

THE
GRAMMAR OF PROPHECY

A Systematic Guide to Biblical Prophecy

by

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PREFACE

THE word Prophecy is used in the following pages in the sense of prediction, that is, the utterance of the Divine Purpose, whether such Purpose be declared by direct personal communications, or through angelic visitants, through the medium of dreams, or through visions. The word is by no means necessarily confined to this sense in Scripture; it sometimes signifies forth-speaking rather than fore-speaking, and exposition or personal application of truths already revealed rather than the declaration of definite purposes. But it is this last which is now to be brought under discussion.

The prophecies dealt with are those contained in the Scriptures, *i.e.* the Canonical Books of the Old and New Testaments. No attempt is made to discuss those which can be traced to other sources, if such there be, or to deal with Jewish and early Christian Apocalyptic literature.

The Books of Scripture are taken as a faithful Record, their traditional dates, relative positions and authorship being regarded as trustworthy in the main, though calling for modification here and there, and their text being taken as sufficiently exact for the present purpose.

A "grammar" represents the method which underlies a language. Where there is no method there can be no grammar. If a method can be detected in the prophetic utterances as a whole, we are certainly losers if we do not make use of it. Perhaps the neglect of the study of prophetic method is one secret of the great variety of opinions amongst students of prophecy; and it may account for the fact that so many have given up the subject in despair.

The injury which has come through the rashness of interpreters is very serious. I here refer specially to those who publish and lecture on unfulfilled prophecy in an omniscient style, and who sometimes are in danger of pandering to the popular desire for excitement. This class of prophecy needs no comment.

Other students have been more cautious. It was natural that G. S. Faber, to whom younger students owe so much, should make the Papacy close in 1866. He started from the decree of the Emperor Phocas giving universal sovereignty to the Bishop of Rome in A.D. 606. To this date he added 1,260 years, which brought him to 1866. Frere, another most thoughtful and helpful writer, considered, on somewhat similar grounds, that in 1847 the Mohammedans would be converted, and that in 1867 all the world would be brought to Christ.

In 1840 Pierre Louis, of Paris, calculated that the end of the world would be in 1900. He added 1,260 years to the date of the capture of the Holy City by Omar (A.D. 636), and this brought him to 1896, at which date he thought that the Jews would return, and he allowed three and a half years for subsequent events. A similar view was taken by a certain L. Evans, on the same ground, in or about the year 1717, when he modestly wrote his thoughts on the flyleaf of his Bible. After bringing out the date 1896 he continues, "near or about which time the Jews will be reinstated in their own country and city again, which will be at or about one hundred and seventy-nine years hence."

It is natural that each age and country should see itself figuring largely in history, and the men who are conspicuous in its eyes are looked for in the

prophetic page. Hence we understand the position which Bonaparte occupied in the mind of students during the first half of the nineteenth century. Similarly, turning from the sphere of wars and politics to that of religion, it would be strange if Protestants did not see the Papacy and the Reformation in the calendar of Prophecy, and equally strange if the marvellous rise and success of Islam, and the thralldom which it has exercised and still wields over the East had been passed by unnoticed in the prophetic record. Certainly these three powers, Bonapartism, Romanism, and Mohammedanism, have laid themselves out for notice, and have, by their utterances, made the path of identification easy to the prophetic student. Each in his turn has claimed to be the representative and mouthpiece of God or of Providence, and the voice of each has been regarded by a vast following as the voice of a god and not of a man. Commentators, therefore, can hardly be blamed if they have seen in the first the resuscitated Beast, in the second the Woman of the Apocalypse, and in the third the Eastern "little Horn" of Daniel.

The danger is lest we become fascinated with a theory, and (as Dr. Anderson has well said in his *Coming Prince*) turn it into a hobby. We are then liable to shut our eyes both to the difficulties attendant on our own view and to the claims of outlying departments in the prophetic word. What we cannot explain we ignore or explain away, and so we do an injury to the cause of Truth. It may be safely laid down as an axiom that the longer we refrain from formulating a detailed programme of the future, and the more time and thought we give to the patient study of the sacred text, the better.

It only remains to mention some of the books on prophetic subjects which I have found specially instructive during a long course of years. Must I apologise for the fact that most of them were written a considerable time ago, and are in English? At any rate they have stimulated thought on the prophetic element in Scripture, and for this, if for nothing else, I owe them a debt of gratitude.

John Davison's *Discourses on Prophecy, its Structure, Use, and Inspiration*, would appear to be still the best introduction to the method of prediction as a whole. Alongside of these discourses should be mentioned Bishop Butler's weighty utterances in the *Analogy*, part II. chap. 7. Patrick Fairbairn's *Prophecy Viewed in Respect to its Distinctive Nature, its Special Function, and Proper Interpretation*, gives the philosophy of prophecy, but tends to spiritualise more than seems legitimate. R. Fleming's *Rise and Fall of the Papacy* (1698) is profoundly interesting. He was a minister of the Scots church in London, and was a keen student of Scripture and of History. His work was republished by Knight in 1849. Renewed attention had been called to the book owing to the fact that the writer had anticipated the fall of the Bourbon dynasty, of which he said, "I do humbly suppose that it will come to its highest pitch about the year 1717, and that it will run out about 1794." On chronological grounds he puts the end of the present dispensation at circ. A.D. 2000, and allowed 1,000 years for the Day of Judgment. Speaking generally, he regards prophecy as a key to the past, and as indicating the completion of History in the future.

Other notable and suggestive works are Sir Isaac Newton's *Observations on Daniel*; the *Dissertations* of Thomas Newton, Bishop of Bristol; James Hatley Frere's *Combined View*; Elliott's *HoræApocalypticæ* which, in spite of all its dogmatism, is a masterpiece of research, and will repay the study of those who discard and resent many of its interpretations; the writings of Professor Birks; the stimulating sermons of Bishop Horsley and (later) of Dr. Arnold; nor should Pusey's lectures on *Daniel* be passed by. The once-popular works of Dr. Cumming, and the

various futuristic studies of such writers as Capel Molyneux and Hugh McNeile, together with the more advanced writings of George Stanley Faber and Edward Irving, are now almost forgotten, but they have helped to keep alive certain definite expectations, and have not been written in vain. Edward Irving's translation of *The Coming of Messiah in Glory and Majesty*, nominally by Ben Ezra, but really by a Spanish Jesuit named Lacunza, has left its mark on many minds, English and foreign.

Later on we reach Dr. Giffard's *Voices of the Prophets*, Payne Smith's *Bampton Lectures*, Guers' *Israel in the Last Days*, Garratt's *Commentary on the Revelation*; also Guinness's *Approaching End of the Age*, which is based on Elliott, but goes further into chronological questions. His *Light for the Last Days* follows, and should be read in connexion with Birks' latest summary, called *Thoughts on Sacred Prophecy*.

On the Messianic subject thanks are specially due to Professor Vincent Stanton's *Jewish and Christian Messiah*. On the post-Millennial kingdom of Christ G. F. Trench has opened out new views, considerably extending the period of Messianic supremacy. With regard to what is beyond, special mention must be made of Isaac Taylor's *Physical Theory of Another Life*, together with the latter part of the *Unseen Universe*, by Professors Balfour Stewart and Tait; also an astronomer's view of *Our Celestial Home*, by Professor Porter, of the Cincinnati Observatory.

For the theory that the English are the Lost Tribes of Israel, reference may be made to *British-Israel Truth*, published by the British-Israel Association, and to a cleverly written book called *The Fulness of the Nations*, by Dr. Alder Smith. As a sample of the way in which Scripture is dealt with by those who hold this theory, I take a test passage, "Go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matt. 10.6), which this writer thinks inapplicable to the Jews, who have never been lost; hence he would lead us to the conclusion that it points to a mission from the Galileans to the British! But he ignores the first part of the sentence, "Go not into the way of the Gentiles, and into any city of the Samaritans enter ye not"; from which words we plainly gather that the contrast is between Israel and the Gentiles, not between Israel and the Jews. With regard to the expression "lost sheep," the writer had only to go back to Matt. 9.36 to read of the multitudes who fainted and were scattered abroad as sheep having no shepherd. Those who hold the Anglo-Israel theory have done good service by calling attention to the covenant-word *Israel* as a larger word than *Jew* (*i.e.* Judean); but they put themselves out of court by running into the opposite extreme, and practically excluding the Jew from the promises made to Israel, and by ignoring the plain fact that a remnant of the Ten Tribes became permanently combined with the Two after the age of Hezekiah.

On the resurrection of nations as such the (anonymous) works of the late Mr. Dunn, formerly Secretary of the British and Foreign School Society, especially *The Destiny of the Human Race*, should be consulted. Mr. Edward Grinfield's work¹ on the Gentile Dispensation collects and discusses the various passages in Scripture which exhibit favourably the case of outside nations, but it does not deal fully with Prophecy.

That a necessity exists for some such book as is now offered as a *Grammar of Prophecy*, may be illustrated from some words lately written by one who is no mean authority on Biblical subjects: "The phenomenon of prophecy (says Professor

1 Mr. Grinfield is better known in connexion with the plea for the study of the Septuagint, for which he founded a lectureship in Oxford.

Margoliouth²) is one which is at present scarcely understood; it belongs to a class of experiences which are not yet brought into the region of science, though it is conceivable that they may be. The words used by the prophets to describe their experiences imply that they were not ordinary; that they were bestowed only on particular individuals; and that they were often falsely claimed by persons who did not really entertain them. The process, therefore, by which the ostensible results of these experiences are denuded of their supernatural character and treated as ordinary utterances is only scientific if the profession of the prophets be shown to be false, e.g. if the scene described in Isai. 6 be shown to have been either a delusion or a dishonest invention. How this can be demonstrated is not obvious; but until it is demonstrated, the assumption that such experiences must be delusions is to be classed with the theory that nature abhors a vacuum, or with the belief that the orbits of the planets must of necessity be circular. Such assumptions may lead to the writing of books, but they are not *science*."

After all, these words are but an echo of those uttered by Lord Bacon in his *Advancement of Learning*,³ where he desiderates a treatise in which "every prophecy of the Scripture be sorted with the event fulfilling the same throughout the ages of the world, both for the better confirmation of faith, and for the better illumination of the Church touching those parts of prophecies which are yet unfulfilled; allowing, nevertheless, that latitude which is agreeable and familiar unto Divine prophecies; being of the nature of their Author, with who a thousand years are but as one day; and therefore are not fulfilled punctually at once, but have springing and germinant accomplishment throughout many ages, though the height or fulness of them may refer to some one age. This is a work which I find deficient; but it is to be done with wisdom, sobriety, and reverence, or not at all."

2 Lines of Defence of the Biblical Revelation, p. 136.

3 Ed. Pickering, p. 119.

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THE GRAMMAR OF PROPHECY

CHAPTER I

IDEAS CONCERNING GOD INVOLVED IN PROPHECY.

AN ideal Biblical prophecy may be expected to have the following characteristics:--

- i. It plainly foretells things to come, and is not clothed in the ambiguities which we observe in heathen oracles and vaticinations.
- ii. It is designed and intended to be a prediction, and is not like the suggestion of Caiaphas, which might be called an unwitting prophecy.
- iii. It is written, published, or proclaimed before the event to which it refers, and which could not be foreseen at the time by ordinary human sagacity.
- iv. It is subsequently fulfilled in accordance with the original utterance, due regard being had to the recognised laws of prophetic speech and interpretation.
- v. It does not work out its own fulfilment, but stands as a witness until after the event has taken place.
- vi. It is not an isolated utterance, but is more or less clearly correlated with other prophecies, and is practically one of a long series of predictions.

These are the marks of an ideal prophecy. It is manifest, however, that many Biblical prophecies do not come up to the ideal; but some of them will be found to do so, notably those that have to do with the destiny of the seed of Abraham, and with the mission of the Son of God. In the latter case it might be objected that the Lord Jesus deliberately set Himself to fulfil the prophecies; and this is freely granted, so far as He Himself is concerned. But, on the other hand, those who forsook Him, falsely accused Him, smote Him, spat upon Him, crucified Him, cast lots on His vesture, pierced His side, but left His bones unbroken, had not the slightest idea that they were fulfilling what was written. They did it in ignorance; and God overruled their folly and wickedness so as to fulfil what He declared beforehand by the mouth of all the prophets that the Messiah should suffer (see Acts 3.17,18). This public testimony of St. Peter is confirmed by St. Paul, who pointed out to the Jews in the synagogue of Antioch that the inhabitants of Jerusalem and their rulers, in their ignorance of the Lord and of the voices of the prophets, which were read out in their synagogue every Sabbath, fulfilled them in condemning Him (Acts 13.27).

Taking it for granted that the six points named above exhibit what an ideal prophecy ought to be, we have to consider how far the existence of such a prophetic element in Scripture is *a priori* conceivable or inconceivable. There is a strong tendency in some writers to reduce Biblical prediction to a *minimum*, if not to do away with it altogether, the object being to smooth away the difficulties which lie in the path of unbelievers, and to make some elements of Christianity more accessible to those who stumble at the idea of anything supernatural. But the

predictive element in the Bible cannot lightly be disposed of. It is distinctly claimed by the writers themselves. Isaiah challenges heathenism to produce its prophecies:--"Let them shew us what shall happen . . . shew the things that are to come hereafter, that we may know that ye are gods" (Isai. 41.22,23). He claims prediction as an attribute of God Himself:--"I am God, and there is none like Me, declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times the things that are not yet done, saying, My counsel shall stand, and I will do all My pleasure . . . I have spoken, I will also bring it to pass: I have purposed, I will also do it (Isai. 46.9-11). The Prophet Amos goes so far as to say that the revelation of the Divine purpose was normal:--"Surely the Lord God will do nothing without revealing His secrets to His servants the prophets" (Amos 3.7). Similar passages can be produced from both the Old and New Testaments. Thoughtful students of these books thus find themselves compelled to take the Biblical predictions as they stand, reading them inductively and dealing with them on a large scale. Manifestly they are not wholesale forgeries; nor are they a series of happy guesses; but they must be regarded as the unfolding of purposes which were revealed at sundry times and in divers manners, and were only realised in history ages after they were uttered, whilst some are still waiting for their fulfilment. The prophetic element is thus not only a proof, but also a method of Revelation.

What then are the ideas concerning God which are implied in the series of literary phenomena which make up Biblical prediction?

1. The *Personality* of God lies at the foundation of this as of all else. God is not a dead force, but a living Father. He is not only the uncaused spring of all secondary causes, but a Being possessed of consciousness, *i.e.* of something akin to our consciousness, inclusive both of feeling, whether of pleasure and displeasure, and of will. The fact of our own personality leads us on purely rational grounds to ascribe personal existence to the Father of our spirits. The Personality of God may be--must be--infinitely greater than ours: it is eternal; it needs not to be nursed and trained through the medium of a body; it is something essential and fixed, but not impassive and hard. The grand words, I AM THAT I AM, stand like a monument of the Divine personality, and commend themselves to the searcher after truth as the basis of all other existence, and as the starting-point of all sound investigation into such a discussion as lies before us.

2. The *eternity* of God is a necessary corollary. As nothing preceded Him and brought Him into being, so nothing can cause His existence to waste away or be obliterated. He was: He is: He is to come. Whilst human beings are creeping round the circumference of Time, He remains as the eternal centre, the same yesterday, and to-day, and for ever. From His throne in the spirit world He looks down on His creatures, and in one glance beholds their beginning, their course, their consummation. A thousand years do not affect Him in the sense in which they affect us. The lapse of ages will not change His moral and spiritual attributes. The tendency to create and, if need be, to save, must be His through all time and through all space.

3. The existence of *purpose*⁴ in the Divine mind follows next. He is "wonderful in counsel." Purpose springs from Tendency, and is formulated in Plan. These are human words, but they point to something in the Divine nature, and the thought concerning them is freely expressed in Scripture, e.g. by Isaiah and St.

4 In the Old Testament various words are translated "purpose." Some signify "speech," others "thought" or "good pleasure."

Paul. It is here that Revelation becomes specially necessary. Our knowledge of God's attributes (which after all is infinitesimal) would not enable us to predict His purposes. We could only tell what their qualities would be. But "known unto God are all His works from the beginning of the world" (Acts 15.18). Every step in creation, in origination, in differentiation, whether in our planet or in the stellar and spiritual universe, is best worded by us as the result of mental or spiritual action on the part of God. Some things may be directly ordered and executed by what we usually call physical force, as when He said, "Let there be light," and there was light; others, especially where moral beings are concerned, are permitted, aided, and inspired, rather than compelled; but our reason and moral sense lead us to believe that in the long run these permissions, and the results which follow--even though apparently failures--will be turned to account in the direction of the original intention and design. Human beings are always making plans, whether in politics, in military matters, in construction, or in games. We are forecasting every day and all day long. This is one element in our likeness to God.

The Divine *omnipotence* is the fourth element. He is able to carry out His purposes. "Hath He said, and shall He not do it? Hath He spoken, and shall He not make it good?" When we call God "Almighty," we mean that His spiritual and (in a secondary sense) His physical powers are not restricted by human limitations or by the unforeseen. Nothing is impossible with Him, provided always that it is consistent with His attributes and purposes. The hearts of kings are in His rule and governance. Men may think they are carrying out their own will, when really they are His agents. We read of the Assyrian, "I will send him . . . I will give him a charge . . . howbeit he meaneth not so, neither doth his heart think so; but it is in his heart to destroy and cut off nations not a few" (Isai. 10.6,7). "Him, being given up by the deliberate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken and by wicked hands have crucified and slain" (Acts 2.23). This is what we mean by Providence. It is the utilisation of existing forces, physical, human, angelic, to carry out the Divine purposes. There are many links, some large and some small, in the chain, but the hand that makes and holds it is Divine. When we consider the power of our own will on matter and on mind, we recognise that He in Whom we live and move and have our being must have some power akin to ours, only infinite and perfect.

5. He is *capable of making known His purposes beforehand*. That the Divine Being, who has endued us with so many avenues of communication with each other, should have debarred Himself from all such means, is an idea which carries with it its own refutation. We are taught that man was originally made in the Divine image that he might be God's child, and we gather consequently that Divine intercourse with human beings was normal before the Fall. But now what used to be natural has become supernatural. God ordinarily hides Himself, but reveals Himself when it is needful. In our present condition we should be dazzled and bewildered and rendered unfit for our ordinary duties if God walked amongst us as He did in the Garden of Eden. Hence it is that reserve in the Divine communications with man is reasonable and natural, and has become the rule rather than the exception. That reserve, however, is not absolute. Just as we depart from our ordinary routine under special circumstances, so there is nothing unreasonable in the unveiling of the Divine purpose to the eye of special persons, or even nations, where God sees fit. The mission of the Son of God, together with all that led up to it, and all that follows from it, is the most conspicuous of all the reasons which justify such an unveiling. Divine Intervention thus furnishes the *rationale* of Divine Revelation. The two ran side by side through the preparatory ages which closed with the return

from the Captivity. A gap of some four centuries succeeded. Then came the fulness of time; and Revelation and Intervention were re-awakened in the manifestation of the Lord Jesus Christ, in the outpouring of the Spirit, and in the first preaching and recording of Christian truth.

Such are the ideas of God which are involved in the theory of Biblical prediction: His Personality, His Eternity, His Purpose, His Providence, His Revelation. Are they not reasonable? What sort of a God would He be who was deprived of these attributes, or was debarred from expressing them in action? Certainly He would not be the God of the Jew or of the Christian. He would not be such an ideal God as Reason and Feeling suggest. In fact, He would in some respects be less godlike than an ordinary man. Let the student of human nature face these reflections fully and fairly. He will then at least acknowledge that no theoretical objections to prediction *per se* need hinder him from studying the prophecies contained in the Scripture.

CHAPTER II

PHENOMENA OF BIBLICAL PREDICTION.

HAVING shown cause for believing that there is nothing unreasonable in the idea of prediction regarded as the unfolding of a Divine purpose, it will be best to take a bird's-eye view of the phenomena presented by Biblical predictions as a whole. The following points seem the most noteworthy:--

1. *Their number and distribution.*--They are by no means confined to the so-called Prophetic Books. In fact, there is hardly a book in the Bible which is wholly devoid of the prophetic element. Putting aside frequent utterances of promise and threat, and proverbial expressions which indicate the downfall of wickedness and the success of righteousness in the long run, we find numerous definite predictions running through the Pentateuch, Joshua, Samuel, Kings, Chronicles, the Psalms and Prophets, the Gospels and Acts, the Epistles to the Romans, Corinthians, Thessalonians, the Epistles of St. Peter, St. John, and St. Jude, and the Book of the Revelation. They are to be numbered not by tens but by hundreds, and are constantly coming to the front in the course of a series of Books which extend over a period of at least 1,500 years. Moreover, those prophets whose writings we possess are only a few out of many; and they themselves must have uttered many more predictions than those which have come down to us.

2. *The variety of their subject matter.*--They have to do with individuals, as in the case of Lamech's prophecy concerning Noah, or the utterance of the man of God at Bethel concerning Josiah; with tribes and families, as in the case of Noah's prediction concerning Shem, Ham, and Japheth, or of Jacob's blessing on his twelve sons; with the rise and fall of empires, as in Nebuchadnezzar's dream; with the destiny of the earth, as in the Second Epistle of St. Peter; with the coming and work of the Redeemer, as in the prophecy concerning Bethlehem in the Book of Micah; with His glorious reappearing, as in the angelic message recorded in the 1st of Acts; with the resurrection of the saints, as in 1 Cor. 15; and with the final Judgment of the Race, as in Rev. 20.

Nothing seems too great and nothing too small for the prophetic spirit; nothing too near, and nothing too far off; nothing too secular, and nothing too sacred. The birth of a child, the death of a king, the shortening or prolongation of a life, the discovery and punishment of a sin, the inroad of a nation, the preservation of a family, the advent of a Redeemer, the destruction of a planet--all find their place in Biblical prediction.

3. *The individuality of the speakers and writers.*--While there are certain characteristics more or less common to all prophetic utterances, the Spirit of God by no means prompted them all to speak in the same style or to treat their subject in the same method. Each prophet preserves his individuality and exhibits a certain independence of thought and language. Peculiar lines of thought and feeling spring out of the circumstances in which the various writers are placed. Thus, David's peculiar position as an anointed but persecuted king makes him unconsciously a type of Christ, and his strange experiences enabled him to give expression to feelings far deeper than his own. The same may be said of Jeremiah. Besides this, each period had its special needs which the prophets were called to supply; and every man of God contributed what was required for his own day, all being under the direction of the Master mind, and each contributing unwittingly for

the benefit of future ages.

4. *Their unity and relationship.*--Although Biblical prophecies are the utterances of many men and the product of many ages, yet when regarded as a whole they are found to be correlated. They form a vast series which extends through many generations. There is a main line of prediction, and there are divers branches. Their terminus or objective of the main line in the Old Testament is the coming of the Messiah. And the terminus of New Testament prophecy--all uttered and written down *after* His coming--is the coming again of the Messiah. Thus, "Testimony to Jesus is the spirit of prophecy" (Rev. 19.10). Side-issues must be read in connexion with this main line. The eternal God breathes through all the utterances, whether great or small, whether central or subsidiary. Each prophet contributes unwittingly to a complete programme, whilst each has his own special style and office. The later prophets frequently take up the earlier predictions, and re-issue them with certain additions or modifications. Moses takes up the blessing of Jacob: Jeremiah brings out afresh the words of Isaiah and his contemporaries: the Lord Jesus carries forward the utterances of Daniel: the Apocalypse projects into the future the unfilled residuum of Old Testament prophecy.

The more critically we examine the Books the more we are struck with the proofs that the later writers were well acquainted with the literary remains of their predecessors and contemporaries. They had free access to the archives and registries in which such writings were kept, and there were guilds of scribes who were expert in copying MSS. See, e.g. Judg. 5.14; 1 Kings 4.3; 1 Chron. 2.55. Inspiration does not imply originality, and prophets borrowed freely from one another without mentioning the fact. When we compare Micah with Isaiah, Jeremiah with almost all previous writers, Zephaniah with Isaiah, Haggai with Ezekiel, and St. Jude with St. Peter, we cannot fail to detect this spiritual communism among the prophets.

Besides this, there are in the Bible traces of a prophetic scheme or cycle in accordance with which sacred history proceeds. It comes to light in Lev. 26, and again in Deut. 26-29, and culminates in the national Song preserved to us in Deut. 32, which all Israel had to learn by heart. This Song contains their history in short. The people are regarded (i.) as thriving, (ii.) as forgetting God, (iii.) as suffering for their sin, (iv.) as appealing for help. Their God looks down upon them, and (i.) is jealous for His people, (ii.) redeems them, (iii.) punishes their enemies, (iv.) incorporates some of the outside nations with His rejoicing people. Verbal quotations from these chapters named above abound in the Psalms and the prophets; they are observable in the time of the Maccabees, e.g. in 2 Macc. 7.6, where we read, "Moses in his Song declared He shall be comforted in His servants"; also in the New Testament seven or eight utterances of the Song are reproduced.⁵ In the prophets the cycle usually takes this form:--Ingratitude, Idolatry, Punishment, the call to Conversion, the promise of Restitution, the Judgment on persecuting nations, Jerusalem the centre of all nations.

5. *The predictive element is entwined with the historical.*--Prophecy and Providence run together; and prediction, speaking generally, is to be found in a biographical or historical setting. It is not always easy to disentangle the one from the other, for both grow together. If Pharaoh had not dreamed his strange

⁵ See the *Student's Deuteronomy* (Eyre and Spottiswoode), where the leading quotations are given in full.

dreams, and if Joseph had not interpreted the cup-bearer's dream, the course of Israelitish history might have run differently. The promises made to Abraham became the *magna charta* of his seed. They are appealed to as the ground of Divine intervention throughout the Pentateuch and in the later Books, and again by Ezra after the Babylonian Captivity. They emerge afresh in the New Testament at the time of the birth of Christ, whose coming is considered their fulfilment.

6. *The predictive element is generally subservient to the practical and spiritual.*--The object of prophecy was not to excite surprise, but to stimulate enterprise. It was not a narcotic or a substitute for action, but was designed to provoke to love and good words. The prophet's business was to warn men, to kindle hope in their breasts, and to turn them to God. There is no room for fatalism in the Bible. However near or however sure a prediction might be, it was intended to call out faith, and faith was to call out action; and if the day of action was allowed to slip by without being used, then the prophecy was in vain. The promises concerning Canaan incited Israel to fight, not to sit still. When David found by enquiring of God that the men of Keilah would deliver him into Saul's hands, he did not sit still and let himself be captured; he fled away. Isaiah's message to Hezekiah telling him that he should die prompted him to pray that he might live; and he did live.

How far the prophecies produced the full effect which was intended may well be questioned. The word often fell on dull ears and hard hearts. The predominant tone of warning which is so characteristic in the pages of Jeremiah and Ezekiel caused men to feel as Ahab did towards Micaiah--"I hate him, for that he doth not prophesy good concerning me, but evil." Still, whether they heard or whether they forbore, they knew that God had spoken. The burning of Jeremiah's roll was probably unique, though it has had plenty of imitators in later days. Some seed, at any rate, fell on good ground. In the 3rd chapter of Micah, after a review of Judah's sin, the prophet says, "Zion shall be ploughed as a field, and Jerusalem shall become heaps, and the mountain of the House as the high places of the forest." Did this definite threat produce any effect on the people? We know that it did. A century later we find the matter referred to by the elders of the land, who say that the effect was that Hezekiah "feared the Lord and besought the Lord, and the Lord repented Him of the evil which He had pronounced against them." See Jer. 26.17-19.

7. Another remarkable feature of prophetic diction is that *its language at first sight looks extremely exaggerated*. It is in truth thoroughly oriental, and if the Bible had been originally written in English and by Englishmen, it would doubtless have been worded very differently. Even in such a sober book as the Epistle to the Colossians (1.23), we are told that the Gospel had been "preached to every creature under heaven," as if the injunction of Mark 16.15 had already been carried out. A hundred times destruction is threatened in the most terrible forms against Israel and against other nations, and yet it arrives in a very reduced form. It is evident that neither desolation nor destruction were final or complete. Look, for example, at Isai. 24.18-20:--

"He who fleeth from the noise of the fear shall fall into the pit;
And he that cometh up out of the midst of the pit shall be taken in the snare;
For the windows from on high are open,
And the foundations of the earth do shake.
The earth is utterly broken down;
The earth is clean dissolved.

The earth is moved exceedingly;
The earth shall reel to and fro like a drunkard,
And shall be removed like a cottage;
And the transgression thereof shall be heavy upon it;
And it shall fall and not rise again.

It is needless to multiply such passages as these which the prophetic Books supply so freely. They naturally suggest two thoughts. First, if threats which can be tested in this world are not fulfilled to the letter, how will it be with regard to those which affect the world to come? And secondly, if punishments are not fully carried out, how will it be with rewards?

The wording of the Books inclines us to believe that we have presented to us what may be called extreme cases and ideal judgments, which are often considerably modified in practice. They enshrine the laws of Divine government in their most telling forms; and in this sense they may be compared with the teaching of the Lord Jesus Himself as preserved in the Gospels.

It must not be forgotten that terms of comparison in Hebrew are more pointed than in English, and transitions are far more abrupt. This is true in ordinary narrative, and of course it affects prophecy still more. When we read such sentences as "Your cities are burnt with fire," "Incense is an abomination to me," "Your hands are full of blood," "Every one loveth gifts" (Isai. 1.7,13,15,23), we quite understand that we must deduct something for Hebrew style; but we neglect the application of this principle to other passages which need it quite as much, e.g. some of the utterances of our Lord and His apostles. When we read of a slave, "He shall serve his master for ever" (Exod. 21.6), we know that conditions are sure to arise which will snap that permanent bond; for service closes at death. Similarly, when we read of God's land that "The forts and towers shall be for dens for ever" (Isai. 32.14), we know that the continuance of the desolation here implied will come to an end, for the very next verse points to Restitution--"Until the Spirit be poured upon us," etc. We have, in a word, to compare passage with passage, thought with thought, and truth with truth, and even then we can only speak modestly concerning predictions which are clothed in the most extreme language.

Our Authorised and Revised Versions have added to our difficulty instead of removing it; for they frequently translate the Hebrew duplication by the word "utterly," where the sense requires the word "surely." Thus in Gen. 2.17 they render the passage rightly, "Thou shalt surely die"; but in Deut. 4.26, "Ye shall soon utterly perish . . . ye shall utterly be destroyed." This class of rendering is a serious misfortune.

CHAPTER III

TESTS OF THE TRUTH OF PROPHECY.

THE first test of the truth of a prediction is its fulfilment. When Jeremiah confronted the false prophet Hananiah and gave an ironical "Amen" to his sanguine but fictitious message, he added these words, "The prophet which prophesieth of peace, when the word of the prophet shall come to pass then shall the prophet be known that the Lord hath truly sent him" (Jer. 28.9). The word is thus confirmed and established; and whilst the fulfilment attests the prediction, the fact that there was a deliberate prediction by an authorised person marks the event as something intentional and as part of a Divine purpose. Our Lord said, "Now I have told you before it come to pass that when it is come to pass ye might believe" (John 14.29; comp. chap. 13.19).

Viewing the Bible as a whole and as a trustworthy collection of writings, we are driven to the conclusion that hundreds of prophecies have been fulfilled; and we are thus led to believe that in cases where the fulfilment is not recorded we may be satisfied that they, too, came true, with the qualifications referred to in the previous chapter. Some prophetic utterances must be in process of fulfilment at the present time, whether in personal experience, or in the history of the professing church, or in the movements of nations, or in the silent preparation of the earth for its next great change. The time for some has not yet come; but when we take the Books approximately at their traditional dates, we find that so many predictions concerning Israel and concerning the mission of Christ have been already verified, that we feel assured as to the future. History will yet put its seal on the remaining prophecies, and it will be true in the time to come, as it has been in the past, that God's word does not return to Him void.

2. But this criterion of prophecy does not stand alone. We can readily see that something more was needed in order to persuade men that the things uttered would surely come to pass. Above all things there must be faith in God. "I believe God (says St. Paul) that it shall be even as it was told me" (Acts. 27.25). God is by the necessity of His own nature faithful and true. His word stands for ever. He calls us to be faithful because He is faithful. If we refuse to believe Him we are sinning against one of the deepest laws of our nature. When once we have reason to believe that God has spoken, we have nothing to do but to believe.

3. Again, we must be sure of the man or the medium through whom the Divine message reaches us. If we throw ourselves back into the Israelite age we see the necessity of this. If a prophet was a well-known person whose authority was established, as in the case of Samuel, Isaiah, or Paul, his word would be taken by those who knew him without hesitation; otherwise perplexity might arise. Many predictions referred to the far future, and the minds of men might remain in suspense for many generations if no prophecy could be regarded as certain until the event verified it. Moreover, even the fulfilment of a prophecy might not be an absolute proof that it had come from God. It is quite conceivable that the utterances of some of the false prophets, who formed such a perplexing element in Israelite life, might come true. Thus, additional assistance was needed for the confirmation of the faith of the original hearers of sacred predictions.

Accordingly there was a provision of signs and tokens, miraculous or providential, which were to be regarded as attestations of the messenger and

consequently of his message. These signs were of two classes. There were signs preceding and signs following.

When Moses was sent to speak to the Israelites concerning their approaching deliverance from Egypt and concerning his own mission as their leader, he asked how it should be known that God had sent him. The answer affords us the first instance of miracles wrought by the hand of man--and it is noteworthy, by the way, that we have no record of such miracles in this sense in the antediluvian and patriarchal ages, a fact which is strongly in favour of the trustworthiness and antiquity of the Book of Genesis. The turning of the rod into a serpent and the other signs were so many attestations that Moses was sent by God and that His word must be trusted and obeyed. As we saw in a former chapter that the Divine intervention in the Person of the Son of God was the *rationale* of revelation, we see that the mission of the Prophets gives the *rationale* of the miraculous.

The word "miraculous" is here used in a wide and popular sense. No one can say where nature ends, and where that which is not nature begins. The more we pursue nature the greater and more subtle does it become. There is, however, a normal order of events and conditions, and there is an abnormal. Some of the signs or miracles recorded in Scripture range themselves under the first of these titles and may be considered as Providential, *i.e.* as divinely arranged coincidences, *e.g.* the condition of the Red Sea and of the Jordan when Israel crossed them. Others are distinctly abnormal or extraordinary. These must be studied as a series, not as isolated marvels. They were effected through Divine wisdom and power either in order to guarantee the prophet, or to symbolise and signify something about the mission of the Son of God. The word "miracle" is used only six times in the Old Testament (A.V.). It stands for two Hebrew words, one of which (מוֹפֵת) is generally translated "wonder," and signifies a portent; whilst the other (אוֹת) means "a sign," and occurs as far back as Gen. 1.14. Neither of these words draws a distinction between nature and the supernatural. The three words used in the New Testament distinguish between a sign (σημειον), a marvel or portent (τερας), and an exhibition of force (δυναμις).

We gather from Scripture that whilst sacred revelations in vision⁶ and otherwise ran through the course of history in a direct line from Adam to Moses alongside of a series of Providential circumstances, including answers to prayer, the wonderful works, which we call miraculous, kept step with the mission of the prophets both in the Old Testament and in the New. The signs (to use St. John's favourite word) which the Lord Jesus wrought were the guarantee that He was at least a prophet, and so they called men's attention to His words. They were, indeed, more than this, but this was their first object.

A notable instance of a sign preceding the event is given us in 1 Kings 13. A man of God is sent to Bethel to predict the coming and mission of a certain king who should be named Josiah. But the fulfilment of the prediction was delayed for two centuries. Accordingly, in order to give a guarantee that the words spoken would surely come to pass, two signs are granted. First, the altar was rent there and then the ashes poured out; secondly, the king's hand was first withered and then restored. The sign granted to Hezekiah is in the memory of all, though we in these days hardly know how it was accomplished. In the New Testament a notable

⁶ The sign sought by Abraham (Gen. 15.8) was not a miracle wrought by the hand of man, nor was it an attestation to others that Abraham was a prophet; it was simply a vision granted to him for the confirmation of his faith.

case is that of Zechariah, whose faith in the astonishing revelation made to him sadly needed confirming. His dumbness was a sign before the event, and his sudden recovery of speech may be taken as a sign which followed after.

The demand of a sign was often made, and naturally enough, during our Lord's mission. Certainly plenty of signs were vouchsafed to His generation. Many of them accompanied His teaching, and were both illustrative of it and subsidiary to it; but the most notable answer which He gave to the demand for a sign was what He more than once referred to as the sign of the Prophet Jonah; in other words His resurrection on the third day. This must be considered as a sign which was fulfilled in what followed after that critical day of His betrayal, crucifixion, death, and burial. The outpouring of the Holy Spirit is regarded by St. Peter in a similar sense. The Lord was to baptize with the Holy Ghost; and when the Spirit was shed forth it was regarded as a sign that Jesus was indeed exalted. Similar "signs following" are traceable in other parts of the Bible.

In Exod. 3.12, we read, "This shall be a sign that I have sent thee: when thou hast brought forth the people out of Egypt ye shall serve God upon this mountain." Certainly nothing was less likely than that Israel when on their journey from Egypt to Canaan should work their way round by Horeb. Consequently, when this actually happened, Moses would have his faith in God's mission confirmed. Again, when Isaiah proclaimed deliverance to Hezekiah and his people, he said, "This shall be a sign unto thee: ye shall eat this year such things as grow of themselves, and in the second year that which springeth of the same." The actual deliverance was on the very night in which these words were uttered, but the sign reached onwards into the second year. Perhaps the celebrated sign given to Ahaz (Isai. 7.14) is to be read in a similar sense. When the king had refused to ask a sign that he should be delivered from his enemies, God gave him a sign which was not to be fulfilled for seven centuries--"Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son." The Great Redemption by the virgin-born Saviour was a sign that God was with man, and confirmed the conviction that all the lesser and earlier deliverances granted to the line of David (of which Ahaz was one) were foreshadowings of His gracious and supreme act of intervention in the Person of the virgin-born Son.

These signs, whether preceding or following, are to be regarded as part of the Divine method of revelation, and they were specially adapted to confirm the faith of those who beheld them or knew of them.

4. Yet another provision was made to confirm men's faith in utterances which had regard to the far future. It frequently happened that prophets who had to speak of such things were also commissioned to predict other things which would shortly come to pass; and the verification of these latter predictions in their own day and generation justified men in believing the other utterances which pointed to a more distant time. The one was practically a "sign" of the other, and if the one proved true the other might be trusted. Thus, the birth of Isaac under the most unlikely circumstances would help Abraham to believe that in his seed all the families of the earth should be blessed. The fact that Shebna was degraded from the office of grand vizier, and Eliakim put in his place, tended to establish Isaiah's position as a prophet (see. Isai. 22.15 and 36.3). Jeremiah publicly warned Hananiah that he should die within the year, and he did so (Jer. 28.16,17); and the event would confirm Jeremiah's authority in the eyes of the people. There are many similar cases in the Old Testament and in the Acts of the Apostles.

But the two classes of prophecy thus referred to were frequently combined in

one; they were, in fact, so intertwined that it is almost impossible for the student to disentangle them. They read as a whole, the parts being related as the foreground and the background of a landscape, or as two pictures in a dissolving view. Writers on prophecy have usually pointed out this oft-recurring phenomenon; and some critics have gone so far as to say that wherever there is a background there must be a foreground; that the far future, if predicted at all, is only shadowed forth vaguely in expressions which have to do with the prophet's own day: whilst others go a step further and suggest that the mission of the prophet is only to exhibit the spiritual side of the time then present, whether as a warning or an encouragement, in view of future possibilities.

These ideas can hardly be sustained in view of the facts recorded in Scripture, on which alone we have to depend for our materials. But it cannot be doubted that the intertwining of the near and the distant is a common characteristic of prophecy, and that it largely contributed to the confirmation of men's faith in the prophetic word. In Isaiah and his contemporaries the notable deliverance of Hezekiah and his people from the hand of Sennacherib is associated with a greater deliverance which was not accomplished until seven centuries later; and the Return from Babylonian captivity is interwoven with brilliant pictures of an Israelite Restitution which has not yet been accomplished (see, e.g. Micah, chaps. 4 and 5). Our Lord's prophetic utterances (Matt. 24 and 25) begin in the time then present, but merge into scenes still future, and commentators are not always of one mind as to where the overlapping takes place. The prophecies of Daniel concerning "the abomination of desolation" seemed to be fulfilled in the time of Antiochus Epiphanes. This we see from 1 Macc. 1.51, where we read that "in the fifteenth day of the month Chisleu, in the one hundred and forty-fifth year (*i.e.* circ. B.C. 168), they set up the abomination of desolation upon the altar," etc. But our Lord, speaking 200 years later, tells his disciples that some of them would see it in their own days, and gives them instructions as to what they were to do when they saw it: "When ye shall see the abomination of desolation spoken of by Daniel the prophet stand in the holy place, then let them which be in Judea flee into the mountains," etc. (Matt. 24.15).

5. The case of the false prophet was provided against in another way. These men, deceiving and being deceived through many ages, were actuated by various motives, of which Baalism (Jer. 2.8), the love of money, and even the love of drink were prominent (Isai. 28.7; Mic. 3.11). They were banded together in large communities from the days of Ahab onwards, and were specially vigorous and popular in the time of Jeremiah. They reappeared in the Christian Era, and in the last times they will work false miracles, as the magicians did in the time of the Exodus. It was thus necessary that their influence should be taken into consideration and guarded against, both in the law of Moses and in the teaching of Christ. Accordingly we read in Deut. 13.1-3, "If there arise among you a prophet or a dreamer and giveth thee a sign or a wonder, and the sign or wonder come to pass, in connexion with which he saith, 'Let us go after other gods and serve them'--thou shalt not hearken unto the words of that prophet or dreamer. For the Lord God is proving you to know whether ye love Him with all your heart." In other words, men were to consider the doctrine as well as the signs, and if men's teaching tended towards Baal-worship or any other form of heathenism, it might be known for certain that they prophesied out of their own spirit, and the Lord had not sent them. Further, our Lord said, "Ye shall know them by their fruits" (Matt. 7.16). Thus the authority of teaching was to be recognised by the tendency of the life which it produced. The sceptical scoffers referred to by St. Peter and St. Jude walked after their own lusts (2 Pet. 3.3; Jude 18). This was enough to

condemn them. St. John gives another simple test whereby the false prophets of his day, probably towards the end of his life, might be discerned. He says, "Believe not every spirit, but test the spirits whether they be of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world. Hereby know ye the spirit of God: every spirit that confesseth that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is of God, and every spirit that confesseth not (in other words, that denieth) that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is not of God: and this is that spirit of antichrist whereof ye have heard that it should come, and even now it is in the world" (1 John 4.1-3). He is here no doubt referring to the germs of Gnosticism which had already begun to work among the Christians of Western Asia.

It is worth while to note how ready the Lord Jesus was to submit to the tests here mentioned. He submits to be judged by "the law and the testimony" (Isai. 8.20), and challenges His opponents to convict Him of sin (John 8.46). There is no break in the unity of doctrine, or in the standard of life, between the Old Testament and the New. The one is the bud, the other is the full flower. Christ came not to destroy, but to fulfil.

CHAPTER IV

PROPHECIES CONDITIONAL AND UNCONDITIONAL.

AMONG the points bearing on the nature and fulfilment of prophecy, few call for more special attention than this,--that some predictions are conditional, whilst others are absolute. Many of the utterances of Scripture (e.g. Lev. 26) present alternative prospects. If Israel followed the course of obedience, certain happy consequences would ensue. If they disobeyed, various specified evils would follow. So it was in the case of individuals. Jeremiah said to King Zedekiah, "If thou wilt go forth to the king of Babylon's princes, then thy soul shall live, and this city shall not be burned with fire; but if thou wilt not go forth to the king of Babylon's princes, then shall this city be given into the hand of the Chaldeans and they shall burn it with fire, and thou shalt not escape out of their hand" (Jer. 38.17,18). Similarly, two alternatives were present before the little remnant with whom Jeremiah found himself associated after the Captivity (Jer. 42.10-13).

But the conditional nature of a prediction is not always plainly stated in Scripture. Thus, Jonah is said to have preached that within forty days Nineveh should be destroyed; the people repented at his preaching, and Nineveh was not destroyed; yet so far as we know, the people were not told that if they repented the judgment should not fall on them.

Predictions of this class are so numerous that we conclude there must have been some unexpressed but underlying condition in all such cases which justified God in departing from the literal fulfilment of the prophetic utterance. What that condition is we may gather from such chapters as Jer. 18 and Ezek. 33. After Jeremiah had watched the potter at his work and had learned the great lesson of the Sovereignty of God, a further message was presented to him: "At what instant I shall speak concerning a nation and concerning a kingdom to pluck up and to pull down and to destroy it, if that nation against whom I have pronounced turn from their evil, I will repent of the evil that I thought to do unto them. And at what instant I shall speak concerning a nation and concerning a kingdom to build and to plant it, if it do evil in My sight that it obey not My voice, then I will repent of the good wherewith I said I would benefit them" (Jer. 18.7-10). Acting on this principle, Jeremiah speaks thus to the princes when the priests and prophets wanted to have him slain:--"The Lord sent me to prophesy against this house and against this city all the words that ye have heard. Therefore now amend your ways and your doings and obey the voice of the Lord your God, and the Lord will repent Him of the evil that He pronounced against you" (Jer. 26.12,13). If the people would repent, in one sense, the Lord would repent, in another. And on what ground? On the ground of the original, essential and eternal attributes of the Divine nature, and on the ground of the old promises and covenants which God had made with the fathers as a result of those attributes. The God says to Israel, "Return, thou backsliding Israel, and I will not cause Mine anger to fall upon you, for I am merciful and I will not keep (anger) for ever" (Jer. 3.12). It is the goodness of God which leads to repentance (Rom. 2.4). Ezekiel's words are most significant:--"When I say to the righteous that he shall surely live, if he trust to his own righteousness and commit iniquity, all his righteousnesses shall not be remembered, but in his iniquity which he hath committed, in it shall he die. Again, when I say unto the wicked, Thou shalt surely die; if he turn from his sin and do judgment and justice . . . he shall surely live" (Ezek. 33.13-15). In accordance with this

fixed principle the appeal goes forth, "Repent and turn from all your transgressions, so iniquity shall not be your ruin. Cast away from you all your transgressions whereby ye have transgressed, and make you a new heart and a new spirit. For why will ye die, O house of Israel. For I have no pleasure in the death of him that dieth, saith the Lord God; wherefore turn and live ye" (Ezek. 18.30-32).

It may be gathered from these and other passages that the actual fulfilment of a prophecy depends on the moral and spiritual condition of those to whom or of whom the word is spoken. This consideration throws light on many things.

It is a fundamental principle of revealed theology that God is slow to anger and repenteth Him of the evil. "He is not slack as some men count slackness, but is longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance" (2 Pet. 3.9). This principle is exhibited in His dealings with the nations which inhabited the countries round Canaan. Their judgment may have been postponed or modified in consequence of some good thing which was seen in them. Similarly, in the case of individuals we can trace a relaxation or postponement of judgment. When Ahab had been convicted of grievous sin he rent his clothes and put sackcloth upon his flesh and fasted and went softly. "And the word of the Lord came to Elijah, saying, Seest thou how Ahab humbleth himself before Me? Because he humbleth himself before Me I will not bring the evil in his days: in his son's days will I bring the evil upon his house" (1 Kings 21.27-29).

It is probable that hundreds of prophecies, which look absolute as we read them, were not fulfilled in their completeness because the words of warning from the prophet produced some result, even though slight and temporary, on the hearts of the hearers. God does not quench the smoking flax.

It would be interesting to enquire how far the principle thus clearly laid down is applicable to the case of our first parents. God is represented as saying to Adam, "In the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die" (Gen. 2.17). The eternal attribute of goodness lay beneath the utterance; and in this sense, if in no other, the Lamb was regarded as slain before the foundation of the world. So it came to pass that Adam did not actually die when he ate the forbidden fruit, though the seeds of spiritual and physical death were then sown in him.

In Num. 14.34 we read, "Ye shall know My breach of promise." The words have to do with the threat of judgment on Israel for their unfaithfulness and their murmuring, in consequence of which their carcasses were to fall in the wilderness, and forty years should elapse before they entered Canaan. There is some doubt as to the exact rendering of the Hebrew word תְּנוּאָה, translated "breach-of-promise." Probably the margin in the A.V. ("the altering of My purpose") comes sufficiently near the truth. It would seem as if there were a constant reconstruction of the Divine plan, to meet the new set of circumstances brought about by human failure; so that whilst in one sense God is not a man that He should repent (Num. 23.19 and 1 Sam. 15.29), yet He does repent, in the sense of changing His course (1 Sam. 15.35).

Shall it be said then that all prophetic utterances are conditional? By no means. There are some things concerning which "the Lord hath sworn and will not repent" (Ps. 110.4); and it is of supreme importance to find out what they are, so

far as they have been revealed. The reduction, postponement, or doing away of privilege and penalty in the case of any specified person or generation, is one thing: the gracious counsel of God towards the children of men as a whole is another. The slow preparation of earth as a habitation for man, with its stores of coal and other treasures which man alone is constituted to enjoy and use, indicates Purpose on a large scale. The nature and possibilities of a human being with all his limitations, failures and inconsistencies, marks him off as having been placed on the border-land of two worlds, the physical and the spiritual. The selection of a man, a family, a nation, to run a course of many generations, inheriting, embodying, and conserving a long line of spiritual communications, is a simple fact of history which cannot be overlooked. Moreover, we find that this leads up to and prepares the way for the realisation of the very grandest conception ever entertained (as far as human knowledge can grasp) by the Author of all good, namely, Redemption. These gifts and this calling of God are without repentance (Rom. 11.29). No sin of man, no antagonism, alienation, or indifference, has been permitted to bar the way of God's great purpose in Christ. It is irreversible. The nations may combine against the Lord and against His anointed; but "He that sitteth in the heavens shall laugh; the Lord shall have them in derision. Yet (in spite of all) have I set My Son upon My holy hill of Zion" (Ps. 2.4,6).

These irreversible promises do not depend on man's goodness, but on God's. They are absolute in their fulfilment, even though they may be conditional as to the time and place of their fulfilment. The promise of the seasons recorded in Gen. 8.22 is to be true "while the earth remaineth." The promise made to David and his seed was to have no end; that is to say, as long as there was a human race upon earth, so long there should be one of the seed of David to rule (Ps. 89.29,36,37). The same is the case (in a sense yet to be discussed) with the promise of a permanent "Israelite" seed, with its priests and Levites (Isa. 66.20,21; Jer. 33.19-26). Equally sure and unconditional is the promise of the new heavens and the new earth (Isai. 65.17; 66.22; 2 Pet. 3.13; Rev. 21.1).

Times and seasons may be modified, days may be shortened, events may be accelerated or delayed, individuals and nations may come within the scope of the promises or may stand outside; but the events themselves are ordered and sure, sealed with God's oath, and guaranteed by His very life.

CHAPTER V

THE PROPHETS: THEIR GIFTS AND THEIR POSITION.

HITHERTO we have been dealing with the characteristics of prophecy rather than with the character and position of those who were God's mouthpieces. But it is time we should ask, What do they say concerning themselves? and what explanation of the wonderful gift bestowed on them do they offer?

1. As a class they make no pretence to remarkable learning or natural sagacity. We are in the habit of talking of the school or schools of the prophets, but this is not a Biblical expression. There were "companies" of prophets, whose office was choral rather than predictive (see 1 Sam. 19.20), and the sons of the prophets were naturally associated both in work and in common life (see 1 Kings 20.35; 2 Kings 2.3; 4.38; 9.1). To some extent they formed a guild or caste analogous with the priestly caste, though not necessarily hereditary as in the case of the priests; but this was a mere matter of custom and convenience, and there is no indication that they taught one another the art of prediction. The same may be said of the New Testament prophets. Some of the prophets were undoubtedly men of learning, e.g. Moses, Daniel, and Paul; but others, as Amos and Peter, were uncultured. There were plenty of books of magic among the Babylonians and other Eastern nations, but there is no trace of their use by the prophets of the Bible; and at Ephesus the books of those who used "curious arts" were publicly burnt when their owners became Christians.

2. They did not claim animal or mental excitement as the source of their gift. In many respects they present a marked contrast with the Canaanite Baal-prophets, the Greek soothsayers, the African rain-maker, the American medicine-man, the Mohammedan dervish, or the Western spiritualist. It is true that prophecy is largely poetical and raised out of the ordinary style of thought or feeling, and that in some cases the speaker seems to have been in an abnormal state of mind, being rapt or taken out of himself, whether in the body or out of the body he could not tell (2. Pet. 1.21 and 2 Cor. 12.2). The word translated "trance" in Acts 11.5; 22.17 is literally "ecstasy," *i.e.* an abnormal condition; but this word does not mean frenzy or excitement. It is used in the Septuagint in Gen. 2.21 and 15.12 for a deep sleep. So far as we can judge from their writings the men who had the gift of prediction were collected and self-restrained, though earnest, and at times impassioned. The spirits of the prophets were subject to the prophets (1 Cor. 14.32); and their body did not act on the mind, but rather the mind on the body.

The association of music with prophecy is referred to more than once in Scripture. Not only did it produce a soothing influence on the perturbed spirit of King Saul, who was himself a prophet in one sense, but we are told that whole companies of prophets went in procession with musical instruments before them (1 Sam. 10.5), and Elisha actually sent for a minstrel (*i.e.* a harpist), as if to put himself into a due frame of mind before prophesying (2 Kings 3.15). The habit of prophesying upon a harp, *i.e.* praising God with a musical accompaniment, is referred to in 1 Chron. 25.1 and Ps. 49.4. Music evidently could do a good deal, but it could not supply the knowledge of the future.

It cannot be denied that men of a certain mental stamp, and perhaps of certain nationalities, are more gifted than others in the matter of insight and foresight. The old world and the new, the most cultivated and the most uncivilized

of nations, have had their oracles, soothsayers, augurs, astrologers, prognosticators, horoscopists, and such like. We cannot dismiss presentiment and second-sight as a childish imposture. It may be that coming events do cast their shadows before, and that some persons have skill to detect the signs of the future, where ordinary people are too dull to observe them. There are elements in human nature of which we know very little. The well-known French astronomer, M. Flammarion, has entered fully and seriously into this question, and has produced the result of many years' enquiry in his late work entitled *L'inconnu*. In this book an attempt is made to found a scientific theory on an induction of instances; but it is closed with an honest acknowledgment that no theory can yet be arrived at. Andrew Lang's work on *The Origin of Religion* compares the gifts and ways of barbarous people with those of our own country in such matters as divining and crystal-gazing, and shows that the savage and the civilized have similar tendencies. Remarkable and well-attested instances of horoscopes are given us by Colonel Meadows Taylor in his *Story of My Life* (p. 228, etc.). The fact that the unauthorised attempts to obtain knowledge and influence through this class of agency are branded in Scripture as infamous, by no means leads us to dismiss them as mere jugglery.

7

3. The universal testimony of Scripture is that the gift of true prophecy was from the God of Truth. Strong pressure was exercised on the mind of the prophet, but it was from within (*i.e.* from the spirit-world), not from without. So we read in Neh. 9.30, "God testified by His Spirit in His prophets"; compare Zech. 7.12, where we read of "The words which the Lord of Hosts hath sent in His Spirit by the former prophets." So (Heb. 1.1) "God spoke unto the fathers in the prophets," and they were "moved (or borne along) by the Holy Ghost" (2 Pet. 1.21). Prophecy was thus a normal method of divine agency for the utterance of Truth.

4. Further light as to the nature of the prophetic gift is obtained by an examination of the leading Hebrew terms and expressions used in connexion with the subject.⁸

It is remarkable that none of the names for a prophet signify either pre-vision or pre-diction. All rather point to communications from the spirit-world prompting to the utterance of what is felt or seen.

The ordinary word for a prophet is *Nabi* (נביא), which in Assyrian signifies one who proclaimed the will of the gods. A *nabi* was a "medium" between God and man, and so a spokesman. The position may be illustrated from some analogous cases. When Moses shrank from the work committed to him, God said, "Thou shalt speak unto Aaron and put words in his mouth, . . . and he shall be thy spokesman unto the people; and he shall be unto thee instead of a mouth, and thou shalt be to him instead of God" (Exod. 4.15,16). Again, "I have made thee a god to Pharaoh, and Aaron thy brother shall be thy prophet" (Exod. 7.1).

The second name for a prophet is *Roeh* (רוֹאֶה), which exactly answers to the word "seer," *i.e.* one who sees with the natural eye. We gather from 1 Sam. 9.9 that this was the word in popular use in Samuel's early life. It was, however, never used in the early books, and is by no means a common word, being almost

7 On the Hebrew terminology connected with the subject see *Old Testament Synonyms* (Nisbet), chap. 26.

8 See *Synonyms of the Old Testament*, chap. 20. The English word "prophet" is simply a reproduction of the Greek προφήτης.

confined to the Chronicles, where it is used of Samuel and Hanani. It occurs in Isai. 30.10, and nowhere else in the prophetic books.

The third word is *Chozeh* (חֹזֶה), one who sees with the mental eye, or, to use a modern term, a clairvoyant. Though the verb is used of spiritual vision as far back as Exod. 24.11 and Num. 24.4, the noun is first used in its technical sense in 2 Sam. 24.11 of David's seer.

In 1 Chron. 29.29 all three words are used together, and we learn from the passage that men of this class had a notable function. They were historians. Samuel the seer, Nathan the prophet, and Gad the clairvoyant wrote certain books which we have practically in the Books of Samuel.⁹

The inner voice reached the mind of the prophet under three conditions. He might be spoken to in his wakeful hours, as when Isaiah was stopped while walking across a court and sent back with a message to Hezekiah (2 Kings 20.4). A message might come to him in a dream, as in the case of Joseph the son of Jacob, or it might be presented to his mind's eye in a vision. We read in Num. 12.6, "If there be a prophet among you, I the Lord will make Myself known to him in a vision and will speak to him in a dream." These two methods of revelation are contrasted with the communications which God made to Moses, which were more direct: "With him I will speak mouth to mouth, even apparently (*i.e.* visibly) and not in dark speeches (or riddles); and the likeness of the Lord shall he behold" (v. 8). The likeness of the Lord must have been One who was in some respects human and in some respects Divine; in fact, it must have been the Person who is sometimes called the Lord, sometimes the Angel or Agent of the Lord, sometimes the Archangel or the Captain of the Lord's host, and sometimes the Word of the Lord.

A dream might come to anyone as a warning or suggestion, but a vision was granted to special persons, such as Ezekiel or St. John. When such a vision was presented to the mind's eye, heaven seemed to be opened and the spirit-world disclosed to view. The objects presented might be familiar, as an almond tree or an altar, or they might be strange combinations, as in the case of the cherubim, or there might be manifestations of the Divine Being too dazzling and sublime to be put into words. In the case of a long and elaborate vision, or series of visions, it is not always easy to determine what portions are contemporary and what consecutive. The trance (*i.e.* transit or crossing from the physical sphere to the spiritual) might be short, as in the instance of Micaiah (1 Kings 22.19), or it might extend--practically, if not consciously--over some time (see *e.g.* Ezek. 40-48 or Rev. 1-22).

The process of prophetic rapture is set forth by various expressions, *e.g.* "I saw," "I heard a voice behind me," "the word of the Lord came," "the Lord spake to me with a strong hand." The voice seemed within (see Hos. 1.2, "the beginning of the Word of the Lord *in* (ב) Hosea"). It was like a burden laid on the spirit of the prophet (Isai. 13.1; Mal. 1.1), and he was bound to utter it in the right time and place. In fact he could not do otherwise, though he might resist for a time (Jer. 20.9).

Such is the account given by the prophets themselves of the phenomenon to which they were subjected. It invites study. It challenges comparison with any long series of utterances to be found in other countries and in connexion with

⁹ See *Deuterographs*, Introduction, (Oxford University Press).

other religions, if such can be found. But as a matter of fact any attempt at comparison will evince itself as contrast.

5. With regard to the social position and occupations of the prophets little need be said. They were not confined to one Tribe, though the priestly family contributed largely to their number. They were probably men of middle class, though not all on one level. They were not above labouring with their hands when necessary, as in the case of Elisha, Amos, and St. Paul, though they mixed freely with kings, princes, priests, and people, and with foreigners. Some of them occupied a more conspicuous position than others owing to circumstances, being the poets, historians, and preachers of the nation. They were probably a substitute for the priests in the Northern Kingdom, and a supplement to them in the Southern. Though not always under the direct movement of the prophetic spirit, they might at any time be called upon either by God directly, or by the needs of the occasion. Some of them led, and perhaps framed, the prayers and praises of the people; others expounded the Law, convicted, rebuked, and preached righteousness, whilst others were scribes, conserving, copying, and compiling the Scriptures. David had a "seer" who was almost like a private chaplain to him. So it was with other kings; and throughout the history we find them frequently intervening in times of emergency and calamity.

After all, they were men of like passions with us (Acts 14.15; Jas. 5.17). We have no reason to regard them as free from ordinary temptations or from serious wrong doing. They had no general grant of omniscience or infallibility in things sacred and secular. The gift that was in them was apparently limited to certain seasons and subjects; and when they had no message they were left morally and intellectually to the ordinary powers of human nature. It has often been discussed whether their authority on secular matters was as high as when God's truth was concerned. This much at any rate must be granted, that the special quickening of their memory and other powers through the inspiration of the Holy Ghost would give a unique value to their testimony on matters which had in any way come under their own cognisance.¹⁰

It should be added that both sexes were capable of receiving the gift. This is plain with regard to the general or non-technical use of the word in such chapters as Joel 2, Acts 2, and 1 Cor. 14. But further, we have the case of Huldah in the Old Testament and of Anna (*i.e.* Hannah) in the New. Isaiah's wife is called a prophetess (Isai. 8.3), perhaps because she was the wife of a prophet, but she may have had a gift like that of Deborah.

6. The question is sometimes raised, How far did the prophets understand the full import of their own words? In answering it, we have to avoid two extremes. They were not omniscient; but they were messengers. As such it was by no means necessary that they should be able to fathom the full meaning of the words entrusted to them. Were they, then, simply on a level with their hearers? This was hardly true in all cases. A prophet who beheld a vision had permission at times to question the being with whom he was in communication. See for examples Zech. 4.4-7, and Rev. 7.13,14. Similarly, a definite though enigmatical solution of prophetic truth was given to Daniel (12.8,13). The words of St. Peter (1 Pet. 1.10-12) are most instructive. In dealing with the subject of salvation, he tells us that the prophets sought and searched diligently what manner of time the Spirit of Christ which was in them pointed to, when it testified beforehand the sufferings

¹⁰ See Dr. Gifford's Fourth Lecture in *The Voices of the Prophets* (Edinburgh, 1874).

which should befall the Messiah and the glories which should follow. The apostle here refers to the class of passages which the Lord Jesus expounded after His Resurrection (Luke 24.26,46). The apostles themselves wanted to know these things (Matt. 24.3; Acts 1.6); and it was natural that the earlier prophets should do so. St. Peter, however, continues that it was revealed to these prophets that the things they announced had not to do with their own time, but with a later period which culminated at the time of the outpouring of the Spirit.

The conclusion seems to be that the prophets were generally ahead of their age, and that whilst the hearers and first readers saw little beyond an immediate and national fulfilment, the prophets themselves knew that the foreground of their prophecy was only of secondary importance, and that the background was international, spiritual, and redemptive.

7. There is yet one more point to be added about the prophets. We have every reason to believe that they were honest men who were ready to suffer and, if need be, to die for the cause of God and His truth. They knew in Whom they had believed. They had been called and commissioned by God, sometimes in a startling way. A great responsibility was thus thrown upon them. If God called them to speak, woe to them if they kept silence. "The lion hath roared: who will not fear? The Lord God hath spoken: who can but prophesy?" (see Amos 3.8). No diffidence, no lack of eloquence, no defect in personal aspect, no fear of man, must hinder a Moses, a Jeremiah, an Ezekiel, a Paul, from a free utterance of the Divine message. They had to face mockery, persecution, imprisonment, and even death, for the truth's sake. The story of the prophets of the Old and New Testaments is a story of martyrdom in both senses of the word. Little of it is told in Scripture because the Sacred Books came to us from these very men. But we have enough. The closing chapter of the Chronicles, some passages in Jeremiah, the solemn words of the Lord Jesus (Luke 11.50,51), the burning utterances of St. Stephen, and the 11th of the Hebrews, tell us all we want to know. The men whose words we are considering were heroes. They were the salt of the earth, from the days of righteous Abel to the time of Zachariah, and from the days of John the Baptist till the close of the prophetic period, the course of the prophets was stained with their own blood.

These men were not impostors, forgers, fraudulent scribes, ushering in their private views under cover of great names such as Moses or Isaiah. They spoke and wrote under a sense of responsibility. They were commissioned from on high, and their words were words of truth.