

PART II

PROPHECY

VI

THE NATURE AND FUNCTION OF
BIBLICAL PROPHECY

A PROPER INVESTIGATION OF THE NATURE OF PROPHECY WOULD require a preliminary survey of its relations to Time, and also of super-rational modes of apprehending truth, but these metaphysical enquiries, however useful when pursued by those qualified to make them, are unnecessary for the purpose of this book, which simply seeks to establish that prophecy, while given through men, comes from God, and that it expresses a whole view of time beyond the power of the human mind to conjecture. This can be done most simply by presenting the Biblical view of the source and origin of prophecy in relation to the will of man.

A familiar statement in Peter's second epistle defines how prophecy came to be spoken, and by a double affirmation, negative and positive, clinches the matter, as if to safeguard itself from possible misunderstanding or deliberate evasion. It runs thus:

"No prophecy of scripture is of private interpretation.

"For no prophecy ever came (lit.: was brought) by the will of man: but men spake from God, being moved by the Holy Ghost" (II Pet. 1: 20-21).

That is to say, prophecy did not originate from human impulse. Not only the subject-matter but also the mode and circumstance of communication lay entirely within the power of God. The mind of man may indeed have been chosen to condition its transmission, but never at any time did the will of man initiate the occasion. Prophecy does not come "out of" but "through" the mind of man: it comes "out of" or "from" the mind of God. It is not therefore simply the product of religious genius or spiritual insight. Nor is it a reasoned and intuitive conclusion from comprehended facts, such as might be made by men acquainted with the working of moral law and therefore able to perceive the final issues of human action before these issues were evident to others; or should this occasionally be, it is so under a direct and illuminative impulse of the Holy Spirit. Prophecy is not the fruit of brilliant conjecture or deep sagacity. Yet in denying a purely psychological explanation of the prophetic impulse it does not mean that the Author of the human mind may not, if He

will, make use of its more mysterious powers when making such disclosures to men, through men.

Whether the words "of private interpretation" be taken as referring to the elucidation of the prophecy itself in the mind of hearers, or whether as referring to the illuminative comprehension of future events in the prophet's own mind prior to utterance, makes no difference to the force and truth of the fact appealed to, that "no prophecy ever came by the will of man." If we adhere to the former view, as we may, the whole passage simply means that since prophecy *originated* solely from God, so it can only be *explained* from the same Source, so that no one, prophet or hearer, can elucidate its meaning by his own acuteness of mind. If, however, the other construction be preferred (and there is much to be said for it, despite its difficulties and the adverse judgment of most commentators), the passage means that the interpretation (unloosing) of coming events (often seen in dream or vision) which formed the prelude to the spoken word was not to be accounted for by any private solution in the prophet's own mind, and that this is vouched for by the fact that all prophecy came from God through a motion of the Holy Spirit upon those who uttered it. Either way, the appeal is based upon an accepted fact. The prophets themselves recognized this fact. Daniel asseverated, "There is a God in heaven that revealeth secrets . . . But as for me, this secret is not revealed to me for any wisdom that I have more than any living" (Dan. 2: 30). And Joseph, in like circumstances, answered and said, "It is not in me: God shall give Pharaoh an answer of peace" (Gen. 40: 16).

The prophecies of Scripture have an ultimate bearing beyond that on the situation in which they first were spoken. Doubtless the prophets spoke many things having "occasional" value, which have not been recorded, but which were the voice of God to contemporary hearers. Biblical prophecy is not made up from scattered and unrelated predictions, but forms a grand design, in which each individual unit finds a place. It is not necessary, however, that we should formally systematize the material before we are convinced of its homogeneity. The predictions of things to come given in Isaiah's prophecies claim validity on the ground that they proceed from One who is "the First and the Last," and who knows the end from the beginning. The coherence and interconnexion of prophecy in all its parts is implied in its origin, and casts us back upon the foreknowledge of God.

If prophecy be considered as coming from an ordered pattern of things existing archetypically in the mind of God—though only revealed to us in diverse portions—we shall have a better conception of its scope and purpose. The fulfilment of prophecy will

be seen to bear relations to God's eternal purpose in Christ, as well as to the spoken word of Scripture. Being grounded in the will and foreknowledge of God, prophecy looks upward as well as forward. Like the ritual of the Levitical economy it is in some sense a shadow of things heavenly and eternal as well as a pre-figuration of things to come. True, prophecy in the strict sense is confined to the spoken or written word, but are not the types and shadows of the law themselves prophecies "of good things to come" that had their fulfilment in Christ, as also are the histories of Messianic persons like David and Solomon? The importance of Bible prophecy lies in the fact that it lifts history from the plane of natural evolution to that of spiritual purpose, and shows it to be an ordered scheme of events grounded in the decisions of the Divine will.

Scripture presents prophecy, however, not in a formal programme but in scattered fragments and partial disclosures, here a little and there a little, "at sundry times and in divers manners." Men have sought by induction and by comparison of Scripture with Scripture to build up a comprehensive and orderly and chronological view of things to come. But it cannot be said that any such scheme or chart or outline commands universal assent, and while such enquiry has Scriptural sanction, it must be recognized that such humanly compiled prophetic schemes are only provisional and never final. Charts, for example, are useful as provisional aids toward a better understanding of the relation of events, but they cannot receive the same unquestioning acceptance that the written Word in its simple form claims for itself. Even when made by godly, intelligent and spiritually-minded men, they are at best human interpretations of Divine truth, and of dispensational workings not yet fully explained to us, which will only become clear when He who is their sum and substance is manifested in glory. Meantime, however, we may with due humility of mind and eager interest desire, like the angels, to "look into" these things, or like the disciples, "ask questions" about them, or like the prophets themselves, "enquire and search diligently." Much confusion has been wrought by conjectural dating and by fixed chronological sequences, made sometimes with only slight support from individual texts capable, when read without bias, of other equally possible constructions. In such instances, more is generally read into or taken from the verse than it actually "says," and inductions are given the same validity as the plain word of Scripture. The proper study of prophecy has thus been brought into disrepute, and believers discouraged from entering thereupon. Even *fulfilled* prophecy is more safely considered when a particular or supposed fulfilment has the

plain warrant of Scripture and does not depend upon human ingenuity.

For the Divine foreknowledge consists not only of things that have been revealed, but also, as Scripture itself affirms, of much that has been kept secret, so that our knowledge of the future is subject to a double limitation. Of what has been revealed much is beyond the power of our minds fully to grasp, and beyond this, there is that vast secret territory of which man knows nothing. "The secret things belong unto the LORD our God: but the things that are revealed belong unto us . . . that we may do all the words of this law" (Deut. 29: 29). Many of these things "kept secret" have, it is true, been revealed during a later stage in Divine revelation, as the letters of the Apostle Paul prove. But we do well to remember that Scripture has its silences and reservations, which are to be honoured as much as its open speech. It is not merely that there are things we do not know, but that there are things which are not for us to know, but reserved solely to God's knowledge. In studying Scripture we may unwittingly, in our very eagerness, ask the wrong kind of questions as well as give the wrong answers. Even the disciples did this, and were rebuked by the Lord, as when, in reply to their question, "Lord, dost thou at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" He said, "It is not for you to know times or seasons, which the Father hath set within his own authority" (Acts 1: 7). "It is for you," He said, "to bear witness to Me." The diligent discharge of plain Christian duties leaves little time for unprofitable speculations. Again, after giving precise details of signs by which the disciples would recognize the imminence of that concerning which He had just spoken, namely, the then future destruction of Jerusalem (Matt. 24: 33-35 with v. 2), the Lord goes on to describe the contrast of manner in which the Second Advent would take place, saying, "But of *that* day and hour knoweth no one, . . . neither the Son: . . . watch therefore." The Son's acceptance of the fact that this was something that the Father had kept in His own power ought to rebuke human presumption in anything approaching date-fixing, either of day or hour. So that our approach to the study of prophecy ought to be conditioned by the utmost humility of mind as well as by simple faith and confidence in the Word of God. It ill becomes us to assume that we have so grasped in complete detail the whole course of future events as to be able to allocate almost every verse of Scripture to its proper setting in Divine prophecy.

But systems of prophecy become harmful only when they are elevated into fixed schemes, and made so sacrosanct as to deter further enquiry into such subjects. To clarify in our minds the

wide, extensive scope of prophecy we naturally classify, arrange, analyse, dispensationalize, so as to have a clear picture of the parts in relation to the whole. But this systematization of prophecy has often led to a rigidity that we do not find in the Scriptures, where, as in creation, everything has a richness and complexity and interaction which, though it is beyond the mind of man fully to comprehend, produces an impression of grandeur and sublimity that evokes admiration and worship.

Even without a rigidly-formulated programme of coming events in our mind, how much there is in Scripture to reassure our minds on all matters essential to right Christian thought and living, and to warn us against wrong paths. The hope of resurrection to mitigate the present experience of mortality, the promise of future glory to compensate present reproach for Christ, the special "Word of the Lord" in I Thess. 4 to give assurance that those who have fallen asleep will not miss the blessedness of the Lord's Parousia, the final judgment of the Beast and the false prophet, comforting persecuted saints in their present distress, the last judgment, casting a sombre shadow on the human heart of the terrible consequences of continuing in sin and refusing God's Saviour. *This* is how prophecy is meant to be studied: *this* is how we are to approach even such characteristically apocalyptic writings as the book of *Daniel* and the *Revelation*. Prophecy is given to serve moral and spiritual ends, rather than to minister to mere intellectual curiosity. While there are certain great landmarks of prophetic truth familiar to all diligent readers of the Bible, few are so explicitly explained as to enable us to understand their exact mode and time and occasion of fulfilment; so that in this, as in much else, we live by faith rather than by full knowledge. The manner in which God has been pleased to give us His Word leaves room for much patient study and reflection.

In considering prophecy we must also avoid the temptation of relating current world affairs to particular predictions of catastrophe. One would have thought that the outcome of end-of-the-world scares in the past would have put an end to this abuse. Naturally, those who are nearest to events are most impressed by them, but if we would read past history we would see that in former ages also there were great periods of crisis, involving whole continents, as when, for example, Rome fell before the Goths, or when Europe was in danger of being overrun by the Turkish Ottoman power. At such times people's minds instinctively anticipated the end of the world: it seemed the end of the world as *they* knew it, the dissolution of the established order of things. It was in such a time, and with such an expectation, that the hymn was written, well-nigh eight hundred years ago, by Bernard of Cluny:

“The world is very evil
The times are waxing late,
Be sober and keep vigil,
The Judge is at the gate.”

To believers of that day, no doubt, this seemed indisputable, as *our* experience does to us, but while these “overturnings” (Ezek. 21: 27) admittedly adumbrate the final conditions of the last days, we must not lose our sense of proportion or forget that with the Lord a thousand years are as one day (II Pet. 3: 8). Prophecy, with its vision of the Lord coming to judge the world in righteousness, is meant to help us in such times. Bernard of Cluny even, amid what to him was impending disaster, could lift up his eyes to see “Jerusalem the golden, with milk and honey blest.” And king David in time of dire calamity could comfort himself with the thought, “If the foundations be destroyed, what can the righteous do?” thereby implying that the foundations could never be destroyed, for he continues, “The Lord is in his holy temple” (Psa. 11: 3-4). The word to Habakkuk, when *his* world was falling in pieces, was, “Though it tarry, wait for it; because it will surely come, it will not delay” (Hab. 2: 3). To us this Scripture has been paraphrased in the New Testament, “He that cometh shall come, and shall not tarry” (Heb. 10: 37). How much better it is to wait for a living Saviour than even for the event itself! We are, indeed, as elsewhere reminded, called to “the patience of Christ” (II Thess. 3: 5), and any resolution of present difficulties by forestalling God’s time can only lead to frustration and disappointment, and to the serious weakening of our faith. The rise of Mussolini was hailed by many as the actual beginning of the revived Roman empire, only to be discredited by the event; and the recent establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine has made explanations necessary to account for an event that does not fit in with a previously conceived scheme of prophetic interpretation. Such rebukes from history should teach wisdom. God is His own interpreter, not only of providence, but also of His Word.

The position here taken that prophecy is literally Divine oracle (so that the Scriptures in which it is enshined are fitly termed “the oracles of God”) explains why the Old Testament so frequently speaks to us in the first person, as if the Lord Himself were present and giving the message, and also why the prophets in their delivery of prophecy should be so careful to preface their utterances by a “Thus saith the Lord.” That such language was no figure of speech or poetic hyperbole the New Testament makes clear, for again and again it alludes to these prophetic utterances as being made by God Himself by the mouth of the prophets; that they were, in fact, “oracles.” To give only one or two instances:

“How then doth David in the Spirit call him Lord?” (Matt. 22: 43).

“It was needful that the scripture should be fulfilled, which the Holy Ghost spake before by the mouth of David . . .” (Acts 1: 16).

“The things, which God foreshewed by the mouth of all prophets . . .” (Acts 3: 18).

“The Holy Ghost also beareth witness to us: for after he hath said . . .” (Heb. 10: 15).

A like oracular manner of speech is found in the book of the *Revelation*, which commences with the phrase, “The Revelation of Jesus Christ.” The added words, “which God gave him,” interpret this title as meaning that it is revelation given to and coming from Him rather than revelation concerning Him, though this also is by no means absent from the book. The *Revelation*, therefore, has as its ultimate author Christ Himself, being conveyed through angelic agency to His servant John, who in turn committed it to writing. The book records a series of visions in which Christ is present, either as actually speaking, or as the One from whose authority and knowledge these prophetic visions unfold. Whether it be the letters to the seven churches, or the apocalyptic visions of the time to come, Christ is the active Subject from whom these messages proceed, so that the whole may be fitly termed, as indeed it is, “The Revelation of Jesus Christ.”

Consider the strictly personal forms of address throughout the book, reminiscent of the way in which God announced Himself through Old Testament prophecy.

“I am the first and the last, and the living one” (1: 18).

“I am the Alpha and the Omega . . ., the first and the last” (22: 13).

“I am the root and the offspring of David, the bright, the morning star” (22: 16).

Observe, too, the direct language in which the churches are addressed. John does not say, indirectly, “He knows,” “He counsels thee,” but simply records direct speech, “These things saith he, I know thy words . . . I counsel thee.” In the last chapter we have even more startling instances of verbal directness: “I, Jesus, have sent mine angel to testify unto you these things for the churches. . . . Yea, I come quickly” (Rev. 22: 16, 20). And the terrible judgments unfolded in the main section of the book all lead back to one central vision, that of One whose prerogative it is to take the sealed roll and to break each several seal. This manner of speech is, in the strict and original sense of the word, prophecy—the voice of God speaking through the

mouth of man. Its predictive quality derives from this fact, though incidental to it.

The mode by which these visions were communicated to John is, to our human understanding, very mysterious. All we know is that it was through angelic agency (1: 1). In this it has analogies with Old Testament prophecy. Visions presenting truth under like symbolic imagery were given to Daniel, Zechariah, and Ezekiel, and were likewise mediated through angels, so that it would appear that truth can be apprehended visually as well as verbally. Be that as it may, the glory of prophecy is that it comes from God and that it is given to men in order to create faith in Christ. However important it may be to have a proper understanding of "things to come," and no one would wish to minimize a desire for this where it is followed with due regard to the limits set upon it by Holy Scripture, a still more important thing is that we should so come under the dominant vision of Christ in His regal offices as to see in perspective the whole panorama of human history in relation to Him. For the great end of prophecy is not merely to supply information on a prophetic programme but to support the faith of believers and to inspire acclamation and worship. So manifold is the presentation of Christ in this copestone of Divine prophecy that throughout its pages title after title rings out in royal proclamation, "King of kings and Lord of lords," "Prince of the kings of the earth," "The bright and morning star," "The Lion of the tribe of Judah," "The first begotten of the dead," "The beginning of the creation of God." It is as if the full splendour of His glory would here break forth above all time and space in the pure radiance of eternity: yet is that glory caught from what He accomplished when incarnate upon earth. He who sits upon the Divine throne and receives the adoration of heaven and earth does so as the One whose hands were pierced by sinful men, does so as the Lamb that once was slain, even as He "that loved us and loosed us from our sins by His blood."

VII

THE NOTE OF LAW IN OLD TESTAMENT PROPHECY

THE BOOK OF THE LAW IS THE SUBSTRATUM OF OLD TESTAMENT prophecy. Beneath the whole structure of prophecy, with its predictions, promises, warnings, and visions of the future, rests the supporting authority of Divine law.* What is

**Note:* The word *law* is used throughout in this chapter in a moral and ethical rather than in a legalistic sense.

prophecy if not affirmation that the heavens do rule, that righteousness and mercy are the pillars of God's throne? Are not the commandments themselves prophecies that God's will shall be done on earth as in heaven, that anarchy and sin shall not triumph finally, and that eventually "all enemies shall be put under His feet"? Prophecy is conformable to its original source and upholds the supremacy of Divine law in the affairs of men. The Prayer-book version of *Psa.* 99: 1 gives the basic presupposition of all prophecy:

"The Lord is King, be the people never so impatient:
He sitteth between the cherubims, be the earth never so
unquiet."

Recognition of this fact led commentators in the last century to shift the emphasis from fore-telling to forth-telling, and in so far as this restored in men's minds a stronger sense of ethical values and of the sanctity of Divine law it was salutary. Extravagances of prophetic interpretation, however, should not hinder us from recognizing also an authentic predictive note in prophecy. Why should not prediction be thought of as retaining ethical value, especially when coupled, as it so often is, with promises of reward and threats of punishment?

The Fall in Eden disrupted the rule of the heavens on earth. The first subsequent action on God's part was to affirm that, by the crushing of the serpent's head, this rule would be restored, albeit through suffering, for in treading down the foe, the heel of the conqueror would be bruised. The language, appropriately, is gnomic—comprehensive rather than explicit and detailed. The passage ranks as the first prophecy of Holy Scripture.

"I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and
between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and
thou shalt bruise his heel" (*Gen.* 3: 15).

The enmity between the two seeds, the persecution of God's people by the seed of the serpent, the final triumph of Christ and His people over Satan—these are the essential elements of all prophecy. Different phases of the conflict form the immediate subject of particular prophecies, but the final character of all is the Divine law of righteousness inherent in God Himself. To recognize this is much more important than to be able to chart a programme of events.

The kingdom of God is the grand subject of prophecy. We must not take this exclusively as referring to an earthly kingdom, but in the broad sense of God's rule being established throughout all places of His dominion, as *Psalm* 103: 19-22 puts it. Things in heaven and things under the earth, as well as things on the