

The Predictive Element in the Old Testament.

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TO some minds the mere idea of revelation presents such difficulties that their attitude towards the Christian belief is practically determined without regard for the particular evidence on which that belief is based.

When this hesitation in accepting the idea of revelation accompanies doubt as to the existence of God, it is in itself quite reasonable; but the man who, while acknowledging the existence of a Personal First Cause, refuses to accept the idea that there is a revelation, has taken up a position which is contrary alike to reason and experience. It is contrary to experience, because the acknowledgment of a Personal First Cause is the acknowledgment of the source of all true fatherhood, and wherever true fatherhood is found there is always intercourse with the offspring.

A man, it is true, may be in the position of a father without possessing any of the instincts of a father; but such a case cannot be considered here, because it offers no true parallel, either in intention or desire, to that of the First Personal Cause of the Universe. If the intention of the First Personal Cause was not that of a true father, it becomes a thing which is inconceivable; and wherever true fatherhood exists there is always found self-revelation. Experience demands that revelation shall be an essential constituent in our conception of God.

And reason makes the same demand. The conception of God setting things in motion, initiating a series of processes which lead up to the production of moral beings, and then leaving those moral products of His own laws in utter ignorance of their author, withholding from them any revelation of Himself, His will, purpose, and intention, and of their origin, duty, destiny—such a conception as that is entirely unreasonable.

The denial of revelation by the Atheist and Agnostic is a simple necessity of their position, but the denial by a Deist is contrary alike to reason and experience. Furthermore, just as revelation is an essential element in our conception of God, so prediction is a necessary element in our conception of revelation.

True education always stretches out towards the future. The earthly father prepares his child, within the limits of his own knowledge and foresight, for what is to come. The intercourse between father and son, so far as experience and judgment permit, will always contain the predictive element. Can we then conceive of the Divine education of the human race stopping short at interpretation of the past and instruction as to present duty?

Experience and reason unite once again in demanding that prediction shall be an essential element in the content of Divine revelation. The thought was expressed by a writer in the *Hibbert Journal* of July last, when he said: "Prophecy is not limited to prediction, but prediction is an essential element of prophecy." Whatever opinion may be held as to the alleged predictive element in the Old Testament, there can be no question as to its presence in the New Testament.

To take but one example. In such a short and practical letter as that of St. Paul to the Philippians there are at least eight predictive passages. Five times in that letter does the Apostle refer to *the day of Jesus Christ* or to His expected appearing; he foretells the manifested sovereignty of Christ when at His Name *every knee should bow*; he twice anticipates the resurrection of the dead, and the transformation of *the body of our humiliation*, when the believer shall attain to the goal of the high calling of God in Christ. In other words, the revelation which has been vouchsafed for this dispensation has, as part of its function, the preparation of men for the future, not merely through instruction in righteousness, but also through prediction.

We may expect, therefore, to find that the revelation made

under the old dispensation was similarly designed to prepare men for the dispensation which was to follow, and that this was accomplished through prediction as well as through instruction in righteousness. The same Lord was revealing Himself. He who *hath in these last days spoken unto us by His Son* was the same Divine Person who *spake in time past by the prophets*,¹ and He who *sent His angel to show unto His servants the things which must shortly come to pass, was the Lord God of the holy prophets*.² And in the writings of the Old Testament prophets we find two particular claims made in respect of the matter of prediction.

The first is represented by the words of Amos: *The Lord God will do nothing, but He revealeth His secret unto His servants the prophets*.³

It is one of the clearest assertions contained in the Bible of the principle that Divine revelation must include prediction.

The tendency of the present day seems to be so to emphasize the truth that the prophet is the forthteller rather than the foreteller, that the function of predicting is almost left out of sight. It is doubtless due to reaction from the equally one-sided conception of the prophet as one whose distinctive function it was to foretell.

We must certainly begin with the more comprehensive conception of the forthteller, but we must at the same time be careful to see that forthtelling is not set over in contrast with foretelling.

The other claim is found in the closing chapters of the Book of Isaiah, where the writer frequently appeals to the fact of prediction as evidence for the belief in Jehovah as the true God.

Produce your cause: bring forth your strong reasons is the prophet's confident challenge to the idolater. *Let them bring them forth, and declare unto us what shall happen: declare ye the former things, what they be, that we may consider them, and know the latter end of them; or show us things for to come. Show the things that are to come hereafter, that we may know*

¹ Heb. i. 1.

² Rev. xxii. 6.

³ Amos iii. 7.

that ye are gods. The prophet himself answers the challenge : *Who hath declared it from the beginning, that we may know ? and beforetime, that we may say, He is righteous ? yea, there is none that declareth ; yea, there is none that sheweth ; yea, there is none that heareth your words.*¹

But of the Lord he says : *I am the Lord : that is My Name : and My glory will I not give to another, neither My praise to graven images. Behold, the former things are come to pass, and new things do I declare : before they spring forth I tell you of them.*²

In similar strain the prophet writes : *Who, as I, shall call and shall declare it, and set it in order for Me, since I appointed the ancient people ? and the things that are coming, and that shall come to pass, let them declare. Fear ye not, neither be afraid : have I not declared unto thee of old, and showed it ? and ye are My witnesses. Is there a God beside Me ? yea, there is no Rock : I know not any.*³ Again : *Assemble yourselves and come ; draw near together, ye that are escaped of the nations : they have no knowledge that carry the wood of their graven image, and pray unto a god that cannot save. Declare ye and bring it forth : yea, let them take counsel together : who hath showed this from ancient time ? who hath declared it of old ? Have not I, the Lord ? and there is no God else beside Me : a great God and a Saviour ; there is none beside Me.*⁴

Yet again : *I am God, and there is none like Me ; declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times things that are not yet done, saying, My counsel shall stand, and I will do all My pleasure.*⁵

In the light of such passages as these it can hardly be denied that prediction was a recognized element of Old Testament prophecy, and that there had been actual experience in Israel of prediction being fulfilled. The modern tendency to regard all early predictive passages as prophetic reflections upon the past, cast into the form of prediction, appears, therefore, to be pre-

¹ Isa. xli. 21-26.² Isa. xlii. 8, 9.³ Isa. xlii. 7, 8.⁴ Isa. xlv. 20, 21.⁵ Isa. xlvi. 9, 10.

carious, if only as removing that which is required to explain the language to which we have referred. If there had been no early predictions, and no recognized fulfilment of them, it is difficult to understand the apologetic of this writer in his controversy with the idolaters.

The acknowledgment, however, of the predictive element in the Old Testament is independent of the exegesis of any of these earlier passages. Whatever explanations may be forthcoming of the oracle of Noah, for example, or of the promise given to the Patriarchs, there can be no question at all as to the presence of prediction in the Old Testament viewed as a whole.

And when we consider prediction and its fulfilment as a branch of Christian apologetics, we are on the strongest ground if we confine ourselves to those broad principles which are interwoven in the fabric of the Old Testament, and which do not depend on the interpretation of any particular passage.

It is here that the modern apologist is generally compelled to part company with the earlier attitude. He looks for the fulfilment of principles rather than of details, and recognizes that the language of a prophet belongs to the prophet's own time. For him the consecration of all things to God's service, foretold by Zechariah, will not take the particular form of writing "Holiness unto the Lord" on the bells of the horses. Nor is the Eucharist a sacrificial ordinance because Malachi speaks of a pure offering amongst the Gentiles.

The time was when attention was concentrated on a detail here and one there, and any alleged correspondence between prophecy and event was pressed into the service for the truth of Christianity.

The tendency now is to fly to the opposite extreme, and to leave the argument from fulfilled prediction out of count altogether. Many of the interpretations were so fanciful and the alleged fulfilments were so foreign to the spirit of scientific inquiry that, in spite of the emphasis on detail which is frequently found in the Apostolic writings, the argument from fulfilled prediction fell into disrepute. But, in this case, neglect

is worse than exaggeration. The earlier attitude had at least the merit of recognizing the Divine both in the Word and in history; it sought for that co-operation of the Divine Spirit in revelation and of Divine Providence in the ordering of events, which is essential to a belief in the Divine at all. And what was needed was a restatement of the argument which would be strictly faithful to the scientific spirit, without losing any of the enthusiastic belief in the supernatural, which characterized the earlier thinkers.

But the unscientific treatment of prophecy seems to have brought the subject into such ill-favour amongst scholars that there does not appear to have been much enthusiasm about the restatement of the argument.

Far be it from me to pose as one who is competent to fulfil the conditions. I can only tentatively suggest the line of restatement as it presents itself to my own mind.

The predictive element in the Old Testament Scriptures exhibits three principal features, relating to the worship of Jahweh, the people of Jahweh, and the revelation of Jahweh.

1. *The Worship of Jahweh.*—Under the Old Covenant, with its emphasis on law and ceremony, the popular religion became almost entirely a matter of outward observance. Israel came to regard the bond between Jahweh and herself as indissoluble; established by fleshly descent, sealed and certified by outward rite, expressed and exhibited in service and ceremony, nothing further was wanting to secure the continuance of this sacred tie between Israel and her God.

It was against this popular conception of religion, upheld and nourished by the priesthood, that prophet after prophet, like solitary voices in the wilderness, made their protest, proclaiming that the bond between Jahweh and Israel was a moral one; that obedience was a greater thing than the fat of rams; that fasts and feasts, burnt-offerings and meat-offerings were an abomination unto the Lord unless they were the expression of a true and contrite heart; that Jerusalem's safety depended upon the moral condition of its inhabitants; that the Day of the Lord,

so far from being an object of joyful anticipation, would be found to be a day of judgment and disaster for the impenitent people. And side by side with these pronouncements, bearing upon the actual circumstances which confronted the prophets, there are found predictions that in the latter days their ideal of religion will characterize the people of the Lord.

*Behold the days come, saith the Lord, that I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. . . . This shall be the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after these days, saith the Lord. I will put My law in their inward parts, and in their heart will I write it.*¹ In other words, the religion of those latter days was to centre itself upon a state of heart and will; holiness and uncleanness were to be determined by moral condition and not by ceremonial distinction (on the bells of the horses would be written, *Holiness unto the Lord*²); and the service of the Lord would be independent of Jerusalem and its temple (*Men shall worship Him, everyone from his place*³).

2. An even more radical change (if that were possible) from the prevailing conception is held forth in the prophetic prediction of the people of the Lord. Exclusiveness was to give place to catholicity. The whole world was the Lord's, and all nations were to do Him service. The Gentiles were to receive the light, the Law was to go forth out of Zion, and the salvation of the Lord was to reach unto the ends of the earth.

On one of the occasions when the Lord Jesus set before His Apostles the task of evangelizing the world, He based His charge on these Old Testament predictions: *Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and rise again from the dead the third day, and that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His Name unto all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem.*⁴

The prophetic picture of the dispensation in which we live presents to our view the people of the Lord constituted, not

¹ Jer. xxxi. 31 *et seq.*

² Zech. xiv. 20.

³ Zeph. ii. 11.

⁴ Luke xxiv. 46 *et seq.*

merely by the recovery of the outcast of Israel, but also and still more by the ingathering of the nations of the world.

And the Apocalyptic vision of the redeemed, which embraced not merely the 12,000 of each of the tribes of Israel, but also a great multitude which no man could number out of every nation, and of all tribes, peoples, and tongues, was in strict accord with that Old Testament portrayal.¹

3. These two features of the prophetic anticipation are not to be treated as independent and separate pictures, but as features of one picture. They stand or fall together. The picture must be taken as a whole or left altogether. If the argument from fulfilled prediction is to have its proper weight, it must be through taking the picture as a whole; the evidence is cumulative.

But we have still to mention the third, the principal and central feature of the picture. I mean the advent of the Messiah. The two radical changes which we have noticed are predictive of the time of the Messiah; they were to be ushered in by the arrival upon the scene of Him who was to be at once Servant and Lord, Sufferer and King, Victim and Priest.

The preaching of repentance and remission of sins unto all the nations was linked up by the Lord Jesus to the death and resurrection of the Christ, as two inseparable features of the one picture. The evangelization was to be the consequence of the Messiah's work; both were essential elements in the prophetic portrayal.

Such, then, in general outline, seems to be the content of Old Testament prediction: the coming of the Messiah, whose advent would bring in a revolution of men's conceptions as to the nature of religion and the membership of the Kingdom.

When we turn to the world around us, what do we find?

The God of Israel recognized, believed in, served by all nations, kindreds, and peoples, worshipped in every country and in all tongues. I speak generally, using the word "all" in the sense of "the many," as opposed to "the one."

¹ Rev. viii: 9.

The people of Jahweh know no limits of race save those imposed by the failure of the Church to discharge the commission which was entrusted to her by her Lord and Master.

The descendants of Israel remain as a drop in the bucket, witnesses to their past, a survival which bears evidence to the rock out of which they were hewn, but, in comparison with the multitudes of the Gentile worshippers of Jahweh, a mere handful.

From the religious point of view, their influence is so minute that, if the religion of Jahweh were confined to them, it would justly be regarded as one of the effete systems of the world.¹ But, instead of that, the desirable things of all nations are being used for the adornment of the Temple of the Lord, all nations have received the Law from Mount Zion, and are walking in its light, the servant of the Lord has been sent to the Gentiles, and has become His salvation unto the ends of the world.

Moreover, the religion of Jahweh has changed ; in its essence it is dependent no longer upon places or ceremonies. *Neither in this mountain nor yet in Jerusalem* do men worship Him now, but each from his own place. *God is Spirit* is their creed : *they that worship Him must worship Him in spirit and in truth* is their principle,

It might be said that the Jews of to-day act on the same principle. Yes, but there is this great difference : for the Jew it is an inevitable (and they hope) temporary accommodation to circumstances ; for the Christian it is a permanent principle of life. The essence of religion for the Christian is the spiritual union of God and His children, and the spiritual communion which flows from it.

And these two transformations of the Judaistic conceptions of religion are the direct consequences of the teaching of Jesus of Nazareth, who claimed to be the Jewish Messiah. He it was who proclaimed the abolition of racial privilege, and it is in obedience

¹ I am not unmindful of the glorious results of a restored and converted Israel anticipated by St. Paul in Rom. xi. 11 *et seq.* This is the statement of the obvious present fact of the fall of Israel being the *riches of the world*, and the *diminishing of them* being the *riches of the Gentiles*.

to His teaching that the world is being evangelized. He it was who asserted the spiritual character of acceptable worship, and announced the coming of the Comforter, through whose indwelling in the heart God and His children should become one spirit, and it is the acceptance of His teaching which has made the religion of Jahweh essentially spiritual and experimental.

In weighing up the evidence of this comparison between Old Testament prediction and the circumstances of our own time, we shall do well to remember that the changes were effected in spite of the appointed guardians of the prophecies. The Church to which the oracles had been committed, rejected and put to death Jesus, who was called Christ ; it refused His interpretation of their Scriptures, and regarded Him as the enemy of the true religion.

The correspondence which we have noticed has been effected not only without the assistance, but in spite of the strenuous opposition of the authorities of the Jewish Church.

The predictions have received a fulfilment which was repudiated by the official teaching of these authorized custodians, and the correspondence in fact cannot be explained as the natural consequence of the predictions.

It is along some such line as this that the argument for the truth of Christianity, which is based on the fulfilment of Old Testament prediction, must (I believe) retain its place in the equipment of the Christian Apologist.

We, with St. Paul, must be ready to declare *the glad tidings of the promise made unto the fathers, how that God hath fulfilled the same unto our children.*¹

¹ Acts xiii. 32 *et seq.*

