

ARTICLE IV.

THE PREDICTIVE ELEMENT IN OLD TESTAMENT PROPHECY.

BY PROFESSOR WALTER R. BETTERIDGE.

A PROPER conception of prophecy is indispensable to a clear understanding of the Christian religion. As a revealed religion, Christianity is, in its essence, dependent upon prophecy; for, broadly considered, the prophet is the organ of revelation. In the Old and in the New Testament alike the prophet is the divine messenger who communicates to his fellow-men the messages which he has received from God. Paul as well as Isaiah, Peter as well as Jeremiah, belong to the glorious company of the prophets. Yes, even our Lord himself, though greater than the prophets, is also, in a very real sense, the greatest of the prophets. It is not unnatural, therefore, that the study of prophecy has occupied the attention of religious thinkers of all ages. The advocates of the most rigid supernaturalism have found their strongest support in their doctrine of prophecy, while, on the other hand, the most systematic and scientific attempt ever made to disprove the supernatural character of the religion of the Old Testament is also a work on prophecy,—I refer to the book entitled "Prophets and Prophecy in Israel," by the late Professor Kuenen of Leiden.

It is not my purpose here to discuss the question of the divine origin of the biblical religion. I would be the last to ignore the question or to underestimate its importance. No consideration of prophecy can be complete which does

not candidly face this problem and honestly attempt to solve it. But for the believer the divine origin of the Christian religion is an established fact. As Christians we accept the declaration of the apostle, that "no prophecy ever came by the will of man; but men spake from God, being moved by the Holy Ghost."¹ We admit the claim distinctly made by the prophets of both Testaments, to be divinely inspired and divinely commissioned. The messages which they delivered did not come from their own hearts. These messages are not in any sense the result of their own reasoning on the course of events, but have been communicated to their spirits by the Spirit of God. They appear as prophets not of their own will. On the contrary, they often prophesy in direct opposition to their own inclinations by virtue of the inner compulsion of the divine message which they have received; or, to express the same thought in the picturesque language of one of their own number, "The Lord Jehovah hath spoken, who can but prophesy!"² We are justified, therefore, in defining a prophet, in the biblical sense of the word, as the man who delivers to men the message which he has received from God. Or, to employ the comparison used in the book of Exodus,³ the prophet stands in a relation to God similar to the relation in which Aaron stood to Moses: the prophet is God's mouthpiece, his spokesman. This definition is in its essence equally valid, whatever may be our conclusion in regard to the vexed question of the fundamental meaning of the meaning of the word *nabi*, the principal Hebrew name for a prophet. Whether the prophet is the inspired one, or, as seems to me more probable, is the speaker, the result is the same. In the one case, he declares what has been inspired—breathed into him by the Divine Spirit; in the other case, the prophet is the speaker, the man who speaks under the influence of the

¹ 2 Peter i. 21. ² Amos iii. 8. ³ Exodus vii. 1, 2.

Deity. Accepting this definition of the biblical prophet, we are prepared to consider his function.

PROPHECY NOT EXCLUSIVELY PREDICTION.

Modern usage has given a narrower meaning to the term "prophet," and it is not strange that the popular conception of the biblical prophet is that he was chiefly, if not exclusively, a foreteller, a predictor of future events. This popular view of prophecy agrees essentially with the older scholastic theory which found the characteristic of the prophet in the fact that he is "endowed with a knowledge of hidden things, especially of hidden things of the future"; or, in other words, that his characteristic function was prediction. This theory has few if any supporters among biblical scholars of the present day. Its inadequacy has been exposed not only by writers who, like Kuenen, seek to disprove the supernatural origin of the Christian religion, but also by scholars who are hearty believers in the truth of a revealed religion. All recent evangelical interpreters of the religion of the prophets unite in protesting against this rigid scholastic theory of prophecy, and in endeavoring to restore to the term its original broad meaning. They also insist on the historical character of Old Testament prophecy, and in so doing have rendered an inestimable service to the cause of theological science. The prophet is undoubtedly a man of his own times; he speaks primarily to his own contemporaries; whether his message is concerned with past, present, or future, his primary object is the religious instruction of his fellow-men.

PREDICTION AN ESSENTIAL ELEMENT OF PROPHECY.

But it may well be questioned, whether the modern historical theories of the functions of the prophet are not as truly open to the charge of inadequacy and defectiveness as was the theory which they have so largely displaced. It is

unquestionably true that these theories tend to minimize the predictive element in prophecy, and indeed to deny that prediction is an essential element of prophecy. They insist that the prophet was mainly, if not almost exclusively, occupied with the present as a reformer, as a preacher of righteousness, or with the past as historian, and hence interpreter of the events of history in accordance with his conception of the revelation of the divine nature. The future, on the other hand, he discusses only occasionally and incidentally. His statements in regard to the future are, in the main, only the result of his clearer insight into the true state of the affairs of the present, and of his unusual ability to read accurately the signs of the times; or they are the deductions which he makes from his divinely imparted knowledge of God's love and holiness. The following quotation from the "Old Testament Theology" of Schultz¹ may be taken as fairly representative of the views of this class of interpreters. "Prophecy," or in this connection more accurately rendered "Prediction," "is thus the prophet's application to the future of his certainty as to the eternal laws of the Divine Being and Will, and as to the final goal of salvation, in so far as that future is of importance for the present, and is connected with the sphere of religion and morals." In thus minimizing the predictive element, the recent interpreters of the prophets, whether influenced by the purely historical spirit, or by the desire to formulate such a doctrine of prophecy as would be unassailable by the opponents of a revealed religion, have formulated theories which are defective and one-sided. A true historical method of explanation must take account of all the phenomena of the prophetic activity, and must base its theory of prophecy upon a consideration of all the facts. And it is surely a mistake to suppose that any theory, no matter how important that theory may be, can be made secure

¹ English Translation, Vol. i. p. 282.

from attack when it plainly ignores or denies a large portion of the facts which must be taken into account before any proper theory can be formed. Such a fair and impartial consideration of the testimony of the prophets leads to the conclusion that prediction, so far from being merely subordinate and insignificant, is really a prominent and essential element in Old Testament prophecy; so far from being only the "prophet's application to the future of his certainty as to the eternal laws of the Divine Being and Will," that is really the result not of revelation, but of a process of reasoning, is actually a part of the body of truth which has been revealed to him by the Divine Spirit. This conclusion is amply supported by the testimony of the prophets themselves. On their own evidence they were seers. They knew the purposes of Jehovah in regard to their own people and also in regard to other nations. A recent writer in his¹ discussion of prophecy maintains that their denunciations of the sins of their contemporaries were only deductions from the revelation which they had received; a reasoning back from effect to cause. The coming catastrophe was revealed to them; from this fact in connection with the principle of divine righteousness and justice, they deduced the reason for the punishment, namely, the failure of the people to conform to the divine requirements. While it is doubtful whether this theory furnishes an adequate explanation for all the facts, it contains nevertheless a large element of truth. The prophecies of Amos furnish an excellent illustration in favor of this point of view. According to the prophet's own statement, Jehovah took him from following the flock, and said to him, "Go prophesy unto my people Israel." But the series of visions which he describes undoubtedly gives the fuller account of his call. And according to these visions the essence of the revelations which had been made to him was the approach-

¹ Smend, *Alltest Religionsgeschichte*, p. 170.

ing destruction of the Northern Kingdom. The disaster twice averted in consequence of the prophet's intercession is at last seen to be inevitable. "The high places of Isaac shall be desolate, and the sanctuaries of Israel shall be laid waste." The causes for this doom are not far to seek: they consist in the sins of the people,—sins which the prophet proceeds to denounce with unexampled severity. In their own accounts of their call and consecration, Isaiah and Jeremiah emphasize essentially the same truth. The Lord Jehovah is going to bring an overwhelming disaster upon the land, and indeed upon the whole earth. But the Lord Jehovah does not do anything without revealing his secret to his servants the prophets. And it is the proclamation, the development and the application of the secrets thus revealed which form the burden of the prophetic message.

THE PROPHETIC ESTIMATE OF THE IMPORTANCE OF PREDICTION.

Another fact which cannot be overlooked, is the emphasis laid by the Old Testament upon the power to predict as a characteristic of the true prophet. The law in Deuteronomy describes two qualities which the true prophet must possess, two kinds of credentials which he must show, in order to command the attention of his hearers. The one qualification is the substance¹ or content of his prophecy which must not seek to lead away to the service of other gods. But, further,² when Moses commands the people of Israel not to follow after the nations whom they are going up to dispossess who listen to "observers of times and diviners," but to hearken to the prophet whom Jehovah shall raise up, he distinctly asserts that the fulfillment of this prophet's predictions shall be the test of his divine commission. Micaiah³ the son of Imlah was content to await in confinement the progress of events, confident that

¹ Deut. xiii. 1-5.

² Deut. xviii. 14-22.

³ 1 Kings xxii. 28.

his prediction would be fulfilled, and calling upon the people to witness that if Ahab returned in peace, then he was branded as a false prophet. Jeremiah¹ holds essentially the same doctrine, and, according to Ezekiel,² the fulfillment of his prophecies will be the proof to the indifferent people that a prophet of Jehovah has actually been among them.

But unquestionably the classic exposition of the prophetic conception of the nature of prophecy is to be found in the second part of the book of Isaiah. For the purposes of this discussion it is not material when or by whom these chapters were written. Their prophetic authorship is unquestioned, and whether their author lived and wrote in the time of Hezekiah or during the closing years of the Babylonian exile, his views in regard to prophecy are of the first importance. In his magnificent description of the challenge which Jehovah the Holy One of Israel issues to the gods of the nations to come forth and compare themselves with him, it is upon the inability of these gods to prophesy, to predict, in contrast with Jehovah's own marvelous prophecies, that he never wearies of laying the emphasis. "Produce your cause, saith the Lord; bring forth your strong reasons, saith the King of Jacob. Let them bring them forth, and declare unto us what shall happen: declare ye the former things what they be . . . ; or show us things for to come. Declare the things that are to come hereafter, that we may know that ye are gods. . . . 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 showeth; yea, there is none that heareth your words."³ "Assemble yourselves and come; draw near together, ye that are escaped of the nations. Declare ye, and bring it forth; yea, let them take counsel together: who hath showed this from ancient

¹ Jer. xxviii. 9. ² Ezek. xxxiii. 33. ³ Isa. xli. 21-23, 26.

time? who hath declared it of old? have not I Jehovah?"¹

Again it is upon prophecy that the prophet bases his plea to the people to hear and heed the words of Jehovah. "Remember the former things of old: for I am God, and there is none else; 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."² And his severest denunciations are occasioned by the obstinate refusal of the people to serve Jehovah in spite of the fact that he has, by his prophetic dealings with them, proved himself to be superior to their idols. "Because I knew that thou art obstinate, and thy neck is an iron sinew, and thy brow brass; therefore I have declared it to thee from of old; before it came to pass I showed it thee: lest thou shouldest say, Mine idol hath done them, and my graven image and my molten image hath commanded them. . . . I have showed thee new things from this time, even hidden things which thou hast not known. They are created now, and not from of old; and before this day thou heardest them not; lest thou shouldest say, Behold, I knew them."³

But further quotation is not necessary. Even the most casual reading of chapters xl.-xlviii. of the book of Isaiah must show that their author, at least, did not regard prediction as an insignificant and sporadic element of Old Testament prophecy. One more illustration from another source will suffice to indicate beyond a doubt what the prophets themselves thought of the importance of their divinely imparted power to predict, and then we must pass on to a consideration of a few of the actual instances of predictive prophecy which are recorded in the Old Testament. This illustration is taken from the prophecy of Zechariah in the period immediately following the return from the exile. The prophet in beginning his appeal to

¹ Isa. xlv. 20, 21.

² Isa. xlv. 9, 10.

³ Isa. xlviii. 4-7.

the people, bases his claim to their respectful attention upon the ground that the earlier prophetic oracles had been fulfilled. "Be ye not as your fathers, unto whom the former prophets cried, saying, Thus saith the Lord of Hosts, Return ye now from your evil ways, and from your evil doings: but they did not hear nor hearken unto me, saith the Lord. . . . But my words and my statutes which I commanded my servants the prophets, did they not overtake your fathers?"¹

INSTANCES OF PREDICTION.

The most obvious though by no means the most frequent or the most important form of predictive prophecy consists in the precise foretelling of distinct and definite future events. Kuenen has endeavored to break the force of such predictions by maintaining that they were in most cases reduced to writing after the events which they ostensibly predicted had actually happened, while in other cases the predictions were of such a nature as naturally to secure their own fulfillment. The present tendency is undoubtedly in the direction of explaining these cases of definite prediction as sporadic and accidental, not essentially different from divination or soothsaying. To quote again from Schultz: "They must be connected with the dark and mysterious realm of spiritual life in which a special unnatural excitement and one-sided enlargement of particular faculties of the soul awaken presentiments which are taken for certainties."² This attempt to explain away such recorded cases of actual definite prediction can only be accounted for when we remember that it is made by those interpreters who seek to show that predictive prophecy is always general rather than specific, and is indeed mainly the result of shrewd generalizations. But this attempt is rendered futile by the facts which oppose it. Not merely in the historical books which contain the records of the lives of the earlier prophets,

¹ Zech. i. 4-6. ² *Op. cit.*, Vol. i. p. 283.

but also in the distinctively prophetic books, cases of such specific prediction occur in such numbers and so well attested, as to render it impossible to doubt that the prophets themselves in these instances were conscious of uttering not "presentiments" but "certainties," certainties communicated to them by the same spirit who inspired them with their certain convictions in regard to religious truth. From the historical books of the Old Testament we may select as examples of such specific prediction or unveiling of the future,¹ the series of signs which Samuel gave to Saul, the occurrence of which was to prove to Saul that God had called him to be the leader of the people of Israel. Or Ahijah's promise to Jeroboam that he should become king over the ten tribes which were to be taken away from the house of David in the reign of Solomon's successor, or the doom pronounced upon Jeroboam's altar at Bethel by the man of God out of Judah, a prediction whose force is not destroyed even if it be proved that the name Josiah is a later addition to the text.

From the prophetic writings the following instances of specific prediction may suffice as illustrations: Amos predicts with great definiteness the fate of Amaziah the priest of Bethel, as well as that of his family; he also predicts the Assyrian captivity.² Isaiah declares that before the child whose birth is near at hand shall have come to the age of moral responsibility, great distress shall come upon the kingdom of Judah, while its foes Ephraim and Damascus shall be destroyed.³ A little later he asserts that before his own new-born son shall be able to say "My father, and, My mother, the riches of Damascus and the spoil of Samaria shall be carried away before the king of Assyria,"⁴ while in still another prophecy he says that an earlier still un-

¹ 1 Sam. x. 1-9; 1 Kings xi. 29; xiii. 1-3. For other instances see 1 Kings xiv. 1-18; xvii. 1; xviii. 1, 45; xxii. 14-28; 2 Kings vii. 1, 2.

² Amos vii. 17; v. 27. ³ Isa. vii. 16. ⁴ Isa. viii. 4.

fulfilled judgment which had been pronounced upon Moab shall be fulfilled within three years.¹ Jeremiah foretells the death of his opponent Hananiah within the year, and on at least two different occasions declares that the Babylonian exile is inevitable, but that it shall be of limited duration, extending over a period of seventy years.² Ezekiel in Babylon predicts the beginning of the siege of Jerusalem, and on another occasion by his symbolic action he depicts the futile attempt of the defeated king of Judah to escape from the doomed city, and declares that he shall be taken captive and be deprived of his eyesight.³ These instances, the number of which is capable of being largely increased, must suffice to illustrate the truth of the assertion previously made, that the prophets of Israel in all periods of their history were conscious of being endowed with the power of definite and specific prediction.

MESSIANIC PROPHECY.

But such cases, while sufficiently numerous and unequivocal to compel the acknowledgment of the predictive element in prophecy, form by no means the most characteristic feature of Old Testament prophecy, and if they stood alone the present tendency to ignore them would not be difficult to explain. But such is not the case. The most noble, the most characteristic, part of Old Testament prophecy is in its essence predictive prophecy. I mean the so-called Messianic prophecy, which I use in the broader sense of the term, as including all prophecies concerning the completion of the kingdom of God and the redemption and glorification of his people, whether this looked-for consummation is represented as being brought about by the royal personal deliverer from David's house, or is regarded as being the direct work of Jehovah himself. The retention of the

¹ Isa. xvi. 13, 14. ² Jer. xxviii. 15, 17; xxv. 12; xxix. 10.

³ Ezek. xxi. 18; xii. 3-15.

term "Messianic" may be further justified from the fact, that, whether expressly mentioned or not, it is nevertheless true that the personal Messiah is the central figure of the glorious kingdom of the future. Messianic prophecy forms a part of all forms of biblical literature. History and poetry alike contain allusions to the coming glory, but these are in the main only foreshadowings. Messianic prophecy in its highest beauty and splendor is chiefly confined to the prophetic books. But this glowing depiction of the future redemption has its darker counterpart, which stands even more distinctly in the foreground of the prophets' picture of the coming age. All of the prophets without exception are heralds of doom. It is scarcely correct to hold that this proclamation of doom was their principal function,¹ that their hopes for the accomplishment of redemption and the ushering in of God's kingdom while ever present, are only secondary. The truer conception would seem to be that the two phases of their work, the proclamation of the coming doom, and the description of the dawn of the reign of peace and righteousness, taken together, form the determining elements of their prophetic work. In other words the orbit of predictive prophecy is not a circle, but an ellipse, with judgment and restoration as its focal points. From these two great facts of the future which have been revealed to them by God himself and which no human power can change, the prophets judge their own contemporaries, both those of their own nation and those of foreign nations as well. These two facts form, therefore, the fixed points of the prophetic conception of the future. Some of the prophets seem to emphasize the fact of judgment, while others of them bring into prominence the fact of the coming glory. In Amos, for example, the proclamation of doom is the chief feature. But he too recognizes the fact that Jehovah's people shall be sifted

¹ So Smend, *Op. cit.*, p. 180.

like grain in the sieve, yet not one sound grain shall fall to the ground, and he closes his prophecy with a description of the glory of that future in which the Lord shall reign. In the second part of the book of Isaiah, on the other hand, the idea of the coming restoration occupies the more prominent position. But here, too, the proclamation of doom is not wanting. And at the close of the long series of prophets, we find that the same two facts are the determining factors of Malachi's picture of the future: "For, behold, the day cometh, it burneth as a furnace; and all the proud, and all that work wickedness, shall be stubble: and the day that cometh shall burn them up, saith the Lord of hosts, that it shall leave them neither root nor branch. But unto you that fear my name shall the sun of righteousness arise with healing in his wings."¹ Without an apprehension of these two determining facts of the prophetic conception of the future, a correct understanding of prophecy is impossible, the marvelous interchange of light and shade, of denunciation and promise, which characterize the pictures of such a master of prophecy as Isaiah, seems only an illogical tangle. But, as is often the case with a picture which at first sight seems to be only a confused mass of color, but, when seen from the proper point of view, the confusion disappears, the figures or the landscape assume their rightful relations, and the beholder stands spellbound before the work of the master; so it is with prophecy, the various elements of the picture seem at first to be in a state of inextricable confusion, but, seen from the point of view of the prophet, with his vision of doom and of glory, the prophecy gradually assumes a symmetrical form, and discloses a picture of surpassing beauty.

That prophecy such as has just been described forms an important part of the prophetic portions of the Old Testament, no one would dream of denying. The mere attempt

¹ Mal. iv. 1-2.

to remove it from the body of extant prophecy shows instantly that without it we have very little record of the activity of those heroes, whose restoration to their true place in history is the service which modern criticism claims to have performed. But not until modern criticism is willing to accept the word of the prophets in regard to the source of their knowledge of the future, will it be capable of doing them full justice. Not shrewd generalizations, not "the application to the future, of his certainty as to the eternal laws of the Divine Being and Will, and as to the final goal of salvation," but "thus the Lord Jehovah showed me," according to the prophets themselves, is the ground of their knowledge, and the reason for their certainty. An Amos, a Hosea, an Isaiah, or a Jeremiah proclaims with certainty the approaching punishment, not from his conviction that sin must be punished, but from divine revelation. Similarly each one of them bases his faith in the ultimate restoration of at least a fragment of the people, not on his conception of the indissoluble bond between Jehovah and his people, but upon the promise which Jehovah has given him.

We conclude, therefore, that rightly considered the prophet is really a seer. This does not result in withdrawing him from his connection with his own time, nor preclude the strictest historical interpretation of his life and work. He is a preacher of righteousness, but the revelation of coming facts furnishes him with the text for his sermons. He is a reformer, but his vision of doom in connection with his divinely imparted conception of the true character of Jehovah's kingdom of the future has given him the measure with which to compare the present. His pictures of the future are not mere projections of his present experience and of his shrewd estimation of present circumstances, but are the result of a certain immediate knowledge of the divine plan for the future.

PREDICTION AND FULFILLMENT.

The object of this discussion has been to ascertain the prophet's estimate of the nature and value of the predictive element in Old Testament prophecy. The conclusions which may be reached in such a consideration are not dependent upon the question of the fulfillment of prophecy. But a few words upon the fulfillment of prophecy may not be out of place here. It is probably a fact that a large part of the prediction of the Old Testament prophets has not been fulfilled, and in all likelihood never will be fulfilled. It is probably equally true that the prophets themselves did not expect a literal fulfillment of their predictions. In many cases, indeed, the true object of the prediction could be reached only if the necessity of its fulfillment was averted. For it can scarcely be denied that the prophets recognized this fact that much of their prophecy was conditional. Even Amos, stern, unrelenting messenger of approaching doom that he was, interrupted the stream of his denunciations with the exhortation, "Seek ye me and live." And indeed all of the prophets, while despairing of reform, yet show unmistakably that they regard it possible to avert the punishment by speedy and thoroughgoing repentance. There is, therefore, no force in Kuenen's taunt, that to maintain that certain prophecies were conditional is to rescue the prophets at the expense of the divine omniscience. Furthermore, there is undoubtedly an ideal element in prophecy. Many of the prophetic pictures of the future are clothed in highly figurative language, and it is unreasonable to suppose that the prophets could have expected that these predictions would be literally fulfilled. And with the meager materials at our command it is impossible to declare just what kind of fulfillment the prophets themselves expected. That they expected the fulfillment of many of their prophecies in some way or other, and at some time or other, is certain, and the fact that a certain proph-

ecy remained for a long time unfulfilled did not cause them to waver in this belief. Isaiah makes use of an older prophecy against Moab, and supplements it with the assertion that, though delayed long, the judgment is not averted but shall soon come. And even if it be admitted that he expected the dawn of the Messianic era to follow very soon after the Syro-Ephraimitish invasion, yet he did not hesitate to express the same hopes when thirty years later the Assyrians were threatening the city of Jehovah.

It will be clear, therefore, that a proper conception of the fulfillment of prophecy cannot be derived from a study of the Old Testament prophetic writings alone. Prophecy was religious instruction and was based upon a distinct revelation of the divine plans and purposes for the future. But the most prolonged examination of the prophetic statements alone cannot make these plans and purposes clear to our minds. Much of Old Testament prophecy is explicable only in the light of the New Testament. The New Testament writers saw the true fulfillment of prophecy in the person and work of Jesus Christ. His life and the perfect revelation which he brought furnish the key which unlocks many of the mysteries of the Old Testament. In the highest and best sense of the term, Old Testament prophecy has found its fulfillment in Jesus of Nazareth.