfect analogies, to understand God's work in the physical world. But as a practical basis for religious faith, it seems truer to me than regarding God as a mere force. I want a God to love and reverence, to depend upon as the source of good,—a God, in short, with character; but a force has no character.'

I have thus roughly sketched the way in which I can fancy an intelligent young man thinking out his religious doubts and difficulties. Nor have I cared to make any very clear distinction between what he may be presumed to have received by tradition, to have learnt by study, or to have thought out originally for himself. But I am supposing that he has made whatever he has received thoroughly his own, so that, in this sense, he is really thinking out his own thoughts. Now, what effect would the ordinary evidential argument from prophecy have upon such a man? Would it do anything to convince him? Would it not rather disgust and repel him? Would he not certainly feel that the cause of Christianity must be very desperate if it needs arguments of this sort, like the drowning man who catches at a straw. Now, even though the Old Testament as a whole is to him a curious mixture of confusing religious notions, somewhat hard moral sentiments, and dry religious annals, written from a single and apparently narrow point of view; yet for all that he has

probably felt, as he hears them, or used to hear them in church, a vague liking for some special chapters which attracted him, partly by their beauty of language and partly by something which appealed half unconsciously to his better self, is it not likely that, in such a state of mind, he might feel an interest in a serious study of the Old Testament? He would read it, of course, in a different way and in a different spirit to that in which he had read it before. He would, on the one hand, avail himself of the best information in various branches of Bible study; but, on the other hand, he would read it without prejudice in either direction, with the pure and honest desire to ascertain what Bible writers really said and meant, and what they may or may not have had to teach others. Surely such an one would be led to welcome the religion of the prophets and psalmists, as giving, on the whole, by far the most perfect, and practically a unique, example of monotheism. In reading some of the early Books of the Bible,—parts of Genesis and Exodus, for example,—he might be tempted to smile at their simple, childlike anthropomorphism; but he would soon discover that this is but an early stage in the religious history of the Jews. As he passed on to a later period, he would find the conception of God becoming more and more spiritual, till it reaches its climax in such passages as Isa. lxv. and Ps. cxxxix.

He might find a very instructive example of a transition between, or a combination of, those two views of God, the anthropomorphic and the spiritual (showing how one grew out of the other), in the quaint story found in Ex. xxxiii. 12–xxxiv. 7. In v. 13, Moses prays Jahweh to show him His ways. This being granted in v. 17, Moses further asks that He will show him His glory. To this there is, as the narrative now stands, a double answer. Jahweh first promises that He will make His goodness pass before Moses, and proclaim the name of Jahweh as the God of mercy. But the second answer takes an almost entirely anthropomorphic form. Jahweh's face cannot be seen, not because it is a thing impossible in itself, but because it would involve the inevitable death of the beholder, just as a flash of lightning kills one with whom it comes in contact. But something will be done towards gratifying Moses' request. There is a rock near Jahweh, on which he is directed to stand. He will put him in a cleft of the rock, and cover him with His hand till He has passed by; then He will remove His hand, and Moses will be permitted to see His back. But when the event is actually described a few verses below (xxxiv. 5–7), the anthropomorphic conception of God again passes almost into the spiritual. 'And Jahweh descended in the cloud, and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name of Jahweh. And Jahweh passed by before him, and proclaimed Jahweh, Jahweh, a God full of compassion and gracious, slow to anger and plenteous in mercy and truth: keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, and that will by no means clear the guilty,' etc. It is a matter of considerable critical interest whether we should regard this whole passage as it now stands as a revised recension, according to new lights, of a primitive document, or as the work of a mind hovering between the old and new learning. But this is not a question of very great theological importance. In any case it shows, better perhaps than any other passage of the Old Testament, how the higher view of God gradually supplanted the lower.

The supposed student would also discover that the religion of the Jews underwent another change. There are significant hints that it was originally polytheistic, or at least contained polytheistic elements. The worship of the Teraphim, or images of household gods much like the Roman Penates, was common, at least up to the time of David. It is spoken of as a thing not at all surprising that there should be an image of this sort in David's house.[1] It appears also that Jahweh was regarded as the God of the Jews much in the same way that Dagon was the God of the Philistines, or Chemosh the God of the Moabites, or Molech the God of the Ammonites. The point of the story of the disaster to Dagon's image is not that it represented a false god, but that in the image falling down before the Ark, Jahweh showed His superiority to Dagon. The contest between the God of the Hebrews and those of the Egyptians in the ten plagues points to the same idea. It was also not an uncommon belief that Jahweh had no power except in His own country. David complains to Saul that, in being chased from his fatherland, he was driven from the inheritance of Jahweh, and was thereby forced to serve other gods.[2] Even at the time when the story of Jonah took a Jewish shape, it is thought not an unnatural, though an

[1] 1 Sam. xix. 13. [2] 1 Sam. xxvi. 19.

erroneous, belief on the prophet's part that he could escape from Jahweh's power by leaving his native country.[1]

And so we can trace a gradual change from the thought of the inferiority of the heathen gods to that of the utter absurdity of worshipping nonentities, as we find it expressed, for example, in the great Captivity prophet. How could rational men worship gods which were so feeble that they could not even do harm![2]

But even in this book the prevailing thought is the absurdity of representing a spiritual God at all in material forms. How the prophet laughs at the thought of the Babylonian gods, jostled together faces downward and carted off by the victors in ignominious triumph![3] or of the image whose more useful counterpart has already served to the worshipper's creature comforts! 'He burneth part thereof in the fire; with part thereof he eateth flesh; he roasteth roast, and is satisfied: yea, he warmeth himself, and saith, Aha, I am warm, I have seen the fire: and the residue thereof he maketh a god, even his graven image: he falleth down unto it, and worshippeth, and prayeth unto it, and saith, Deliver me; for thou art my god.'[4] This thought, again, was largely due to the influence of Deuteronomy, where the prohibition of idols is emphatically based on the fact that the Israelites saw no form of God in Horeb.

Above all, the supposed student of Scriptures would be struck by the moral greatness of the God of Israel. The Jahweh of the prophets is the source of all righteousness, purity, and tenderness; and in common with this is the feeling that all immorality is an offence against God's holiness, and therefore requires His pardon. *We* accept such doctrines as a matter of course; but *then* they were new truths which the world had yet to learn. The Jews learnt them first, and they taught them to the world.

But even the Jews did not learn them all at once. The earlier belief about sacrifice was not so very unlike that of the Pagans. God delighted in sacrifices as such. He took a sort of human pleasure in them. He smelled the sweet savour of Noah's sacrifice, and was so pleased that He determined never again to curse the ground for man's sake.[5] We are reminded of the delight which the Homeric gods took in the sacrifices of the Greek heroes. But how unlike this is to the language of Isa. i. or of Ps. l. and li. It is clear that both prophets and psalmists are contending against a false notion of sacrifice. Purity of heart and hand, thanksgiving, obedience, penitence, are the true sacrifices which God requires. It is quite true that after the Captivity we find the sacrifices not only restored, but developed into a new and complicated system. But their character is in a great measure changed. They have become object-lessons intended to enforce the very truths on which the prophets had been insisting. Even a sacrifice once offered, as it seems, to the heathen deity Azazel, is so transformed as to become a significant and very instructive feature in the ritual of the Great Day of Atonement.[6]

Even at best the Jewish conception of God was not absolutely perfect. As in His nature, so also in His character, it contained anthropomorphic elements which it never seems to have thrown off completely. Sin was thought of still more or less as a personal affront to God demanding His vengeance. It was quite a natural thing for God to be jealous of idolatry as an infringement of His rights. There is an almost childlike simplicity in those beautiful appeals which Moses and Joshua make to God's dignity not to allow his name to be dishonoured among the heathen.[7] Thoughts like these colour even the later language of the Old Testament; nor is it easy to say how far such words as wrath and jealousy had come, as with ourselves, to be merely figurative expressions for the hatred of wrong in itself. But this, like some other recognised imperfections in the elementary religion of Judaism, need form no stumbling-block to this earnest inquirer, for it would help to point the way to the more perfect teaching of Jesus Christ. But it is a matter of very great importance to realise that the religion which in its expanded Christian form is becoming the religion of the world, which is the only religion which inseparably connects theology and morality, the only religion which teaches a God such as to satisfy at once the religious instinct and the requirements of thought, began with the Jews, and found its best exponents in the Jewish prophets.

Moreover, the student in question could not help being deeply impressed with the fact that these great Jewish teachers one after another claim unequivocally to be speaking the words of God.

[1] Jonah i. 3. [2] Isa. xli. 23. [3] Isa. xlvi. 1, 2.
[4] Isa. xliv. 16, 17. [5] Gen. viii. 20–22.
[6] Lev. xvi. 8, 10. [7] Cf. Ex. xxxii. 12; Josh. vii. 9.

Without taking a too narrow and literal view of such an expression as 'thus saith Jahweh,' without forgetting the manifest limitations of prophetic knowledge and foresight, he could not help seeing that they honestly believed that they were God's special messengers to their people, and that their work it was to awaken a new and purified religious spirit, which was promised first to them, and through them to all the world; and he would gladly recognise that the result in both cases has justified their belief, even though not precisely in the way in which they themselves expected.

If he once satisfied himself that these things were so, would he be likely to stop at this point? Would he not feel, as he studied the prophets with increasing earnestness and pleasure, that they were leading him towards a religion so purifying and so ennobling that it must be true? Would he not in all probability turn again with greater interest to the New Testament, and learn to see in its familiar words a new power stirring and directing his own spiritual life? It is needless to trace any further the possible religious history of such a man, except perhaps to ask whether he would not be far more likely after such an experience to live his Christianity out in deed and power. For he would have found in it an ideal compared with which neither science nor philosophy nor any mere religionism have anything to offer.

But it may be objected, 'You have been supposing a very special case, a man possessed of remarkably high character and exceptional religious tastes. What about the profligate or the pronounced infidel? the man who openly denies God or professes contempt for all moral principles, and looks upon religion as an effete superstition? Would the study of the prophets have any effect on such a man?' Very possibly not. Such a state of mind shows a want both of culture and of natural endowment which must be dealt with by other means. At any rate, it is obvious that one who will not listen either to the voice of Christ, or to his own conscience, is hardly likely to study with patience or profit the teaching of the prophets. But, after all, it is not in these half-developed and onesided characters that the great danger to our faith lies, but rather in that unconscious infidelity or half-faith of those who have never learnt to doubt, just because they have never known what it is in the best and fullest sense to believe. It is quite possible to lay the greatest stress on the matter of faith, and not attach half enough importance to its quality. It may be willingly admitted that the instance which I have supposed is undoubtedly favourable to my argument, but I do not think it is really so very exceptional; even if it were so, it may be fairly supposed that to one less favourably circumstanced by education and natural endowment, the study of the prophets is likely to have at least a proportionate value.

At this point I must bring my papers to a close. If it was my purpose to estimate, in distinction to other branches of evidence, the exact weight to be assigned to prophecy in determining Christian belief, then these papers must be pronounced a failure. Such a task was far beyond my power,—perhaps it is altogether impossible. What I have done is something, I trust, towards showing that the prophets were a very substantial element in the history of Christianity, and that the serious study of them may be a very real help in the building up of Christianity within us. One thing I have made my aim throughout, the rejection of all arguments which to the best of my judgment the genuine results of modern criticism and scholarship have rendered unsound. If I have by over caution in this respect not included arguments which may still be used with perfect good faith and honesty, I trust that the defect may be forgiven in consideration of my honest intention. But in any case it is wiser, I think, to err on this side than on the other. I feel sure that the convincing power of prophecy will eventually be found so strong as to need no doubtful support. But at present the evidence of prophecy is passing through a crisis. The old argument has signally failed; the new still requires, shall I say to be stated? I would rather say, to be understood and felt. Towards that result many valuable contributions have already been made; the completion of the task must be left to others. If I shall have contributed in any small degree to this end, if I shall have induced any to study the Jewish prophets, to prize their moral beauty and to feel their religious power, I shall thankfully recognise that what I have written has not been altogether in vain.