

*PROFESSOR A. B. DAVIDSON.*

ON the morning of Sunday, January 26, a great light was quenched in Scotland. For wellnigh half a century it had burned with undiminished brightness; at its warm flame was kindled a host of other fires. In A. B. Davidson passed away a grand master of the Old Testament, whose work it is for other scholars to attempt to estimate if they can, whose influence they cannot. Fortunately, if some acquaintance with the Hebrew language was necessary to appreciate his special knowledge, the lack of it proved no barrier to knowing the man himself. And when in after years his students met in recollection of their college days, it was not of his learning that they loved to speak, but of the man.

Of course we had all heard of him long before we entered the Hall. Even when we were undergraduates in the University, the talk of friends who had preceded us into New College tempted us to accept their invitation to come and hear this man who thrilled them, for ourselves. And when, under their proud escort, we climbed the weary flights of stairs that led to the Rabbi's lecture-room, we shared their anxiety lest after all it might not be "Saul" to-day. For the master sometimes seemed to find amusement in upsetting the careful calculations of his scholars as to the precise day on which they might miss other classes to hear once again his famous sketches of Old Testament characters.

As the door of the retiring-room opened, the class sank into silence. The gowned figure walked slowly to the desk, and after gazing for a moment with upturned eyebrows at the

class, engaged in prayer—such prayer as you might have heard with difficulty had you been seated in the front bench, the prayer of a man talking in great humility and reverence with God, prayer punctuated oftentimes with deep-drawn sighs. During the roll-call you had a moment in which to study the keen spectacled face, with the nose slightly awry, the thin lips, and the scant steel-grey hair. The roll called, there would perhaps follow certain remarks about the Theocracy in Israel, interspersed with the shuffling and turning over of leaves of manuscript, for the Rabbi only read us selections out of his great store. This naturally led up to Saul and the turning-points in his career, and when he reached the well known sentence, “There are incidents in Saul’s life which induce us to look at it,” there was a general murmur of expectancy, and even some of the younger men would lay down their pens prepared only to listen.

I suppose that if the most of us had any definite conception of Saul up to that moment, we pictured to our minds a disobedient, jealous king, who wrought his own undoing. From that hour we learned to think of him more charitably as a man thrust into a position that he had not sought, called to a destiny that was above him, struggling with a task that was beyond him, feeling his inability and so taking it to heart that his mind became unstrung, and “all was harsh and out of tune.” Verily he became a hero to us. The effect was tremendous, for the Rabbi suffered himself to be carried away by the intensity of the situations he depicted, and his words, accompanied by an upward movement of the pencil which he continually held in his right hand, rose high and shrill, gathering speed till he reached a climax, when as suddenly his voice would fall to a low, soft, lingering, meditative emission of the final words. “The story of Saul’s rejection<sup>1</sup> is told in

<sup>1</sup> It is not pretended that these are more than a student’s notes which can at

1 Samuel xv., in connexion with the affair of the Amalekites, when he was directed to destroy everything. . . . Saul, when he came to meet Samuel, said he had done the will of the Lord, as he thought. He was expressing his honest belief. He was not a vulgar hypocrite detected in the act and trying to brazen it out. He fancied himself obedient to the word of the Lord and Samuel. Hypocrisy was not one of his faults; it was rather religious incapacity, a characteristic of mind. He might know that religion implied a full surrender to God, but his moral sense was too blunt to really understand what full surrender was. He knew that Jehovah demanded obedience, but he could not penetrate to know how minute and particular obedience to God must be. He thought a general compliance was obedience. . . .”

Thereafter it was suggested that “perhaps his religious incapacity goes to explain his madness, which was a mere mania with a religious origin. He had an ill-balanced mind which his circumstances completely overthrew. He certainly was jealous, but his mania shewed itself long before the appearance of David. The shepherd boy was brought to quell the unquietness of the king’s mind. This unquietness must have come from a thought, a feeling, that things were not right around him. He was disappointed; he knew that he was unsuccessful. Samuel haunted him; he was like a blind man told to look, like a lame man told to walk. He would do right but he could not; this Kingdom of Jehovah was beyond him. He felt his incompetence, and the feeling preyed on him to madness; the hollowness of his position upset his understanding. . . .

“He could not understand the cause of his failure. No one who does not succeed ever understands why he failed. He lays the blame of failure on others. We were not

the best give but an imperfect shadow of the original, a demand for which and other originals it is, however, hoped that they may help to stimulate.

suited, we imagine, to catch the popular vote. We say our music did not fall upon sympathetic ears. We have an inner refined sense, we think, which others cannot understand. Upon Saul there came a feeling of profound resentment, and when he knew that he was to be supplanted he became furious. He sought to slay David, and his son had to flee from him. But before Samuel he always took the shoes from off his feet, however cruel he was to others. The majesty of the king bowed before the majesty of the prophet of the Lord. Samuel brought back to him the days of his youth when he had set out to fight the battles of the Lord. The king thought of his past victories which seemed as yesterday; he recalled in thought his first meeting with the prophet Samuel. The struggles between his higher and lower self came back to him, and in the wilderness of his present life streams broke out, and he was again something of that other man. But it must have been hard to bear the incessant depreciation of Samuel, who said that his greatest virtues were but splendid vices. . . .”

Then followed a wonderful portrait of Saul,—“a man of honour, gallant, brave, liberal, chivalrous.” One touch in particular appealed to students of the Rabbi. “Consider his modesty, how he told his relatives about the asses, but said nothing about his election to the crown, how when they went to seek him, he had hid himself among the stuff.” And so through every trait in the character of this perplexed life.

“Then Saul said, I have sinned: yet honour me now, I pray thee, before the elders of my people, and before Israel, and turn again with me that I may worship the Lord thy God. So Samuel turned again after Saul, and Saul worshipped the Lord.’ It was a strange scene. Samuel and Saul were friends; they knew each other. They were the two highest men in the commonwealth of Israel. Saul was Samuel’s brother in all the big purposes

of Israel. When Samuel announced his rejection, Saul asked him to come back and sacrifice with him. Was the act of either a little one? Was it merely a piece of good nature to propose it on the part of the one, and to gratify it on the part of the other? Saul knew that all that Samuel said was true, and Samuel knew what it conveyed to the ambitious mind of the king. No one though he may crush out a mind but feels it all his life through as the weightiest thing in his existence. Samuel had done this to Saul his brother; he had crushed out the kingdom of God in his mind. His first instinct was to abandon Saul, but the fellowship of a lifetime cannot be smothered in a moment of religious excitement, and Samuel turned back on this reprobate in his rejection and went with him. He could not let Saul down to the vulgar stare of the people; he would not have been the calm, compassionate, righteous judge of Israel as we know him if he had. It was like Saul to ask this of Samuel, and yet why did he do it? Was it to keep up appearances? Partly, although this keeping up of appearances in more serious things is but a confession to the depth of life and therefore beautiful, a confession to tragedy and that which we wish to hide. Saul's request was due to his sense of propriety and his dignity. He was not unnerved by Samuel's denunciations. The very awfulness of the sentence strung every nerve in him; the greatness of the calamity made him rise above what was personal. He did not go through the camp of Israel lamenting his fall. He had duties as well as interests and he rose above himself, feeling that there were interests wider than his own . . .

“A moment came to Moses on the border of the promised land when he saw that he was not to get that upon which he had set his heart. Such a moment comes to many men—when it is made clear to us that we are not going to make that out of life which we had wished, when

we are told as if by a voice from heaven that we shall not take part in that great movement of which we had dreamed, shall not rise to that position in the Church of God to which we had aspired, shall not lead that movement in thought; when the advance is made no one will think of us. And although others do not know, God shows us what incapacity, what false step it is which loses for us the harvest of our hopes. Yet are we not therefore to go paralysed through life, with our hands hanging down, but accept what God adjudges, and our smaller part in life's interests, even if it be not that for which we had hoped . . .

“The mysteriousness of Saul's life derives its real tragical interest for us by its connexion with a Higher Power. We have not our destinies entirely in our hands; we cannot do everything by mere force of mind. There is something above our wills using us for purposes beyond ourselves, beyond our own immediate failure or success. In God's providence Saul was put upon a throne which he did not desire; it was thrust upon him, incapable though he turned out to be. Perhaps his very incapacity fitted him for the office more than ability would have done. His failure drew attention to the loftiness of the office. Saul fell and broke himself to pieces, and men could not help looking up to God; they saw how far he had fallen. So God shows us the demands of Christianity by letting us see the little way that the best go to fulfil them. By being chosen king, religion was forced on Saul's attention; he had to face the question in some measure. What might he have been had he been left in his father's house! He might have died an untouched, unawakened, secular-minded man, wholly without godliness, interested only in mundane affairs; such a man might he have remained, following the plough. But the hard soil of his mind was torn up, and though experimented upon he was not merely a warning to others . . .

“There is a gleam of returning light in Saul’s last act. After his rejection he loyally clung to his post. He did not pettishly renounce the kingdom. He did not renounce the claims of life although life had nothing now to give him. Think of his last act. We do not speak of the chivalry, the self-denial of it. The old fire was not dead. On his last battlefield he was chivalrous as ever. What blending of rare kingliness, generosity, and greatness of mind—Jonathan and he in one last act of self-immolation for their country!

“Even that act the night before the battle had its noble though pathetic side. We smile at it—smile at the display of great moral qualities because we see them combined with some superstition. The king sought his old friend Samuel—sought him who had first spoken to him from God. He thought of old times, of what he might have been. He strove to go back to other days and try to be that other man which the spirit had made him in the earlier years. And even as that which he might have been again made effort to assert itself, stars shone out of the clouds. Perhaps it was in vain. Often on deathbeds visions of youthful resolves and aims come up before men’s minds. The dial goes back forty or fifty degrees, and the resolves of early youth strive to shine out again. But they come back as shadows, lost possibilities, reflections of early visions, phantoms of youth bright and filled with promise, phantoms uttering with hollow voice one sound—It might have been. Yet there may be other ways of it. What we look on as the throes of death are often but the pangs of a new birth. Scripture passes no censure upon Saul; it simply states, ‘God took the kingdom from him.’ And we are fain to believe that the first king in the kingdom of God, holding such a place as he did, was not cast away. We read our faults in his, and leave both his and ours at the feet of the King of kings, who did not leave

the kingdom as Saul left it, but established it for ever and ever, and who is the propitiation not for our sins only but for the sins of the whole world."

At frequent intervals, and especially towards the close, it was impossible to continue to take notes because the paper seemed blurred. The Rabbi spoke as if every phase depicted had been a personal experience, as if he had lived through and known the situations he described. Perhaps in a measure it was so. The circumstances of his life led to much introspection, and he discovered strange personal affinities with men like Saul, Elijah, Isaiah, Amos and Hosea. Hence the perfection and the palpitating life of his interpretations.

With Elijah he had been in the backside of the wilderness; there, broken and dejected, he had been comforted again, and returned to even greater victories. It was, perhaps, this note of personal experience, constituting the burden of his interpretations, that so brought his hearers into sympathy with him. Thus, on another day, we were shown Elijah in the moment of his triumph, when the people, stung by his words, slew the prophets of Baal. But his triumph was of short duration, and when threatened by Jezebel he fled. "He fled into the wilderness where we should expect him to flee. In any moment of his life its waste was congenial to him: its bleakness and desolation were the counterparts of his mind. There he and Jehovah could be alone. In its solitude he could best meditate on the great questions that surged up in his mind, and thence rush into the conflict once again. He felt himself alone among men: he was too great to be the companion of any at Ahab's court. His greatness lay in the mysteriousness and profundity of his thoughts of God, and he was solitary because of his greatness. Some men are solitary for other reasons. Circumstances alienate them from their fellow-men. Thus some hills stand alone, though not so very great, because the others that stood around them have been



carried away ; and some men are left, unsought by their fellow men. Others are solitary because of their grandeur, like Mont Blanc towering into regions of cloud into which the mountains around it cannot rise. So is it with those who dwell in lofty regions where only Heaven is ; hidden in dense clouds of divine light they are solitary. The loftiest minds can be followed to a certain distance, and then they part company with other men, leaving them behind.

“Elijah fled into the wilderness of Sinai. He longed to be near the place of Jehovah’s revelation of Himself, where the law was given with thunderings. It was a natural longing. Some men, wearied by the indifference and laxness of those around them still find rest in Sinai. Their spirit craves to be set face to face with truth and God ; it seizes the service of God in its simplicity. They have an asperity, a fierce earnestness that will not be satisfied with half measures. They have no love for half truths, and are distasteful to those who with more mildness wish to rub off the sharp corners of truth. Law, righteousness, justice, God’s service—these they desire unmixed. With those who say ‘This here is mystery ; this ends in God ; this certainly is good, but we can only hope, we do not know,’ Elijah and those like him have no sympathy. It may be truth, but it is only truth so far. . . .

“And yet we cannot wholly analyse the complex longing that impelled Elijah to Horeb. It was an unconquerable wish to see the face of that Jehovah before whom he stood, to realize his God. He felt what the prophets felt—that Israel had abandoned God : he wished to be with Him.

“The way to Horeb seemed long. On the road occurred that breakdown for which we are thankful. It was the day after his triumph. Yesterday the wells of life were full ; today they had receded and seemed dry. Yesterday a people stood by him, a kingdom seemed gained for Jehovah ; today no one would raise a finger for him. Alone, famished,

crouching under a bush, forsaken of men, his life a failure, the memory of his might and influence eclipsed, wishful to die,—‘Take away my life, for I am not better than my fathers.’

“It is a hard moment, such as this which fell upon Elijah now, when he had given the energy of his life to one cherished purpose, thinking continually of it, foreseeing the day when victory would come, enduring much, waging a weary warfare, refusing to think of defeat; and then some terrible miscalculation, some unworthiness on the part of others snatches away the desired object, and defeat ensues when victory seemed secure. He judged it truth for which he struggled; the means that he had taken seemed to him worthy. And now his life is like a vanquished host: the purpose of his life is broken like the fragments of a regiment. But God remains to him, who will judge his cause and remove him from the unequal strife. His cause, though now dishonoured, shall yet be honoured and his name be lustreful. And so people continually misjudge and mistake. The modern martyr can but die appealing to posterity, believing that his name, though now dishonoured, shall yet shine with a perpetual lustre; and after-generations look back with wonder on the misjudgment of past times. But this thought did not appear to comfort the prophet; his prostration was so complete. All seemed lost, and he longed to die for very weariness. The most powerful minds fall into the deepest dejection. He was like a warrior who has fought all day, and now after receiving a mortal wound retires to die. But God first removed the bodily weariness of his servant and then satisfied his spiritual longing. . . .

“He took him to his desired Mount, and in the revelation there conquered and taught him. There in that strange contrast of wind, earthquake and fire to which his nature would be profoundly responsive, and in which God was not, He comforted and taught him. What meaning all

this conveyed to Elijah we do not know; we are at a loss to interpret. Perhaps he was taught the meaning of his own failure, although he could hardly have used another way. He had wondered that people should be fanatical one day and sunk into indifference the next. All his life Elijah had used force and compelled obedience; he had made use of law and deified it. He had made the heavens appear as brass. The experiment he had tried on others was being tried upon himself. God repeated the terrors of the law, but God was not in them. 'And after the fire a still small voice,'—and God was there. So perhaps, was he shewn prophetically in a parable of another more excellent way, when the thunders of Sinai shall die away and give place to the still small voice of Christ, the power and wisdom of God—Him who did not cry aloud nor lift up His voice in the streets, and who is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth.

"Thus he was sent back to his work comforted. He thought he had only saved himself, but God spoke of seven thousand which had not bowed the knee unto Baal. The assurance was given him that his work had not been a failure; he had not laboured in vain. No work done is lost. Deep and lasting had been his career, although he thought it superficial. In later years his desire was accomplished, for when Jehu came to the throne, a thorough political and religious revolution followed, and this was but the expression of Elijah's monotheistic, ascetic spirit, which is omnipotent when it arises in the hearts of the people."

Two days a week the Rabbi lectured to us, and on the other three we read portions of the Old Testament in Hebrew. In his exegesis of a passage we learned to appreciate the eminently judicial character of his pronouncements. In a sense there seemed to be a certain unsatisfactoriness about much of his criticism and exposition, for continually he presented us with alternative views, and even when

pressed refused to declare in favour of one or other. But sometimes—it might be long afterwards—we came to see that this just represented the excellence of his scholarship, inasmuch as it was not possible to have given an absolute decision at the time upon the point in question. Again and again his sentences opened with a “many consider,” or “some think,” to be followed by a “but,” behind which was concealed an objection that, ram-like, with a single blow demolished the flimsy structure of some hasty immature worker. His negative work in particular was continually enlivened by sallies of keen wit. Thus we were told that the sixth and seventh verses of the eleventh chapter of Isaiah represented “simply a picture of peace. Lagarde’s observation, however, is interesting: ‘This represents a physical impossibility, for the alimentary canal of the lion is not adapted to straw.’” And again on *v.* 10, where the last clause reads (R.V.), “And his resting-place shall be glorious”: “Jerome thought that his ‘resting-place’ referred to his grave; this is beautiful but not true.” Many will recall in this connexion a sentence in his little book on *The Exile and the Restoration*: “It has been said by some one that Ezra, when driven to extremities, plucked his beard, while Nehemiah in like circumstances plucked other people’s beards.”

Himself imbued with the poetic spirit, he was always severe upon literalists who missed the poetry of a passage. Thus, of Isaiah xl. 3, 6 we were told: “Verse 3 is poetry. It is prose to ask whose is the voice. ‘Hark one saying, Cry.’ It is another voice which the prophet hears. The world is filled with voices proclaiming the advent of Jehovah. ‘And another said, What shall I cry?’ It is more lofty not to refer it to the prophet.” The depth of his insight into the prophet’s meaning was revealed to us in such a note as this (on Isa. xli. 22): “A general description of prophecy. ‘The first things, what are they? Tell us,

etc.' The choice is not between near and far future events as some scholars think. The point is they cannot prophesy at all." I do not know how far the following dictum represented his attitude to textual criticism in general; it is reproduced simply because it contains one of his favourite adjectives: "The rhythm has got out of order, and it is probably vain to attempt to restore it." Occasionally, with a sharp backward toss of his head and a peculiar smile flitting across his face, he would jerk out a casual reference to "Hebrew poetry—whatever that is," while one time we were amazed as well as amused with the following declaration: "The translation of the Prophets in the Septuagint is very badly done, because it was done by a Greek Jew who did not know his own language, and only knew his adopted language badly."

If there was one characteristic that impressed itself upon those who knew him, apart from his reverence and scholarship, it was his humility: he had the spirit of a little child. Modest and shy to a degree, he was certain in any gathering to be found hidden in some corner or even behind a door: those who served him at Communion seasons in Free St. George's, where he sat under the ministry of Dr. Candlish and Dr. Whyte till declining years caused him to seek some nearer place of worship, invariably found him in a back pew. Possibly this trait was partially instrumental in restricting his output of literary work. On the other hand, when on one occasion, six years ago, the writer ventured to ask if that winter would see the publication of his long expected lectures on Old Testament Theology, the Rabbi replied, "No, no, Mr.—, I prefer to keep them for my daily bread."

The Rabbi seldom preached, and could only be prevailed upon to do so in some small town or country church, mainly because he felt himself unable to fill a large building with his voice. It was commonly reported that his stock of pul-

pit material was slender, but that every sermon was a gem. Those who heard him in the "seventies" still speak with wonder of a remarkable study of Thomas from the words, "My Lord and my God," for which a search might well be instituted, since on being asked on one occasion in recent years to re-deliver that address, he replied with the most absolute indifference that this was impossible, as he had left it in the Bible of some country pulpit.

The last time I heard him preach was at Kelso three summers ago. In any service that he conducted there was always a marked contrast between the preliminaries and the sermon. He would enter the pulpit and after curtly giving out the opening psalm with an appearance of the greatest unconcern, resume his seat, which he maintained the while, now raising his left hand to his forehead, now gazing around on the people, now looking first at one cuff, then at the other. Even the reading of Scripture, apart from his peculiar intonation, appealed but to a few. He never raised his eyes from the book; there was the same air of nonchalance. His rendering of the passage—it happened to be Isaiah xxii.—was only broken by one short sharp ejaculation at the mention of Shebna's name—"Probably would be a foreigner." Those who heard the Rabbi pray, however, can never forget it; the slow measured petitions seemed wrung from his very heart. When he reached the sermon, all was movement. His face flushed and glowed; his thin hands were raised in eloquent insistence; his voice rang out shrill and clear, or sank again to gentle earnestness. His subject was "one or two of the points" in the message to the Church in Philadelphia,— "almost the only Church of the seven to which no blame is attached, which is indeed not greatly praised, but on the whole all that is said of it amounts to praise." It is impossible to reproduce the effect of his sympathetic study of those who were "eternally entering and never getting

in," or his continued return with undissembled joy to the promise that those who were so weak and so afraid of other men around them would yet actually be made pillars in the house of God.

This man, then, made us love him : possibly no teacher ever won so easily the affectionate regard of his scholars. There was a glamour about this man of God ; there likewise was granitic strength. He drew us to him all unconsciously, and that which drew us never played us false. We followed him afar off, and where he led, our halting feet found a sure foothold. Right to the end he laboured ; indeed it is probable that latterly he had overworked himself. The evening before he died he retired to rest, specially contented because he had finished the proofs of the "Temple" *Isaiah*, for which he had been pressed. On Sunday morning, shortly after eight o'clock, he suddenly complained of sharp pain in the back, and in a moment was translated.

Standing in his severe and simple study, where nothing was more conspicuous than the photograph of Ewald on the mantleshelf, one could not help recalling the closing words of his lecture on the Hebrew conception of that peace which latterly in weariness of body he had sought and now had won : "Thou wilt not leave my soul to Sheol, neither wilt thou suffer thine holy one to see corruption. Thou wilt show me the path of life : in thy presence is fulness of joy ; in thy right hand there are pleasures for evermore."

J. Y. SIMPSON.