

fully revived the function of the prophet. For several centuries the function had remained in abeyance: It had become a remote, though it was still a fondly-cherished, tradition that there had been a time when the nation had received guidance from commissioned representatives of its invisible King. We possess still the utterances of many of these prophets, and when we consider the age in which they were delivered, we can clearly perceive that no more precious treasure was ever bestowed upon a nation than these oracles of God which were committed to the Jews. They unite in what was then the most effective way all that is highest in poetry and most fundamental in political science with what is most practical in philosophy and most inspiring in religion. But prophecy was one of those gifts which, like poetry or high art, are particularly apt to die out under change of times. Several centuries had succeeded each other which were all alike incapable of producing it. When John the Baptist appeared, not the oldest man in Palestine could remember to have spoken even in his earliest childhood with any man who had seen a prophet. The ancient scrolls remained, as amongst ourselves those Gothic cathedrals remain, of which we may produce more or less faithful imitations, but to the number of which we shall never add another. In these circumstances it was an occurrence of the first magnitude, more important far than war or revolution, when a new prophet actually appeared. John the Baptist defied all the opposition of those *scribes*, who in the long silence of the prophetic inspiration had become the teachers of the nation, and who resisted him with the conservatism of lawyers united to the bigotry of priests. He made his way back to the hidden fountains; and received at last that national acknowledgment which silenced even these professional jealousies, that irresistible voice of the people in which the Jew was accustomed to hear the voice of God. Armed with the prophetic authority, he undertook a singular enterprise, of which probably most of those who witnessed it died without suspecting the importance, but which we can see to have been the foundation of the Universal Church.