

THE PROPHETS

The Prophetic Books.

IN popular speech the Prophetic Books are the sixteen books of the Old Testament, from Isaiah to Malachi, and some would include Lamentations as well. They are further subdivided into the four Major Prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Daniel) and the twelve Minor Prophets.

This enumeration and sub-division is not to be found in the Hebrew Bible. It is divided into the *Torah* (Law), *Neviim* (Prophets), and *Ketuvim* (Writings). The second section, the Prophets, consists of eight books: Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings (the Former Prophets), and Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, The Twelve (the Latter Prophets). The reasons for the omission of Daniel, which belongs to the Writings, are considered in ch. XVII. For the moment it is sufficient to say that the rabbis made a correct distinction between normal prophecy and the apocalyptic visions we find in Daniel.

The distinction between Major and Minor Prophets is first found in the Latin Churches, and Augustine rightly explains that it means a difference in size, not in value.¹

Though we are not dealing with the Former Prophets in this book, we shall profit by grasping the implications of books we call historical being considered prophetic.

The Functions of a Prophet.

The prophet is not defined or explained in the Old Testament; he is taken for granted. This is because he has existed from the very first (Luke 1: 70; Acts 3: 21 R.V.), and has not been confined to Israel, e.g. Balaam (Num. 22: 5), the prophets of Baal (I Kings 18: 19). There are true and false prophets among the nations, as there are in Israel. But Amos makes it clear that the prophets of Israel are a special gift of God (Amos 2: 11) without real parallel among the Canaanites.

In the Bible, persons are called prophets whom we normally never call by that name, e.g. Enoch (Jude 14), Abraham (Gen. 20: 7), the Patriarchs generally (Ps. 105: 15). Moses is not so much the law-giver as the prophet *par excellence* (Deut. 18: 15; 34: 10).

¹ De Civitate Dei: 18. 29.

All this should prepare us for the realization that the popular conception of the prophet as primarily a foreteller is alien to the thought of the Bible. Indeed, the alleged antithesis of the Old Testament fore-teller with the New Testament forth-teller, should have saved us from this error. The two Testaments are not two books in opposition to one another, but two parts of the same book, and speaking the same spiritual language.

The best picture of the true function of a prophet is given by Exod. 7: 1f. The prophet is to God what Aaron was to Moses. When Moses stands before Pharaoh ("I have made thee a god to Pharaoh"), Aaron does all the speaking, even when the narrative might suggest otherwise, but they are Moses' words—Exod. 4: 15f, "Thou shalt be to him (Aaron) as God." In other words, the prophet is God's spokesman. Speaking for God may involve foretelling the future, and in the Old Testament it normally does, but this is secondary, not primary.

While the foretelling of the true prophet may normally be expected to come to pass (Deut. 18: 21f), that does not necessarily establish his credentials (Deut. 13: 1ff). Ultimately it is the spiritual quality of his message which shows whether a man is a prophet or not. In any case the foretelling of the future is never merely to show that God knows the future, or to satisfy man's idle curiosity; there is normally a revelation of God attached to it. We can know the character of God better now, if we know what He will do in the future. And as the future becomes present we can interpret God's activity the better for its having been foretold.

From this there follows that the prophet speaks *primarily* to the men of his own time, and his message springs out of the circumstances in which he lives. So some slight knowledge of the history and social background of the prophet are a help to the understanding of his message. But for all this, the source of the message is super-natural, not natural. It is derived neither from observation nor intellectual thought, but from admission to the council chamber of God (Amos 3: 7; Jer. 23: 18, 22), from knowing God and speaking with Him (Num. 12: 6ff; Exod. 33: 11). Though the ordinary prophet might not rise to Moses' level, and had to be satisfied with vision or dream, yet Moses' experience represented the ideal. We must beware of applying Deut. 34: 10 to all the written prophets. Though such a verse must by its very nature have been written a couple of centuries after the death of Moses, the latest date we can reasonably give to the final editing of the Pentateuch will be very early in the time of the united monarchy.¹ It

¹ See Aalders: *A Short Introduction to the Pentateuch*, p. 157.

cannot therefore be applied simply *a priori* to the written prophets, though possibly on other grounds some readers may wish to do it.

Since, then, the prophetic message is not merely a revelation of God's will, but of God Himself, it follows that it has a depth beyond the prophet's own understanding of it (I Pet. 1: 10ff), and that its significance extends beyond the prophet's own time, though its application at a later period may be rather different. In so far as a prophetic message is a revelation of the unchanging God, it has an unchanging significance. But none-the-less we will be better fitted to grasp its significance for us now, as we understand what the message meant to those who first heard it. Our study will, therefore, normally approach the prophets from this standpoint.

History as Prophecy.

We can now understand why Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings, are reckoned as prophetic books. The anonymous authors of these books—or it might perhaps be better to say editors—may well have been prophets themselves. At any rate they were given to see that the history of Israel was, in itself, a revelation of God. Their record of it sought less to give a history of the doings of Israel and more an account of the doings of God in and through Israel. This explains the stress on what the modern historian would consider non-essentials and the omission of apparent essentials.

This thought of Jehovah as the God of history permeates the Latter Prophets. The partial loss of this vision in our day has largely weakened the Church's preaching.

Early Prophecy.

In the historical books we are introduced to prophetic activity of a strange nature, *e.g.* I Sam. 10: 10-13; 19: 20-24. It is reasonable to attribute this partly to the baleful influence of Canaanite religion during the period of the Judges. However that may be, there is little, if any, trace of it in the written prophets. The wild men had degenerated into professional prophets, with their ecstasies and dreams (Jer. 23: 25), and are repeatedly condemned by the written prophets. Their last pitiful state is described in Zech. 13: 2-6. (The Messianic interpretation of Zech. 13: 6 is only possible by a gross neglect of the context.) Amos indignantly refuses to be called a prophet, if it involves his being classed with them: "I am no prophet, neither am I one of the sons of the prophets" (Amos 7: 14, R.V. mg., R.S.V., N.E.B.).

In contradistinction to these false prophets, the written prophets seem to have obtained most of their messages

verbally—we cannot go further in our explanation than this—though we do meet with fairly frequent visions. As the prophets never really explain how the message came to them, it would be unwise for us to speculate too far on the subject.

The Form of the Prophetic Message.

The majority of the true prophets were bitterly unpopular—Ezekiel is apparently a major exception and there is no evidence for this after the exile. As a result, they could seldom rely on a large audience for any length of time. Their messages had normally to be packed into short pregnant form, generally in poetry, that they might be the more easily remembered. (The failure to indicate the poetic sections of the prophets is one of the major weaknesses of the R.V.; it could not be expected in the A.V. for they had not yet been recognized in the seventeenth century; this has been rectified in the R.S.V., N.E.B.). It should be remembered that before the days of printing, the only possibility of a message becoming widely known was for it to be passed from mouth to mouth.¹

The best example of the prophetic message in its simplest form is given in Jonah 3: 4. We need not doubt that Jonah expanded it, whenever questioned about it, but basically this was his message. We find the prophetic tradition carried on by John the Baptist (Matt. 3: 2), and our Lord (Mark 1: 15).

The fact that the bulk of the earlier prophets and not a little of the later (not Daniel) is written in poetry should serve as a warning to us in our interpretation. It means that we are dealing not merely with the natural exuberance of Oriental language, but with the vivid metaphors and pictures of poetry as well.

At times the prophet became so unpopular that he could only gain public attention by unusual actions. Examples are Isaiah's vintage song (5: 1-7), and his going about dressed as a slave (20: 1-6). Jeremiah had to do this kind of thing a number of times: among them his remaining unmarried (Jer. 16: 2), his breaking of the jar (ch. 19), his wearing a yoke (chs. 27, 28), his buying of land (32: 7-15), his use of the Rechabites (ch. 35), his hiding of stones in front of Pharaoh's palace (43: 8-13), his sinking of the scroll against Babylon in the Euphrates (51: 59-64). This element is very common in Ezekiel, e.g. his acting the siege of Jerusalem (ch. 4), the symbolizing of the scattering of the people (5: 1-4), the removal of his goods (12: 1-16), the rationing of his food (12: 17-20), his refraining from mourning (24: 15-27). It is the more remarkable here, as there seems to have been no necessity for it. It may be that such actions had come to be expected of a

¹ For the form of Hebrew poetry see Appendix, p. 150.

true prophet. The non-mention of such details in connexion with the Minor Prophets may well be due to the virtually complete lack of personal details in their writings.

The Shaping of the Prophetic Book.

Apart from Jer. 36, there is no indication given us how the prophetic books were put together. It should, however, be clear that the recorded prophecies cannot represent the whole of the prophet's activities, even if we allow for frequent repetition of his messages. The most obvious explanation is that the prophet only preserved those of his prophecies which best expressed the character and purposes of God, and would best make them real to the future.

This probably explains why we have almost nothing of the messages of men like Samuel, Elijah, and Elisha, preserved for us. They were so intimately connected with the circumstances of their own times that they had but slight importance for later generations. We may be sure that the same was true of much that the prophets dealt with in this book said. It does not take any very close study to reveal long periods in their lives from which we have few, if any, prophecies.

In most of the longer prophets the main guide in the putting together of the prophecies preserved was spiritual connexion. Chronology is not neglected, but it is obviously secondary, and there are clear cases where it has been ignored for the sake of spiritual connexions.

In Jeremiah's case we know from 30: 2, 36: 32 that there were at least two collections of his prophecies in existence already during his lifetime. Isa. 8: 16; 30: 8 may well point to something similar in the case of the earlier prophet especially when we consider Micah's knowledge of him (see p. 63). Nothing will really satisfy the evidence offered by Jeremiah, except the theory that it was put together after the prophet's death by Baruch. In ch. VI in considering the evidence for the authorship of Isaiah 40-66, we have had to assume the transmission of Isaiah through a group of disciples, even though the book may well have been given definitive form by the prophet before his death. With Ezekiel there is every evidence that the prophet looked forward to publication from the first, and that it was he who shaped the book from first to last. A number of the Minor Prophets give the impression that they were put together by the prophet himself.

Unfulfilled Prophecy.

One of the major problems in the study of the prophetic books is the problem of unfulfilled prophecy. The question is normally shirked either by referring the fulfilment to the

Millennium, or by spiritualizing the prophecy and referring it to the Church.

The former method is seldom legitimate. Prophecies which refer to the last things normally do so quite unmistakably. There seems no justification for picking out others and making them do so too, just because we know that they were not fulfilled in the prophet's own time.

For the latter, there seems nothing to be said. Very many prophecies find a fuller meaning and fulfilment in the Church than they ever found in Israel. But this is by their having gained in *spiritual depth*. If a prophecy obviously does not refer to the Church in its primary meaning, its non-fulfilment in the prophet's time cannot be explained away by discovering a spiritual application to the Church.

Another school of thought minimizes the reliability of the predictive element in prophecy, and finds confirmation for its views in such unfulfilled prophecies, but this approach does not do justice to the facts.

The problem is really brought to a head in Ezek. 26. This is a prophecy of the complete destruction of Tyre by Nebuchadrezzar. Lest there should be any doubt as to its meaning, it is followed by a lamentation over Tyre (ch. 27), its prince (28: 1-10), and its king (28: 11-19). Yet Tyre was not captured and destroyed and its king killed. Sixteen years later (cf. 29: 17 with 26: 1) the king of Tyre was able to come to honourable terms. Ezekiel simply says that Nebuchadrezzar has had no gain from Tyre, but God has given him Egypt instead (29: 17-20). This is re-affirmed in the next chapter (30: 10 *seq.*). In spite of this, and Jer. 43: 8-13, there is no clear evidence that Nebuchadrezzar ever crossed the Egyptian border; he certainly never conquered the country.¹

The very fact that Ezekiel neither apologizes nor explains in 29: 17-20 shows that he must have recognized a principle in prophetic fulfilment which we tend to overlook. This is probably to be found in Jer. 18: 7-10. Every prophecy is conditional, even when the condition is unexpressed. A prophecy of good may be annulled or delayed, if men do not obey, while repentance may suspend or reverse a prophecy of evil. We must make an exception when it is confirmed by God's oath.

It is only because we have the story of Jonah as well as his message that we have no difficulty with the "unfulfilled" prophecy of the destruction of Nineveh. Could we know all the circumstances, we should doubtless find similar circumstances elsewhere, where prophecy has not been fulfilled. The recording of such "unfulfilled" prophecies without explanatory

¹ Cf. H. R. Hall: *The Ancient History of the Near East*, p. 549. Nebuchadrezzar is the more correct form of Nebuchadnezzar.

comment is ample evidence that the prophet thought little of the evidential value of fulfilled prophecy.

For all this, "unfulfilled" is not in every case the best word; "suspended" would often be better. Nineveh was not destroyed in forty days, but some 150 years later it ceased to be a city. Nebuchadrezzar did not destroy Tyre, but the day came when it became a bare rock, a place for the spreading of nets in the midst of the sea. Egypt was never uninhabited for forty years (Ezek. 29: 11), but it has become a base kingdom, which has no longer ruled over the nations (Ezek. 29: 14f). Babylon did not sink like a stone in the Euphrates (Jer. 51: 64), but surely, slowly it went down into oblivion.

If this is so, he would be a very rash man who would maintain that the prophecies concerning Israel in Isaiah 40-66 and in similar passages elsewhere are abrogated and not just suspended; that they have found their fulfilment in the Church, although it is obvious that much in these chapters cannot be referred to the Church by any strength of imagination.

A number of these points have been expanded in my *Ezekiel* e.g. the use of symbols (p. 32), the problem of false prophets (p. 51 seq.) and the conditional nature of prophecy (p. 102 ff.).