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# HEBREW PROPHETS AND PROPHECY.

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## I.

A prophet is also a prophecy—just as in some sense the life of the Christian is his best sermon. All prophecies may be thrown into one of two general classes :

1. Verbal Prophecies.
2. Historical Prophecies.

This classification makes the discussion of Old Testament prophecy a discussion of the whole contents of the Old Testament; and so indeed it may properly be—a synonym of Old Testament Theology. In these brief papers, however, we shall use the term prophecy in a more restricted sense.

A verbal prophecy is the oral utterance, whether recorded afterward or not, of Elijah, Isaiah, Jeremiah, or any other person whom Jehovah may choose to make the medium, or vehicle, of his revelation.

An historical prophecy is one expressed in an event, or series of events, rather than in words. In this sense the whole of the Israelitish history is a prophecy in the twofold respect, 1) that it is a course of instruction, 2) that it looks to the future. In this sense the general fact recorded concerning Jonah is a prophecy, though in the other sense the Book of Jonah is not a prophecy. While, however, the history, or life, of Jonah as a whole is a prophecy, it would be straining a point to regard as such every detail of his life. In the second of the above two senses the Jewish classification of the historical books of Joshua, Judges, the Samuels, and Kings, as *Prophetæ Priores* may be justified, though the term derives its chief Jewish significance rather from the place which these books occupy in the canon. But it is noticeable in this connection that the Jews regarded all the Old Testament books, except "the Law," as books of "the prophets."

The prophetic books proper of the Old Testament, including some which are not, strictly speaking, prophetic books, are commonly catalogued under the two classes of

1. The Major Prophets.
2. The Minor Prophets.

The first includes Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Daniel. The second includes Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi. It is easy to see that this classification has nothing to recommend it, but its popularity. It is Jewish, however, and very ancient. The Talmud omits Daniel from the list of "greater prophets," and the Hebrew canon places his book among the *K'thubim*, or Writings. Augustine several times in "The City of God" recognizes this classification as one well known in his day. An obviously better one, it would seem, is the chronological, whether the subject of study be the contents or the language of the prophecies. The following arrangement is substantially the one proposed by Van Til, a Dutch writer and professor at Leyden in the early part of the eighteenth century:

1. The prophets of Judah and Israel to the time of the overthrow of the latter, B. C. 721. This list includes Jonah, Amos, Joel and Hosea.

2. The prophets of Judah from the overthrow of Israel to the final overthrow of Judah and Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar, B. C. 586. This list includes Isaiah, Micah, Nahum, Obadiah, Jeremiah, Habakkuk and Zephaniah.

3. The prophets of the captivity, B. C. 586 to B. C. 516. Ezekiel and Daniel.

4. The prophets of the restoration. Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi.

Of course, the line of separation between these periods must not be too rigidly drawn, as in each case one period more or less overlaps another. Isaiah's ministry, for example, probably began in the first period, and Jeremiah's ended in the third. The prophetic books of each of these groups should be studied, of course, in connection with the history of the periods to which they respectively belong. No one of them can be studied well, either in respect to its subject-matter or its diction, if it be studied independently of its chronology and historical surroundings—though it is also true that the study of the diction exclusively, or the subject-matter exclusively, may help to determine the chronology.

The sixteen prophets above mentioned cover a period of four hundred years, beginning about five hundred and fifty years after the settlement in Canaan, and extending to about B. C. 400. This would seem to be a small ministry for so long a period of time and for so "stiff-necked" a people. It was a small ministry, and an unsuccessful one,—counting success after the manner of men. It was a small number, even after making due allowance for those who wrote nothing, as Elijah and Elisha, and for the still larger number whose names are not even mentioned. Many of these were unworthy to be called prophets, because they were "false," and many of the remainder were doubtless inefficient. The Prophetic Colleges in those days could make neither heart nor brains. And as for supernatural endowments, God was much more likely to inspire a man who had a basis of natural gifts with which to begin. Not every young Hebrew who attended the Prophetic Schools, and had the diploma, and wore the uniform of the order, was capable of being inspired. Not every prophet in Israel was an inspired prophet. Many were prophets only in the sense that they belonged to the order; some in a little higher sense; others in a lower. The Elijahs, Isaiahs and Jeremiahs, if distributed evenly along the course of prophetic history, would scarcely furnish two for each century. But these were enough. Not many generals are needed. John Huss, Savonarola and Luther were few among many. Samuel stood alone in his day.

But how did there happen to be a prophetic order? for it can scarcely be doubted that there was one. It was not distinctly provided for, or contemplated, in the original Mosaic economy, any more than was the monarchical form of government.

To the sacerdotal order was originally entrusted the function of teacher and governor of the people in matters spiritual and ecclesiastical. Doubtless they also were originally the physicians and teachers of the secular schools, in so far as there were any. Did they not adequately fulfill the task assigned them? Not long. A few score years, at most, was as long as they did their work *adequately*. With neglect of duty and corrupt practices the priesthood was soon reduced to a low condition. Then Samuel was raised up, but whether he was himself a Levite remains a disputed point. It is probable that he was. He was a prophet, and established the Prophetic Order. He founded the first Prophetic School, and these were similar in constitution and purpose to our Theological Schools. They studied music, and poetry, and the Law. They became the teachers of the people,

the politicians, the annalists and historians, the physicians, the conservators of patriotism, morals, and spiritual religion. They wore a kind of uniform, and could be identified as prophets at sight. They had nothing to do with the functions of the priests, but were even more influential than the priests. Kings both respected and feared them. They were a numerous class. Obadiah concealed one hundred at a time from the wrath of Jezebel, an unknown number having already been cut off by her. Ahab king of Israel gathered together four hundred prophets of the Lord, and there was doubtless a larger number in both Israel and Judah in quieter times. But not all who belonged to the prophetic order had the prophetic gift. The majority of them doubtless were without it. Nor was there always agreement among them. So far, indeed, did some differ from others in their views and teachings as justly to entitle them to be called "false" prophets. The condition of the government and of the people was generally such as to call forth much difference of opinion as to matters both of public policy and private morals. But however honest in their views the false ones may have been, they were guilty. They had influence enough to lead the nation to ruin. Their predictions were merely forecastings. Though all claimed to be "seers," comparatively few of the prophetic order were inspired. Some priests, and others who did not belong to this order, were inspired. The whole number making up the inspired list from the close of Solomon's reign to the time of Malachi is about twenty-seven, and extends over a period of about five hundred and fifty years. Besides those mentioned above, their names are Shemaiah, Ahijah, Azariah, Hanani, Jehaziel, Jehu, Eliezer, Micaiah, Zechariah (?) (2 Chron. xxiv. 20), Zechariah (2 Chron. xxvi. 5), Oded (?). It is not expressly stated, however, that the first Zechariah and Oded were inspired. None of the other seers, or prophets, or "teachers in Israel," were in any respect superior in endowments or acquirements to our modern clergy. It is probable that even these twenty-seven were not permanently endowed with the spirit of inspiration. "The word of the Lord" came to them at such times as he saw it was wise and needful thus to communicate with them.

But it was not the duty of the prophetic class, whether inspired or uninspired, merely to teach and preach. It was a part of their duty, and a very important part, to make a record of the Divine utterances, and thus provide for their permanent existence; and in doing this they were guarded by the Holy Spirit from error. It is probable that not only the prophetic books strictly so called, but also the historical books, were written by men who belonged to the prophetic order; so that these historical books may well be called books of the prophets, as they actually are called in the Hebrew Bibles. The written prophecies, in the narrower sense of the term, are records, whether made by the men who originally spoke them, or not, of the revelations of Jehovah to the men selected by him to make known his will to his chosen people. And these prophecies were not merely of local and temporary value. The will of God is the same, under the same circumstances, in all ages and nations; and besides this, the Jew as well as the Christian, of all subsequent times, may see in the fulfillment of the predictions which occur in prophecy a proof that the Bible is in all respects what it pretends to be.

The darkest period of the Hebrew political history was the most brilliant period of Hebrew prophecy. The national sins, and confusions, and defeats, and exiles became the best occasion of its rise and development. Had there been no clouds there had been no rainbows. Prophecy brought to the people a larger hope

of the resurrection both in the national and in the individual, or personal, sense of the term ; and the root of this hope lay in the gloom of the present. It is only night that can make us think of morning. Prophecy also brought a larger anticipation of judgment after death. While it did not displace Mosaism, it became its consummation and fulfillment, and, by placing the greater emphasis on the spiritual nature of God's requirements, prepared the way for the ultimate abolition of ritual and symbol. While the prophets never for a moment lose sight of the national identity, and are ever jealous of it, they do ere long mount the partition wall between Israel and the Gentiles, and proclaim a kingdom of God, which, having its center at Jerusalem shall embrace even the Gentile nations, and permeate them with its benign influence. This, however, leads us into Messianic prophecy, the chief glory of Israel's most brilliant prophetic age ; and it was the failure on the part of the Jews to rightly apprehend it that so largely influenced their treatment of Jesus, and consequently the whole contents of the New Testament.

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## THE SUNDAY-SCHOOL LESSONS.

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### THE BOOKS OF GENESIS AND EXODUS.

The Lessons for the first half of the year 1887 are from these books. It is safe to say that a somewhat thoughtful and scholarly study of the books will be made, during that half year, by many more persons than ever previously made a similar study in any six months of the earth's history.

In actual work with ordinary Sunday-school classes, it would be a mistake for teachers to call much attention to the disputed critical questions concerning these books. Sunday-school work should be distinctively religious, and mere critical discussions are very dry husks for the feeding of the religious life. From the point of view of even the worst possible theory of the origin of these books, their more salient and important religious teachings are unassailed and unassailable. One need not settle the critical questions, in order to establish his right to rest upon the spiritual truths. In what they teach their scholars, most Sunday-school workers will do well to confine themselves pretty closely to these truths. But in making our preparations for teaching, it is well for us, if we can, to study the critical questions. We should need this, were there no other reason, to save ourselves from repeating the thousand traditional mistakes that are currently repeated along with the truths in these books, as if they were a part of the truths themselves. We need it too, in order to be prepared to answer questions and meet difficulties. It is known, not to a few merely, but to the million, that very many scholars of unimpeachable eminence hold that the Pentateuch was written, not by Moses, but many centuries after his death ; and that many such scholars also hold that these books are not credible as history. A Sunday-school teacher is liable, at any time, to have questions of this sort sprung upon him ; it will increase his usefulness, if he is prepared to meet them.

The first five books of the Old Testament have commonly been spoken of as the Books of Moses ; they are so spoken of in the New Testament. This has gen-