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THE PROPHET—ANCIENT AND MODERN.

By Professor J. F. McCurdy, Spadina Road.

“I OFTEN wonder,” says Xenophon, “how by any conceivable arguments the people of Athens could be persuaded by the prosecutors of Socrates that he was deserving of death at the hands of the State.” This mood of wonder in Xenophon has been amply justified. The judgment of Socrates has been one of the most instructive things in history, and that not merely on account of the worth and nobility of the victim and the obvious absurdity and injustice of the sentence. What makes it memorable is rather the fact that the deed was typical and in one form or another is being continually re-enacted. Every prophet and every genuinely prophetic sentiment has to face a like tribunal and be condemned. And every age furnishes as censors and prosecutors not only its unthinking and commonplace Anytus and Meletus, but its witty and accomplished Aristophanes. A nation and a community are, in fact, tested by their treatment of their prophets.

What was it, then, that distinguished Xenophon and Plato and the other companions of Socrates, along with the master himself, from the mass of citizens of the most enlightened state of antiquity? It was just this habit of mind and soul which it was the mission of Socrates to awaken, that sees the moral contradictions and inconsistencies of current dominant opinion, wonders at them and ponders over them. Probably no one ever helped in the least to broaden or deepen the reflectiveness of his people or to stimulate them to practical reform in life and manners, to whom the moral tone and temper of society had not become a paradox challenging attention and demanding explanation.

Thus it ought to be the most valuable of all historical studies to consider outstanding cases of popular infatuation and judicial folly, mixed or unmixed with official outrage. The chief drawback, as a rule, to such reflections is that the world has already made up its mind upon the moral questions at issue. The observer has, therefore, little or nothing of that spontaneous inward sentiment which is the necessary stimulus to energetic practical thinking. So much indignation at the death sentences of Socrates and Savonarola and Bruno and Servetus has been already given forth by our predecessors that we think it scarcely necessary to try the cases again. In fact, very little original sentiment is nowadays evoked by these or the like flagrant cases of injustice. Moreover, the issues involved are in a sense antiquated, or seem to us to be antiquated, which practically amounts to the same thing. Accordingly we dismiss them from our thoughts as irrelevant to present-day matters, perhaps at the same time relieving our

momentarily outraged sense of right by bestowing a contemptuous curse upon the intolerance and folly of the past.

Now, if this is to be the end of our study of antiquity, or of history generally, it is scarcely worth while to begin it. The study of history has no moral quickening in it unless it includes the study of “something far more deeply interfused,” which answers to the Hebrew conception of “Prophecy,” and which we may venture for the present to call by that greatly misunderstood name. It is characteristic of all true prophets, Hebrew, Hellenic or modern, that they stand in vital relation not merely to their own age and people, but to every age and every people. Their message is primarily for their own contemporaries. And yet, in a sense, all men are their contemporaries, for the very same message is for all times and for all peoples. It is they who give to human history its eternal significance. They have educed for us the element in history which is vital and permanent—the very soul of history—of which action and events are merely the body. “The prophet never dies.” That it to say, the interpreter of history has the immortality which belongs to his message. And his message is, in brief, a reiteration of the eternal principles of the moral world. These principles are ever the same. It is the mode of their applicability to the varying conditions of human society that gives them perpetual freshness and power. Plato and Amcs, who knew nothing of electricity or radium or preferential tariffs, may for their saving counsel still be listened to with profit by the modern world.

The other more personal relation of the true prophets is equally worthy of attention. They are out of harmony with their time and people because they are so far in advance of them. They are necessarily misunderstood by most of their fellow citizens and condemned by popular opinion, though their fate is not always the outward stigma of a felon's doom. The mode of their despise and rejection varies with the manners and tastes of the ages in which they live in the body; but they are always under the ban of fashionable opinion. In this respect they are witnesses or martyrs to the truth in their own generation. It has always been hard for the prophet to get a proper hearing. The majority of us moderns would probably in the days of old have joined in the outcry against Socrates; and the modern Christian is usually found implicitly condemning the prophets of the Old Testament and the New. Not that we do not approve of the principles for which these prophets lived and died. Our method of disapproval is to prac-