

The Prophets and their Work.

A LECTURE DELIVERED BY REV. PROFESSOR
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TO most readers of the Old Testament Scriptures the prophetic books, which form about one-fourth of the whole, are very largely unintelligible, with the exception of a few portions which rightly or wrongly have come to be regarded as Messianic, and which the pious instinct of the Church has seized upon for purposes of edification, they are practically given up as hopelessly obscure, and consequently they receive far less attention than they deserve both from ministers and people. The causes of this obscurity are not very far to seek. In the first place, they are naturally more or less obscure, because of their poetic structure and form : and the highest poetry is always obscure. Neither Shakespeare nor Goethe will yield up their meaning to the idle reader, who merely seeks to while away a vacant hour in their perusal. Nor will the prophets of the Old Testament. They must be studied and that carefully, or they will continue to be the despair of the pious in the Church. Unfortunately, the difficulty of studying them has been very greatly aggravated hitherto by the defects of our English version, which is perhaps less satisfactory here than in any other portion of the Bible. It is to be hoped that when the revised version of the Old Testament appears, matters will be considerably improved in this respect. Another cause of obscurity is to be found in the fact that these books are not arranged in chronological order. Hence they are apt to be utterly dislocated from the historical circumstances that gave rise to them. The motive that promoted them is ignored, and they are read in an utterly false light. This defect of arrangement is one which we have inherited from the Hebrew Canon and probably will never be set right in any version intended for common use. Indeed we are not yet in a position to set it right in every case. Much of the critical discussion of these books turns upon this very question of their date and historical occasion. Many points must be admitted to be still doubtful, and until they are set at rest it would hardly be wise to disturb an arrangement that has become venerable from its great antiquity. But it would be well if some means could be devised for fixing in the popular mind of the Church something like an approximate idea of the chronological order of these prophetic books and of bringing them into clearer relation to the parallel history. Until this is done there is never

likely to be any higher degree of intelligent appreciation of them than that which now unfortunately prevails.

Underlying this ignorance of the historical setting of prophecy, there is, however, another cause for difficulty, viz : a common misapprehension of the position which was filled by the prophets in the Jewish church, and of the work which they were sent to perform. There is a mistake as to their objects and as to their points of view, which naturally prevents from seeing their work in its true relations and appreciating its true value. The common idea current among the mass of Christian people is that the great distinctive feature of these men was their power to predict the future, that their chief work was foretelling the course of events in Israel and surrounding nations, especially the coming of the Messiah, and that the chief value of their writings is in furnishing an argument for the inspiration of the scriptures, and for the truth of the Christian religion. Prophecy in the popular mind is simply synonymous with prediction, and as the time for the fulfilment of all or nearly all the predictions has long since passed by, almost the only interest taken in them is to show that they have been accurately fulfilled. Now there can be no doubt that there is an element of truth in this popular view. The books of the prophets do contain predictions and many of them. They do furnish an argument for the inspiration of Scriptures, as many of them are of such a kind as to show a supernatural origin, and they do help to prove the truth of Christianity, but while they providentially serve this purpose for us it is quite evident that this cannot have been their own idea of their work or the object they had in view. To represent them to ourselves in this way is to change their front and marshal them against an enemy quite different from the one they were actually sent to meet, and the question still remains what were these predictions meant for and what place did they have in their real work? We must try and put ourselves as far as possible in their place and see their work as they saw it themselves.

The simplest way to do this is perhaps to look into the origin and history of the order. That they did constitute a separate order and fill an office which was pretty well understood though perhaps never very clearly defined is tolerably clear from the many allusions to them in the historical books. It is true that the inspired prophets, as we count them, number only some sixteen, and as these extend over a period of about 450 years it might seem as though they could hardly be more than one at a time in either Judah or Israel, and that they would therefore stand isolated and alone, solitary figures in society, distinguished from others only by the fact that they received revelations from Heaven, and bound