

THE FALSE PROPHETS.

THE phrase "false prophet" is not used in the Old Testament, though it is said there of certain persons that they spake "falsely," prophesied "lies," and "out of their own heart," and that the Lord had not "sent" them. Neither perhaps does the general idea of a false prophet meet us; all that is said of certain prophets is that in regard to particular issues of one sort or another in the future they spoke falsely, and that in regard to the counsels which on this or that occasion they gave the people or the prospects which they held out to them they deceived them. The view that prevailed among the people—and it seems the view of the Old Testament writers themselves—appears to have been this: the prophet did not speak out of a general inspiration of Jehovah bestowed upon him once for all, as, say, at his call; each particular word that he spoke, whether a prediction or a practical counsel, was due to a special inspiration exerted on him for the occasion. And if a prophet spoke what they could not accept and believed false, they did not draw a general conclusion that he was a false prophet, they merely assumed that the Lord had not spoken by him in that particular instance. The exiles, who were doubtful whether they should go down into Egypt or remain in the land, sought the word of the Lord at the mouth of Jeremiah, and when the prophet, after some delay, was able to counsel them from the Lord to remain in the land they replied, "Thou speakest falsely: Jehovah our God hath not sent thee to say, Ye shall not go into Egypt, but Baruch the son of Neriah setteth thee on against us" (Jer. xliii. 2).

Nevertheless they continued to regard Jeremiah as a man of God, and insisted on dragging him with them as a kind of sacred fetish into the land of Egypt. The question, How was it that prophets spoke falsely, and how did the people believe them? may be difficult to answer. If looked at a little more closely, it may turn out to be a question not very different from some others which we are still asking about people to-day and still finding it far from easy to reply to.

1. From the point of view which we now occupy it seems strange that there should have been false prophets. The phenomenon of prophecy was such a unique one, the prophetic inspiration was so directly from God and the prophet so much his immediate servant that we might think there was little room for confusing the true prophecy with anything else, or for any one imagining himself to be a prophet who was not one. Standing as we do now, two or three thousand years distant from the scenes of Israel's life, our eye sees only one or two great figures; all else is obliterated and reduced by distance to a level. We observe the imposing figure of the prophet with his extraordinary powers of prediction, and in some cases of miracle-working, and we see little else. The elements of the life that surrounded him are almost indistinguishable. The complications in which he was involved, the popular interests that he ministered to, the struggles of opposing parties, the shadows and darkness that fell upon the leaders of the people, perplexing their counsels and paralysing their actions,—in a word, the life that surrounded the prophet and beat upon him with its waves we hardly realize. He is to us merely a solitary, grand personage, with supernatural endowments. And we cannot help imagining him the same imposing figure to his contemporaries. And we wonder that they should ever have disobeyed his word or that anything like a counterfeit to him should ever have appeared. The wonder, however, would be lessened if we would look into the moral compli-

cations of our own time or those of any period of history known to us. We have among us the same elements or moral forces as were among the Israelites. We have the word of God even in ampler form, and we have its record of miracles. But, while we see multitudes believing it and living by it, and proclaiming it with an earnestness little less than prophetic, we see also a large part of mankind with no living belief in its truth and merely in the condition of not denying it, and we see among a number of others actual disbelief. The same condition of things appears in the period of history in which Christ lived. Though the Son of God, men did not find Him to be so. Though working profound miracles of grace and power, men found means of getting past them. However surprising, therefore, Israel's neglect of the true prophets or its opposition to them may appear, it is not without a parallel; it has a continuous parallel in the whole history of the human mind from that day to this. In attempting to explain it many things would need to be considered—disposition of mind, bias of upbringing, circumstances of life, the currents and waves of the whole atmosphere of thought of the time. It would be found eventually, perhaps, that none of these things sufficed for an explanation nor all of them put together; an element which was mysterious would need to be recognised, something additional to these "earthly things" and not one of them.

In ancient Israel there was a life as various as our own. Conduct and faith were subject to the same conditions as among ourselves. There were mysteries then as now. Men were perplexed by opposing probabilities as they are still. Conduct was not a straight luminous path then any more than it is now; various roads often presented themselves between which a choice had to be made. People believed that there was a Divine voice among them, but it did not speak directly but through the voice of men,

and there was room to doubt whether the particular voice of man was God's, or when competing voices were heard which was His. They had no criterion by which to decide. From the nature of the case an external criterion was impossible; they had to bring the standard of judgment with them in their own minds: "Every one that is of the truth heareth My voice." Many passages reveal the condition in which the people found themselves. In Jeremiah xviii. 18 they say: "Come and let us devise devices against Jeremiah, for the law shall not fail from the priest, nor counsel from the wise, *nor the word from the prophet*. Let us not give heed to any of his words." Here we see that the people believed in prophecy and in their prophets, but Jeremiah, who contradicted these prophets, they considered a deceiver. Even more instructive is the conflict between Jeremiah and Hananiah before a concourse of the people in regard to the duration of the Captivity (Jer. xxviii.). The former prophet said it would last two generations; Hananiah predicted that in two years the exiles would return with Jehoiachin at their head. The people gave their voices for Hananiah, and for the time Jeremiah was put to silence.

There were several things which it has been supposed might have served the people as external criteria of true prophecy. Such things were the prophetic ecstasy, miracle, and the verification of the prophetic word by fulfilment in events. But while in simple cases these things might be regarded as accompaniments or even as tokens of the true prophecy, when used as tests to discriminate between one prophet and another they were liable to fail. The excitation in greater or less degree, or even the complete ecstasy, was a thing natural to an oriental people; it was perhaps more natural when great truths were fresh and breaking for the first time on men's minds, or when a national crisis occurred which was new and not hitherto experienced in

history. In the early prophetic period the excitation was common, the prophetic language used in later times appears to be formed upon it, *e.g.* such terms as "vision," "see," "hear," and the like. It was, however, no essential element in true prophecy. It is not mentioned in connexion either with Moses or Samuel. On one occasion Elisha called for a minstrel, and while the minstrel played "the hand of the Lord" came upon him. Isaiah refers to it twice (chaps. vi., viii. 11). It was perhaps more common, however, all throughout prophecy than is usually supposed, and, though the words "see," "hear," and "hand of the Lord," may have at a later time been used in a less strict sense of the prophetic intuition unaccompanied by any extreme exaltation, their occurrence always deserves investigation. But obviously so common a phenomenon as the ecstasy could be no test of true prophecy. It was no evidence that a prophet was true, neither was it any evidence that he was false. On the contrary, it can readily be seen how it may have given rise to confusion of judgment on the part of onlookers, or, what was worse, may have led the man who was the subject of it to regard himself as truly inspired. For in early times, no doubt, the inspiration was an inference from the ecstasy. The man was seen to be in the hands of a power which appeared external to him. It was a god or God in whose grasp he was.

Miracle might certainly be an evidence and test of true prophecy in some circumstances. It was so on Mount Carmel, when at Elijah's word fire from heaven consumed his sacrifice and licked up the water in the trench, though the subsequent history leaves us in great doubt how permanent the moral influence even of this great wonder was. In the Old Testament miracle means wonder; it is something extraordinary, nothing more. Any additional element of meaning arising from the idea of "law" could not belong

to it because the idea of law did not exist. The question, therefore, is, not what impression the Old Testament miracles make on us now, but, how the people of Israel regarded them then. And there were several ways of thinking about miracles which tended to rob them of their force as tests or evidences. In the first place, the working of wonders was not regarded as an exclusive prerogative of Jehovah or of his true servants. Moses performed wonders in Egypt, turning water into blood and filling the land with frogs, but it is said that "the magicians of Egypt also did so with their enchantments" (Exod. vii. 11, 22, viii. 7). *We* nowadays may have our own opinions of the powers of the magicians and the nature of their performances, but the faith of the ancient world was more simple or its credulity greater. In this particular instance the Mosaic miracles did no doubt eventually outbid those of the magicians, but such conflicts were rare, or rather the instance is unique. Again, in Deuteronomy xiii. 1 it is said: "If there arise a prophet and giveth thee a sign or a wonder, and the sign or the wonder come to pass, whereof he spake unto thee, saying [at the same time that he said], 'Let us go after other gods' . . . thou shalt not hearken unto the words of that prophet . . . for the Lord your God proveth you . . ." Here a "false" prophet performs a wonder. It is Jehovah that empowers him, but the wonder, far from authenticating the prophet, has quite another purpose—to prove the people whether they love Jehovah their God with all their heart. The meaning of a miracle might be ambiguous. The passage, however, while withdrawing attention from external signs such as miracles, concentrates it upon the true test, the more sure word of prophecy, the first article of the people's faith, that Jehovah alone was God of Israel. And to all this has to be added the fact that from Amos downward miracles play hardly any part in the history of prophecy, while it was just in the

last days of the kingdom of Judah that the false prophecy became most rampant.

The third test, the verification of the prophet's word in fulfilment, is one proposed by Scripture itself (Deut. xviii. 21). But this very important criterion was one which was serviceable less to individuals than to the *people*, whose life was continuous and whose identity and consciousness were the same after a long period. As a guide to the conduct of individuals at the moment when the prediction was uttered it could be of little avail. Occasionally predictions were made which had reference to the near future, as when Micah ben Jimlah predicted the defeat of Ahab at Ramoth Gilead, or when Jeremiah foretold the death of Hananiah within the year. But usually the prophecies bore upon the destinies of the state, and were thrown into a somewhat indefinite future. This peculiarity perplexed men's minds and led to the despair or at least the disparagement of prophecy. They said, "The days are prolonged and every vision faileth"; or, if they did not go so far, they said of the prophet, "The vision that he seeth is for many days to come, and he prophesieth of the times that are far off" (Ezek. xii. 22-28). The criterion of fulfilment was one for the use of the people, with its prolonged historical life—whether they will hear or whether they will forbear, they shall know that there hath been a prophet among them (Ezek. ii. 5). And its applicability was less to particular details than to the general scope of prophetic prediction. In the most of the canonical prophets this general scope was that the downfall of the state was imminent because of the sins of the people. The moral teaching of the prophets was, as we might say, secondary, being grouped around this predictive centre. It explained the impending downfall by laying bare its causes, the injustice that reigned and the false worship that prevailed. Now it was in the region of this general scope that the conflicts between the

true prophets and those whom we call false took place. It was probably also in this region that the persecution of the prophets by such rulers as Manasseh and Jehoiakim was carried on. The prophets might have preached to their hearts' content about the nature of Jehovah and the worship that was fitting or pleasing to Him, if they had not gone further and drawn inferences as to the destiny of the state. Jehoiakim showed his indifference to Jeremiah's preaching or his contempt for it by cutting up his roll with a penknife and flinging it piecemeal into the grate; it was only when near the end of the roll he found the assertion that Nebuchadnezzar would come and destroy the land and cause man and beast to cease from it that he ordered the prophet's arrest (Jer. xxxvi. 29 with xxv. 9, 10). The prophets were not persecuted because their doctrines were thought false, but because their conclusions were held treasonable. We, to whom the canonical prophecies are without controversy the word of God always need to remind ourselves of the conditions of the society to which they were first delivered, of the comparatively uneducated conscience, the divided opinions and the interests at stake. And we need to remind ourselves of the long process through which these prophecies have secured universal recognition. They have done so by commending themselves to the conscience of mankind and by educating it; and in Israel at least this internal evidence of their own was corroborated by the verdict pronounced in their favour by history and providence in the downfall of the state.

2. There were several kinds of false prophecy which are of little interest and which it is enough to mention. (1) Originally the distinction between priests and prophets does not appear to have been very sharp. The prophets were cenobites, and in early times are found clustering round the local sanctuaries of Jehovah worship. Down to the end of the state numbers of them appear to have been connected

with the temple. Pashhur, who thrust Jeremiah into the stocks, is called a prophet. These persons had some sort of official position, and were the leaders or counsellors of the people in religion and affairs of state—for in Israel religion translated into action was politics. There are always unworthy members in an official class, like the undisciplined stragglers in an army. It is not surprising that there were prophets intent only on gaining a living, who prophesied for hire, and whose prophecies were naturally just what their audience wanted to hear. Amaziah, the priest of Jeroboam, appears to have formed his opinion of all prophets from this class. "Seer," he says to Amos, "get thee away into the land of Judah, and there eat bread and prophesy there" (Am. vii. 12). But a less prejudiced witness can be cited: "Thus saith the Lord concerning the prophets that make my people err, that when their teeth have something to bite cry Peace; but he that putteth not into their mouths they declare war against him" (Mic. iii. 5).

(2) Another class may be passed over—those who prophesied by other gods than Jehovah. Jeremiah speaks of prophets who prophesied by Baal. It is always difficult to interpret the expression "Baal." In later times it is often a mere term of obloquy for whatever is false or unworthy in religion. Prophets who spoke in the name of other gods than Jehovah would not be numerous, for the fundamental article that Jehovah alone was God of Israel was known to all the people. It is undeniable, however, that a stream of idolatry of more or less breadth did overrun the country during the last reigns of the kings of Judah. Many things contributed to this. For a century and a half Judah was subject to the great empires of the East. These imposing empires could not but in many ways affect the small subject state with their thought, their customs, and their religion. Already in Isaiah's day the land was "filled from the East." The repeated deportations of the inhabitants by Assyria and

Babylon also had a very injurious effect upon religion. In all cases it was the higher classes who were carried away, men the best instructed in religion and holding the faith of Jehovah most purely. Both Jeremiah and Ezekiel testify that the religious flower of the nation went into exile with Jehoiachin in 597. A lower stratum of society rose to the surface and assumed the conduct of affairs, men less instructed in religion, more easily swayed by the fanaticism of their religious leaders, and from their social position more in contact with the aboriginal populations, and liable to have the taint of their immoralities. It is in Deuteronomy and later books that the abominations of the Canaanites first come into prominence and are legislated against. The nation was broken, and the national decay was accompanied by a degeneration both of morals and religion, for in all the history of Israel a high national spirit and a powerful faith in Jehovah were the counterparts of one another. The condition of things in that age was unspeakably perplexed. Calamity after calamity had fallen on the state. Jehovah seemed no longer to protect it. Men said, "Jehovah seeth us not; Jehovah hath forsaken the land" (Ezek. viii. 12). And they turned to other gods for succour. The wretched exiles who haled Jeremiah with them into Egypt thus addressed him, their wives being the speakers: "As for the word which thou hast spoken to us in the name of Jehovah, we will not hearken unto thee; but we will certainly burn incense to the queen of heaven, as we have done, we and our fathers, for then had we plenty of bread and were well and saw no evil" (Jer. xlv. 16). Such elements of confusion existed among the people, and so severe were human sufferings that men turned to one god after another, hopeful that some of them might help them. And every direction of this sort had its mouthpiece, its prophet.

(3) There is another kind of false prophecy which need not be enlarged upon, not that it is not very important, but

rather because it falls under the more general head which is to follow—the prophecy which made use of augury, divination of various kinds, necromancy and other appliances to reach the mind of the Deity. The true prophecy was an inspiration, a communion of mind with mind—Jehovah spoke in the heart of the prophet to his heart. And the prophet appears to have been conscious of this external element not himself. Prophecy may be said to have been the intuition of truth accompanied by—not the conviction, but—the consciousness that God was giving it. Possibly Jeremiah alludes to this when, in opposition to the false prophets, he analyses his own mind and speaks of the true prophet as “standing in the council of the Lord.” Deuteronomy proscribes all these arts of divination, and it may be a question whether they were survivals from the religion of premosaic Israel, or mere Canaanite superstitions which had infected the true Israelitish prophecy. Even in Saul’s time they were felt to be alien to the religion of Jehovah, though Isaiah alludes more than once to their practice in his day. Whatever their origin, they were probably submerged by the full tide of the Jehovah religion in the heyday of the state and only showed their heads when the tide receded in the days of national decline. So far as such arts were employed by prophets of Jehovah their use implied a defective conception of His nature. His spirituality was very imperfectly apprehended.

3. The most interesting kind of false prophecy, as well as the most common, is that which we find among men all nominally prophets of the Lord. Men who alike spoke in the name of Jehovah and practised no forbidden methods of reaching the Divine will, but in common regarded it as a thing revealed in the heart, were found not infrequently to give forth as Jehovah’s word conflicting judgments. They advised contrary steps in a political emergency, or they predicted diverse issues in regard to

some enterprise on which they were consulted. Thus in connexion with the expedition to Ramoth Gilead, "the King of Israel gathered prophets together, 400, who said to him, 'Go up, for the Lord hath delivered it into the hand of the king.'" But Micah ben Jimlah said, "I saw all Israel scattered upon the hills as sheep that have not a shepherd" (1 Kings xxii.). Now the 400 were false prophets, and Micah was a true prophet. The Lord spoke by him and not by them. That is true. But is it all that can be said? False prophets are defined to be those by whom Jehovah did not speak, and the definition is always true; but is there not also a truth in the other way of putting it, that the Lord did not speak by these prophets because they were false? Was His speaking or not speaking by them a mere occurrence, isolated, inexplicable, in no connexion with history or the general conduct and mind of these prophets or their relation to the principles of the religion of Israel? A very significant hint is given in reference to these prophets and their relation to the king and his character in the expressions he uses regarding Micah: "I hate him, for he doth not prophesy good concerning me, but evil." The 400 prophesied good to godless and idolatrous princes, such as Ahab was; the other, like the prophets who followed him, could only prophesy evil to such men; they could only express the law of Jehovah's righteous government, that disaster follows sin. In the opposing judgments of Micah and the 400 we see wholly differing views in regard to the nature of Jehovah and His Kingdom and in regard to the character and rule of Ahab. Both the true prophecy and the false have a soil in the past out of which they grew; they are both historical phenomena marking different degrees of insight into the nature of Jehovah and the principles of the religion of Israel. When our Lord said, "Every one that is of the truth heareth

My voice," He did not mean by being "of the truth" having a certain cast of mind with an affinity for the truth, which feels and embraces truth, even though new, so soon as it is presented; he rather meant sincerity and fidelity to the truth already known. His judgment applies to the people of Israel as much as to men of his own time.

It is extremely difficult to gain a just or clear conception of the religious condition of Israel at any time of its history. And yet without it we cannot judge men's conduct fairly, or even understand it. The people on entering Palestine did not drive out the Canaanites or exterminate them, they settled down beside them in many places (Judg. i.), and eventually absorbed them. The Canaanites became Israelites. But in becoming Israelites the native populations could not but carry over into the life and thought of Israel much of their own debased religion and morals. They tainted the life as well as the blood of the conquerors. Further, the tribes in their isolation from one another found sanctuaries of deity ready to their hand in the native high places. These they adopted as places of Jehovah worship. The traditional Baal worship at such places naturally infected the worship of Jehovah. Here and there, where the natives greatly outnumbered the conquering race, Israelites may have gone over to the worship of Baal. But in the main what followed was an assimilation of the service of Jehovah to the native worship and an obscuration of the loftier ethical conception of the God of Israel, who sank down nearly to the level of a nature-god, whose office was to give the people their bread and water, their wool and flax, their oil and their drinks (Hos. ii. 5). Again, Baal, though originally one, had become differentiated into many baals by the localities where he was worshipped, at each of which the rites might differ and the conception of the

god vary. The same followed in the case of Jehovah—He became many Jehovahs. Hence Amos speaks of “thy god, O Dan” and the way of Beersheba (viii. 14); and possibly Deuteronomy says, “Hear, O Israel, Jehovah thy God is one Jehovah.” And when Hosea speaks of “the days (feasts) of the baals” (ii. 13), he hardly refers to the service of Baal as another god than Jehovah, but rather to the Jehovahs of the many high places. These with their images had become so many baals. The conception of Jehovah in the people’s mind was one which Jehovah could not recognise as the conception of *Him*; hence He says in Amos, “Seek Me, and seek not unto Bethel” (v. 5). Ostensibly and in name the people worshipped Jehovah, but the conception which they had of Him and the service they rendered Him were proper rather to Baal. Nevertheless, the ancient Mosaic conception of the God of Israel and knowledge of Him still lived. It animated many in all ages. The prophets, in seeking to inspire men with a purer idea of God, are conscious of being no innovators. They stand on the old paths. Jehovah, as they conceive Him, is the historical God of Israel (Hos. xiii. 4). It is the people who have changed (Isa. i. 4; Jer. ii. 5–8).

Thus an antagonism between two parties pervades the whole history of Israel. It fills the pages of all the prophets, and takes action in the reforms of Hezekiah and Josiah, in the counter-reform of Manasseh and the reaction or *laissez-faire* of the princes of the house of Josiah. It is an antagonism between two conceptions of Jehovah, and in practice two ways of serving Him. Now, broadly speaking, the two classes of prophets, true and false, were the spokesmen of these two conceptions. To the one class Jehovah was the national God of Israel, with which He was indissolubly allied. He must therefore put forth His power to save His people and destroy those who laid

sacrilegious hands on His holy abode. They laid much stress on His power, little, if any, on His moral being, and therefore little on the moral condition of the people. Hence their optimism; they saw nothing alarming in the social state of the people, and they prophesied peace. The true prophets, on the other hand, had their minds filled with the conception of the moral being of Jehovah, of His righteousness; and this idea at once cut asunder the bond between Him and Israel as a nation. As a mere nationality Israel was nothing to Him; as He says in Amos, "Are ye not as the children of the Ethiopians unto Me, O House of Israel?" He could be God only of a righteous nation. Thus the true prophets were all in a sense pessimists. Looking on the condition of the people, they could only prophesy disaster. Jeremiah, as usual, has brought this point under reflection, and not without a touch of paradox declares that the mark of a true prophet is that he prophesies evil (xxviii. 8). The false prophets of his time cherish the same conceptions of Jehovah as the people did in Amos' day, and as they did in their own day. They stand on no higher level than the mass; hence they share their aspirations and are ever ready to second their projects. Ezekiel satirises this subserviency not without wit when he says that the people build a jerry wall and the prophets set it out with whitewash (xiii. 11).

The ethical conception of Jehovah held by the canonical prophets created a cleft between Him and the people. It was no more Jehovah with Israel but Jehovah *versus* Israel. And this explains what is very curious in the prophets—their gradual abandonment of the idea of the kingdom of God as a state and their movement towards that conception of it which is called a Church. What was essential in the kingdom of God was not its form but its nature, the godliness of the people. Perish the state, but live the community of believers! This was the patriotism

of the prophets ; that of the false prophets was much more intelligible. And this ethical nature of the true prophecy is really its characteristic and that by which it is to be estimated and not by the literal fulfilment of its predictive details. The predictions were only embodiments of the ethical and religious principles, projections often so ideal that they could not be literally realized. But the great general scope of the prophetic outlook regarding the destinies of the kingdom of God, whether nearer or more remote, was verified. And, as has been said, it was in the region of this general scope that they came into conflict with that other class of prophets whom the verdict of history has pronounced false.

Some modern writers on prophecy have exhibited a good deal of sympathy with the false prophets, and one scholar has expressed his regret that all their productions have perished and that we have only the judgment of their adversaries upon them, and cannot hear them in their own defence. Nothing that we know regarding them would lead us to believe that their works, if any, would have added anything to the religious or ethical treasures of mankind. And we may acquiesce in the judgment of their countrymen and the judgment of Providence and time which allowed them to perish.

It is allowed that, judged from the point of view of a true spiritual Jehovah worship and pure morality such as we now recognise and such as the canonical prophets preached—from this point of view these prophets were false. Their own position and their requirements from men were below this ideal standard. This is admitted ; but it is said that this was more their misfortune than their fault. It was not due to any declension on their part, but to an advance on the part of the prophets called true, which outran the abilities both of the people in general and of the body of the prophets. The true prophets, as we call

them, were always in a minority because the nation could not keep pace with them. And the prophets called false were so because like the people they moved more slowly, adhered to a former standing point, and were thus left behind by the more advanced prophets and denounced by them. But the denunciation was inconsiderate; the true prophets forgot that the divergence or opposition between themselves and those whom they denounced was due to their own forward march, which had left others behind, who in a former age might have been regarded as occupying a very good position.

This view raises a wider question than can here be followed. Even if true, it would not affect our judgment that these prophets fell below the ideal standard; it would only show how they naturally or perhaps inevitably came to do so. It is very doubtful if this view as a whole will eventually satisfy students of the religious history of Israel. The elements of truth which it contains, however, may teach us to form a gentler estimate of the individual men among these prophets, to allow more weight to the perplexities in which they were involved and the circumstances that determined their minds; and this by giving a broader scope to our view of the times and of human thought will not be a loss but a gain to us. We shall none the less wonder at that divine light cast into the minds of the prophets whose writings have become the heritage of mankind, which enabled them on each occasion to interpret Jehovah's nature rightly to the people, and to give them counsel always in the line of the true principles of the kingdom of God.

A. B. DAVIDSON.