

MICAH'S VISION.

(1 KINGS xxii. 19-23.)

THE prophecy of Micaiah is an obvious instance of that method of revelation which is given in the twelfth chapter of the book of Numbers as the usual way of communication between God and the seer. "Hear now My words: If there be a prophet among you, I the Lord will make Myself known unto him in a vision, I will speak with him in a dream." This description is borne out to the full by the language of Micaiah. It was a vision, something he *saw*—if not with waking, then with sleeping, or entranced, faculties. "I saw," he says, "the Lord sitting on His throne, and all the host of heaven standing by Him on His right hand and on His left. And the Lord said, Who shall entice Ahab, that he may go up and fall at Ramoth-gilead? And one said on this manner; and another said on that manner. And there came forth a spirit, and stood before the Lord, and said, I will entice him. And the Lord said unto him, Wherewith? And he said, I will go forth, and will be a lying spirit in the mouth of all his prophets. And He said, Thou shalt entice him, and shalt prevail also: go forth, and do so. Now therefore," adds the prophet, as his own comment, "behold, the Lord hath put a lying spirit in the mouth of all these thy prophets; and the Lord hath spoken evil concerning thee."

This account, with its clearness of narration and vivid pictorial distinctness, might be taken, with all its details, as a very good example of the divinely imparted vision, but for one circumstance which, every time we read it, "must give us pause." Can we attribute to Divine revelation every detail of a vision which involves an unworthy conception of God? There is no shirking this difficulty, for it is very plain. The language of the prophet, which he declares to

be "the word of the Lord," sets God before us as the author of a lie. Honesty cannot avoid this conclusion. There is no escape from it. It will not do to say that God does not prevent evil which is caused by the wills of inferior intelligences, but uses it and overrules it for His own beneficent purposes; for this is no case of evil not prevented, it is evil enjoined. The master is responsible for what the servant does in obedience to his commands; and if the prophet represents Jehovah as commanding the services of a lying spirit, it is useless to deny that he represents Jehovah as the author of the lie which the spirit inspires. Nor if, like some interpreters, we explain the spirit as the "personified spirit of prophecy," do we improve matters in the smallest degree; for then we take away all that mediates between God and the lying prophets, and throw the whole blame of their falsehood directly upon the All-holy Himself.

But the unworthy conception of God involved in the vision goes even further. The All-wise is depicted as in a difficulty. He does not know what to do, until He seeks council of His court and hears the various opinions of the spirits who minister before Him. Contrast with this the frequent language of Scripture, "For who hath known the mind of the Lord? or who hath been His counsellor?"

In all such cases it is well to remember that Holy Scripture has a *human* element as well as a *Divine* element, and that there is no advantage in throwing upon the Divine difficulties which can be explained as human. There are two intimations in Micaiah's vision which must have been divinely given, because they are such that man could not have arrived at them independently.

First. That the prophets were lying, or were under the influence of a lying spirit.

Second. That Ahab's expedition against Ramoth-gilead would end fatally for himself.

Upon these points rests the whole stress of Micaiah's

message. The remainder of the prophecy consists of imagery, which, though remarkable in itself, appears to have no other function than to convey these intimations, and which has therefore, so far as we can discover, no important prophetic purpose. It is a vehicle, and nothing more.

Now it is to be carefully noted that our difficulties arise solely from the structure of this vehicle; they have nothing to do with the two important messages conveyed. So that the whole question resolves itself into an inquiry into the source of this imagery. From whence did it come? Three sources are possible. It may have come from God, or from the prophet's waking conscious imagination, or from the involuntary working of the prophet's mind in dreaming or trance. The first of these is at once thrown out of consideration by the unworthy conception of the Divine nature which the imagery involves. The second is contrary to the whole style of the language which Micaiah uses in describing his vision, as well as to all probability. We are therefore forced back upon the third, and conclude that the imagery of the prophecy belongs to the human element and not to the Divine, and was given by the unconscious and involuntary working of the prophet's imagination during the suspension of his ordinary faculties by trance or dreaming.

And here the well-known facts of dreaming come to our aid, and not only render our conclusion more probable, but actually seem to give us, to speak with all reverence, a glimpse into the mode of co-operation between the Divine and human.

We all know from experience that when some objective fact makes an impression upon us while in a state of dreaming, the mind immediately weaves some imaginary incident or story to account for the fact. Thus the dreamer fancies he is sentry at a castle gate. Wearily he waits for the long hours of watching to go by, and with mar-

vellous distinctness he perceives everything about him, the massive walls of the fortress and every feature of the surrounding country. Suddenly there is a loud knocking at the gates below. And at that moment the dreamer awakes and discovers that it is some one knocking at his door. Or, again, he imagines he is floating on an iceberg in a polar ocean; the keen frost strikes to the very marrow of his bones, and he is about to perish, when he awakes and finds that it is a cold night, and he is insufficiently covered. In all such cases the story is created by the instinctive working of the imagination, in order to explain an objective fact which forces itself on the sleeping faculties.

Now the visions recorded in Holy Scripture contain evidence that their scenery was, sometimes at all events, intimately connected with some objective fact affecting the seer at the time; for, in St. Peter's vision recorded in the tenth of Acts, the pivot on which the imagery turns is the circumstance, so distinctly mentioned, that the apostle "became hungry, and desired to eat"; and although in this instance the objective fact was not divinely imparted, our inference remains, that the form of the prophetic vision might be more or less affected by stimuli external to the working of the imagination.

We have now in our possession all that is necessary in order to explain fully the difficulties of Micaiah's vision. According to the theory now put forth, it was miraculously imparted to the mind of the dreaming, or entranced, seer that the predictions of Zedekiah and his confederates were false, or, it may be, due to the inspiration of a lying spirit; and that the expedition against Ramoth-gilead would end fatally for Ahab. Round this objective and Divine nucleus the prophet's imagination, working according to its ordinary laws, constructed the scene which has so puzzled many a devout student, using materials which were familiar to the dreamer's experience. God appeared in the vision as the

King sitting on His throne; round Him stood His ministers, the host of heaven; and, like a human king, He consulted with one minister after another, until He obtained the advice which seemed the best. Courtly scenes such as this must have been familiar to Micaiah; for it appears from the narrative that he was well known to the king of Israel, and therefore his memory must have had good store of images needful for such a picture.

If this explanation be true, the difficulties vanish, and the prophecies, not only remain uninjured, but their Divine character shines out more clearly than ever; and the unworthy conceptions of God which so troubled us are seen to arise neither from Divine inspiration nor from the conscious thought of the prophet. They are simply the accidents of a dream.

In the present state of critical thought, it is not necessary to spend time in proving that, when man was made the medium of Divine revelation, his mind was permitted to work according to its ordinary laws. There was a time when inspiration was popularly regarded as some occult species of word for word dictation. That time has gone by. It is now universally admitted, upon every theory, that to each sacred writer was left his own peculiar style and character of expression; that is to say, the mind of each writer worked according to its own laws. If this be admitted with regard to the inspiration of the writers of Holy Scripture, there is no objection to supposing that, sometimes at all events, the minds of those to whom God revealed Himself by vision were permitted to exercise their ordinary functions. And, in the case before us, this probability is made very strong by the extreme difficulty of attributing a Divine origin to the unworthy conception of God involved in the scenery which forms the vehicle of the prophetic message. From this point of view Micaiah's vision is peculiarly interesting, for in it there exists an index

by which to discriminate between the two elements which must enter more or less into all prophecy. Here it seems the Divine and human can be separated, and the relation between them analysed with some degree of accuracy.

If this be true, an important question is raised. Can the principle be extended? Can the moral difficulties of the Old Testament and the results of psychology be used in conjunction in order to bring us nearer to the processes of revelation? The value of such a method needs no proof: for the more we define the human element in Holy Scripture, the more apparent will be the splendour of the Divine; and the stronger the evidence that the ethical obscurities which perplex us arise from man's imperfection, the greater will be our confidence in that pure truth which can only come from the perfection of God.

CHARLES F. D'ARCY.

ST. JAMES AND HIS EPISTLE.¹

"James . . . to the twelve tribes of the Dispersion."—JAS. i. 1.

THIS Epistle, although Luther stigmatized it as "an epistle of straw," has many claims on our regard, of which I will only for the present enumerate one or two.

It is the first Christian document that was given to the world, the earliest of all the New Testament Scriptures. It was probably written in less than twenty years after the crucifixion of our Lord, before any one of the Gospels which have come down to us, and even before any of the other inspired Epistles. If the New Testament were arranged in chronological order, *this* is what we should read first. And, for some reasons, it is to be regretted that

¹ A brief introduction to a set of expository lectures on the first chapter of the Epistle.