

THE EXPOSITOR.

III. *THE SCHOOLS OF THE PROPHETS ABIEK* *THE TIME OF SAMUEL.*

THE headquarters of the schools of the sons of the prophets were, as we have seen, at Ramah, on the mountains of Ephraim, where Samuel dwelt (1 Sam. xix. 18-24). Other schools existed at Bethel, upon the same mountains, upon the road from Shechem to Jerusalem (2 Kings ii. 3); at Gibeah of Benjamin, not far from Ramah, translated "the hill" in 1 Sam. x. 5, 10; at Jericho, also in the tribe of Benjamin (2 Kings ii. 5, and probably Chap. vi. 1-7); and at Gilgal, apparently not the sacred spot near the Jordan, but one higher up among the mountains above Bethel (Chaps. ii. 1; iv. 38). "Two young men of the sons of the prophets," mentioned as coming to Elisha from Mount Ephraim, in Chap. v. 22, belonged probably to the college at Ramah. The whole, therefore, of the schools mentioned by name, excepting perhaps Gilgal, were at places closely connected with Samuel's history, and within a very limited range of country. But they are mentioned so casually that we are left to gather from other notices the probable number of the students and to infer the likelihood or otherwise of similar schools existing elsewhere.

Let me premise that the proper appellation for those educated in these schools was "the sons of the prophets." When Amos (Chap. vii. 14) denied that he was a prophet's son, he did not mean to say that his father was, or was not, a prophet, but that he himself had not received a prophetic education. The word *son* has a wide use in Hebrew. Where we speak of a person as thirteen years old, it speaks of him as "the son of thirteen years" (Gen. xvii. 25); where we speak of a calf, it says "a son of the herd" (ibid xviii. 7); and where we say "fifty strong men," it says "fifty sons of strength" (2 Kings ii. 16). Here son is a title implying mutual affection and respect. The head of the prophetic institutions was addressed as Father (2 Kings ii. 12; this is the most probable explanation also of 1 Sam. x. 12); the disciples were his sons. The appellation will be found in 1 Kings xx. 35; 2 Kings ii. 3, 5, 7, 15; iv. 1, 38; v. 22; vi. 1; ix. 1, in which last place it is wrongly translated "children;" and in all these passages it means, without reference to age, persons educated in the prophetic schools.

But there is little doubt that they were also often called simply "prophets." The previous appellation had reference to their education, and this to their profession. When Jezebel cut off "the prophets of the Lord," and "Obadiah hid a hundred of them" (1 Kings xviii. 4), we can scarcely doubt that by prophets are meant those who, after being educated at a prophetic college, subsequently practised the arts which they had learned there. They were the trained men of their day, and as such were the lawyers, the physicians, and the advisers of the people.

All such offices, too, as required education would be confided to them. There was thus a large class of secular employments which would fall to their lot. But they had also higher duties. Without claiming for them the gift of inspiration, it is evident that they were a deeply religious body of men, and were the teachers and preachers of their time. Here and there one like Elijah or Elisha towered above his fellows, and touched the heavenly heights by his special gift of being directly a speaker for God. But, unless the mass of them had been religious men, and the mainstay, even in Israel, of the Mosaic institutions, neither would Jezebel have persecuted them nor Obadiah have risked life and royal favour for their deliverance.

Their numbers must have been considerable. For when, at the very end of Ahab's reign, Jehoshaphat wanted to inquire of the word of Jehovah before going to Ramoth-Gilead to battle, no less than four hundred were gathered together before the allied kings and prophesied in Jehovah's name (1 Kings xxii. 11, 12). Jehoshaphat is dissatisfied with them; but we are not to conclude from this, that they were not, what they claimed to be, Jehovah-prophets. Jehoshaphat did not live so far from Samaria as not to know what went on there, and probably these were men who had saved their lives during Jezebel's persecution by some compromise. After the great day at mount Carmel the worship of Jehovah was publicly restored in Israel, and they came forth again to exercise their calling. Jehoshaphat, used to a more uncompromising state of things in Judea, naturally wishing to hear the word of the Lord from

some one not so well drilled as these four hundred seemed to be. We refer to the narrative, however, simply to shew the large numbers of those who had enjoyed the prophetic training. For though persecution had thinned their ranks with the sword, and sent even more into exile in Judea, whither there seems to have been a continual migration of such Israelites as came unto Jehovah, yet in Samaria and its neighbourhood four hundred men could be found who, under the very eyes of the fanatic queen, professed to be prophets of Jehovah.

It would be no easy matter now, in our more densely peopled land, to assemble four hundred clergymen in a comparatively small country town like Samaria ; it would have been quite impossible immediately after the Marian persecution. Nor can I imagine whence Ahab obtained so large a number of reputed prophets, unless there had been some college in the neighbourhood of Samaria. Bethel, though removed by the whole width of the tribe of Ephraim, is not absolutely too far away. It was situated in the tribe of Benjamin, but belonged to Israel, and what in an earlier narrative we read of the Bethel prophets (1 Kings xiii. 18) does not give us a very high idea of their probity. They apparently made a compromise under Jeroboam with the calf-worship, and may have done the same under Ahab. But whether from Bethel or elsewhere, unless there had been some headquarters within reach, four hundred is a very large number of prophets to bring together upon such short notice. If, however, they came from some college, of which Zedekiah the son of Chenaanah was the head, all

the students would be counted and swell the roll. And one or two such colleges, added to such prophets as dwelt in Samaria, would supply the whole array.

For plainly these colleges were upon a large scale. Thus from that at Jericho fifty men go forth to watch the progress of Elijah and Elisha (2 Kings ii. 7); and when the latter returns without his master, they urge him to send "fifty strong men," apparently persons in their service, employed perhaps upon their lands, to seek for him (2 Kings ii. 16). Subsequently, in a time of famine, when it must have been very difficult to procure food for a large number of people at one place, we nevertheless find no less than a hundred assembled for a common meal (2 Kings iv. 43); and it is interesting to find that the first-fruits, which were consecrated to God, and belonged strictly to the priests (Deut. xxvi.), were supposed to be used with equal piety if given to "the man of God" who was for the time rector of the prophetic schools.

But probably the whole of the ground which Samuel, their founder, had made sacred by his circuits, and which lay conveniently upon the borders of both kingdoms, was studded with these schools. They would flourish or dwindle away as external circumstances were favourable or adverse, and in proportion to the reputation of their teachers. The great influence of Elijah and Elisha, who successively devoted themselves to their nurture, made the students more than ordinarily numerous in their days. Nor was their multiplication a matter of difficulty. The college, probably at Jericho, had become, we read,

overcrowded. The members ask Elisha's permission to provide better accommodation, and, with him at their head, they go forth and build for themselves a new lodging (2 Kings vi. 1-7), apparently as a succursal to their former buildings. And here let us notice the exactness of the language in the original Hebrew. When our Version (Chap. vi. 1) speaks of "the place where we dwell with thee," the Hebrew says "the place where we sit before thee." Elisha did not dwell with them, nor were they thinking of dormitories and refectories. He was perpetually on the move, going from one school to another (Chap. iv. 8), superintending everywhere the education given by the local teachers, and himself adding definite instruction in some special subject, and so crowning the labours of them all. And what they wanted to build was a lecture-room. For "to sit before him" was the attitude of the scholar, and gives us once again the picture of Elisha as their head, "standing, like Samuel of old, as appointed over them." We thus see that when their numbers increased, they themselves easily provided room for their new students.

It is from a series of narratives, or anecdotes, given us in relation to Elisha's management of these schools that we gather many interesting particulars concerning them. We have seen already in what manner the students at Jericho acknowledged the authority of Elisha when they saw that the spirit of Elijah rested upon him (2 Kings ii. 15). Now Elisha had probably studied for a time at some prophetic college; but, when his course was complete, he returned to his usual occupation, and was plough-

ing his father's lands at Abel-Meholah when Elijah in passing by cast his mantle over him. In the East men are quick in catching the meaning of symbolic acts, and the young farmer understood that he was henceforward to wear the prophetic dress. For the garb of those who claimed to be in an especial sense prophets was a rough loose robe of black camel's hair, girt with a leathern girdle about the loins (2 Kings i. 8; Zech. xiii. 4; Matt. iii. 4). From that time Elisha became Elijah's attendant and minister (2 Kings iii. 11), and after his translation devoted himself with unflagging energy to the prophetic schools, feeling, no doubt, that on them depended the maintenance of the Theocracy and of the institutions of Moses.

In one of these narratives we find Elisha multiplying a widow's oil to enable her to pay her debts (2 Kings iv. 1-7). It plainly follows that, after their education was completed, the "sons of the prophets" had to depend upon their own exertions for their living, and married, and prospered, or were unfortunate, like other men. Nor had they any special exemptions. The creditor came to take the prophet's two sons as bondsmen, to serve till the year of jubilee (Lev. xxv. 41), as he would the sons of any one else. Nor had Elisha any corporate property out of which he could relieve the poor woman, but multiplied miraculously a little oil, which she had in the house, to deliver her from her poverty. In the same Chapter (verse 9) we find Elisha journeying continually backwards and forwards by Shunem. Now this village lay in the tribe of Issachar, far to the north of the regions which Samuel visited, near Mount

Gilboa, and in the vicinity of the favourite palace of the Kings of Israel at Jezreel. What was it which brought Elisha so frequently to the far north? As Carmel lay about thirty miles to the west of Shunem, it is not at all unlikely that there were schools of the prophets also upon this hill, so fitted by nature for such a use. We may feel sure that these visits of the Prophet, paid so regularly, were for some definite purpose, and nothing is more probable than that he had disciples there in training for Jehovah's service among the northern tribes, just as those upon the mountains of Ephraim were trained for similar service in the south.

From Shunem he returns to Gilgal, where we learn some particulars of what befell during the seven years' famine of which Elisha had prophesied (Chap. viii. 1). So severe was it that the rich family at Shunem withdrew with their household into the land of the Philistines during its continuance; and sorely must the prophetic colleges have suffered at such a time. It so happened on a day that one of the scholars searching for herbs came upon a bed of the wild colocynth. (Canon Tristram¹ tells us that all round Gilgal and the Dead Sea the colocynth cucumber grows abundantly in the barren sands, and will flourish in the extremest drought.) This young man must have been a new-comer, or he would have known the plant and its qualities. As it is, he takes home his mantle full of the fruit; but when the students taste the pottage, its bitterness makes them think that it is poisoned. Elisha sprinkles meal into the pot, and miraculously

¹ "Natural History of the Bible," p. 452.

converts the contents into wholesome food. For our present purpose the interesting point is that the sons of the prophets evidently had a common meal. Now this is the very centre of our own collegiate life. The members not on the foundation of any college at Oxford or Cambridge are even called "Commoners," from being admitted to participate in it. We conclude, therefore, that the prophetic colleges had something of a corporate existence, with common revenues and with orderly rules for their maintenance and control. Without considerable resources they could not have tided over so trying a time. At the end of the Chapter, when the farmer of Baal-Shalishah has brought first-fruits, not for the college, but for the man of God at its head, and he orders them to be set before the students, we find that, in spite of the famine, the common table is still set for a hundred men. It is the proximity of this village which makes it probable that Gilgal lay to the north of Bethel, and there are several indications that Elijah's house was there. If so, a prophetic college would naturally grow up around it. Let me also notice the direct proof that Elisha taught the students in person. In Chap. iv. 38 we read that "the sons of the prophets were sitting before him." As noticed above, this was the regular attitude of the scholars. Squatting cross-legged upon the floor they would read their lesson or write, holding the material upon the palm of the left hand, or trace figures upon the sand.

From the narrative of the building of the lecture-room (Chap. vi. 1-7) we gather that these colleges were not wealthy institutions. The students go

themselves to obtain the timber wherewith to erect the new room. Moreover, they have no community of goods; for one, we read, was working with a borrowed axe, and when it fell into the river the loss seemed to him irreparable. But probably they possessed lands, tilled partly by the young men and partly by tenants who shared with them the produce (Chap. ii. 16). But when the students came from their homes, all probably brought with them such gifts as they could afford: and offerings of food were probably made to the heads of these colleges by the wealthier landholders around. For, let me add, they were decidedly popular institutions. They belonged to no class or special order. Every one was welcome, and the education offered was open to all. It bound no one for future life. He might return to his usual occupations, or he might assume the mantle of camel's hair, as he chose. As "prophecy came not by the will of man" (2 Pet. i. 21), no restrictions could be put upon it. Both in its higher and its lower aspect it was free, untrammelled, unconfined. It flourished in Israel as largely as in Judah; and the Spirit of God, which bloweth where it listeth, poured down large blessings upon the sons of the prophets in the northern kingdom, and used them for the maintenance of the truth there at a time when all other privileges had been withdrawn, or exercised but little influence.

It is not the manner of Holy Scripture to give us direct information upon the many points relating to the internal habits and manners of the people, which would be to us most interesting. Too profoundly occupied with its one great purpose, it does not stop

in its course merely to increase our secular knowledge; and thus what we know of the training and mode of life of the prophets has to be gathered from incidental allusions dropped in narratives chiefly occupied with other things. There remains one more such allusion, already briefly adverted to. Amos, a native of Tekoa, a village twelve miles south of Jerusalem, upon the very border of the great western desert, had gone on a special mission to Israel. It was then governed by Jeroboam II., the greatest monarch of the house of Jehu, and a nominal worshipper of Jehovah, but only so far as Jehovah was symbolized by the golden calves. But besides this central sin, moral corruption was fast spreading among the ten tribes and threatening the kingdom with ruin. In vain were all the victories of the warlike king. His throne was tottering to its fall.

And God gave the Israelites one last vehement call to repentance. Amos, in hurried circuit, like some revivalist preacher, visited all parts of the country, and so earnest was his appeal and men's hearts so stirred that "the land was not able to bear all his words" (Amos vii. 10). Amaziah, the high priest of Bethel, is indignant, and complains to the king, and also appeals to Amos, bidding him consult for his own safety, by returning to Judea, there to eat his bread and prophesy (verse 12). The words were of course intended to suggest that Amos was prophesying for money, and that he would be more likely to earn it peaceably in Judea than at Bethel. For "Bethel was a royal sanctuary, and for the time the capital, where the king dwelt." At such a place the

royal power would not permit the vagaries, as Amaziah deemed them, of a foreign prophet.

The answer of Amos meets Amaziah at every point. "I am," he says, "no prophet, neither am I a prophet's son; but I am a herdman, and a gatherer of sycamore fruit" (verse 14). Our Version has wrongly inserted a past tense. Amos really speaks of the present: I am at this moment no prophet professionally. I do not wear the black camel's hair cloak and leathern girdle. Consequently I receive no fees, nor gifts. I have, too, my own means of subsistence. They may not be large, but they are enough. I have cattle, sheep, and fruit-trees. On their produce I was living, when a direct command came to me to bear God's message to Israel. I have obeyed, but not for earthly reward. And when my mission is over I shall return to my former method of life.

It follows, therefore, that the prophets received gifts for their services (see also Micah iii. 11), not the inspired men who had a message directly from God, but those of the meaner sort; and from the indignant denunciation of them by Micah we gather that these fees had proved a snare to the order generally. Next we learn that the prophetic schools existed at this time as ordinary things. Amaziah, hearing that Amos prophesied, assumed, as a matter of course, that he had been educated with "the sons of the prophets," but is undeceived. Finally, though Amos had not been thus trained, he was not therefore an illiterate man. On the contrary, his Book, though marked by some diversities of spelling from the common mode and by

a few of what we should call provincialisms, is a work of no common literary merit; and his metaphors, borrowed from country life, are used with the utmost skill and judgment. It appears that the Jews in the days of King Uzziah were a highly educated people, when thus a herdsman of limited means is so well able to manage the pen. The days of Uzziah and Jotham were indeed the palmy days of Judah; still it is plain that Samuel's foundations had ended in educating the mass of the people. And this education was carried on, I believe, by men trained in the prophetic schools; and Amos, though he had never been to a college, had, I doubt not, obtained his learning from those who had been so taught, and who, dispersed throughout the land, were the teachers of the whole Jewish youth.

I have endeavoured in these papers to give a concise account of the educational institutions of the Israelites, which, starting from the wise forethought of Samuel, ended in making the Jews one of the most highly cultivated peoples of ancient times. When the Assyrians invaded Palestine they destroyed a civilization far in advance of anything that ever existed on the banks of the Tigris and Euphrates. To a certain extent it revived after the exile at Babylon, but never reached again that perfection to which it had attained in the days of Hezekiah and his immediate ancestors. We have in our Bibles the eternal results of this culture. But for Samuel's schools, the Psalms of David, and the Prophecies of Isaiah and Hosea, of Joel, Amos, and Micah, would have been, humanly speaking,

impossible, and the Jews unfit for their high destiny of teaching mankind the truth. I trust, therefore, it will not have been without its interest to trace these secondary means by which the Jewish race was made fit for its office of teachers; and if we are to judge of these schools by their fruit, they must have been admirably fitted not only to preserve the patriotic enthusiasm of the people and to deepen their religious fervour, but also to kindle their genius and imbue them with sentiments not merely just and true, but also intensely poetic. But with all its fervour the poetry of the Jews is regulated by the most exact taste and expresses itself in language chosen with the utmost care. It is no small meed of praise that we must bring to the man whose wise heart laid the foundations on which were built such glorious results.

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THE DOOM OF THE CHILDREN OF BETHEL.

2 KINGS ii. 23, 24.

FEW of the Scripture narratives are more perplexing and revolting than this. Little children, two-and-forty of them, ruthlessly destroyed for the mere utterance of a jibe! I suppose no man ever read the story yet without being shocked by the disproportion between the offence and its punishment. If forty or fifty of our children were crushed and maimed by a railway accident, a thrill of horror and pity would run through the heart of universal England. And *this* was no accident, but a deliberate act of vengeance. The Prophet "*turned and looked*" at