

# **THE PROPHETS AND THEIR INTERPRETERS**

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The Prophets and Their Interpreters by G. Vance Smith

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1878.

## PREFACE.

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IN the following pages it has been my purpose to state, or, perhaps I ought to say, to suggest, as briefly and simply as may be, the principles of interpretation which are applicable to the prophetic writings. The illustrative examples are taken principally from the book of Isaiah, for reasons assigned in the last section of the work. A few controversial remarks were unavoidable, but these have been limited to the recent little volume, *The Argument from Prophecy*, by the Rev. Brownlow Maitland, M.A.—a work, I need scarcely add, which the reader would do well to peruse for himself. He would thus have the whole case fairly before him, at least in outline, of what I may term rational historical interpretation *versus* that which is founded upon dogmatic and traditional prepossessions—as, I venture to think, the work just named too largely is.

One other suggestion I would offer to the reader. It is, that he should actually consult the passages of Scripture referred to in the following pages. A mere reference to them as they are quoted here, or perhaps only indicated in a foot-note, is hardly sufficient to exhibit the full force of the arguments and statements made from time to time. Passages appealed to should be read in their own context, and with a due reference to the historical circumstances of their respective authors, so far as these are known to us.

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THE PROPHETS  
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§ 1. THE CHAPTER-HEADINGS.—THEIR MISLEADING  
CHARACTER.—ISAIAH XXXV.

THERE can be no doubt that many readers of the Bible are accustomed to take their idea of the prophets and their writings from the headings of the chapters, as these lie before them in our authorised English version. It may be well, therefore, here to recall the fact, that the chapter-headings are no part of the original Scriptures. They are additions to the books made by editors and translators in recent times; intended to indicate the contents, or supposed contents, of each chapter, as understood by such persons. This fact is not, I imagine, very generally known; or, perhaps I should only say, it is not very commonly thought of by ordinary readers. It may be added, that the natural tendency of preachers is to leave it unnoticed, rather than the contrary; and it is easy to understand that the recollection of it might interfere seriously at times with the usual strain of popular exposition.

It is well known, again, by those who have attended to the subject, that when the headings of the chapters are examined and compared with their contents, the most singular instances of incongruity, and of the confusion of one thing with another, present themselves. A promise to King Ahaz\* of a child to be born 700 years after his own time is supposed to serve the purpose of encouraging him and his people amidst the devastation of their country by invading armies; a description of the office of Christ as the prince of peace introduces an announcement of the defeat and discomfiture of Edomites,

\* Isaiah, vii.



Philistines, Moabites, and Egyptians;\* the future glories of a church which they have never acknowledged are held out to the Jews, as if to mock them with delusive promises in the midst of their calamities; † their return from captivity is proclaimed along with the preaching of John the Baptist in the wilderness, in such a way that it is scarcely possible to distinguish the one from the other; ‡ the meekness and gentleness of Christ illustrate the terrible roaring of Jehovah as "a man of war" against his enemies; § the downfall of Babylon, the vocation of the Gentiles, the cursed folly of trusting in Egypt, the scandal of the cross, the damnation of the wicked, the new Jerusalem,—such topics as these alternate with one another in various phrase; || the whole forming an extraordinary medley such as could hardly have originated in any sane mind, and which, in truth, owes its existence solely to the inventive genius of ill-judging commentators and writers of chapter headings.

To illustrate these statements a very familiar section of the book of Isaiah may be referred to. It is ch. xxxv., which commences thus:—

"The wilderness and the solitary place shall be glad for them;  
And the desert shall rejoice, and blossom as the rose;  
It shall blossom abundantly,  
And rejoice even with joy and singing:  
The glory of Lebanon shall be given unto it,  
The excellency of Carmel and Sharon,  
They shall see the glory of the Lord,  
The excellency of our God."

It is not necessary to quote the entire passage, in order to ask, what does this remarkable and beautiful description refer to? According to the statement at the head of the chapter it sets forth "the joyful flourishing of Christ's kingdom," and "the virtues and privileges of the Gospel." Who may have appended this piece of information no one knows, and we have no means of finding out. But it is accepted, probably, by multitudes, as a just and authentic account of what the prophet had

\* Isaiah xi.

† Isaiah xlix. liv. lx.

‡ Isaiah xl.

§ Isaiah xliii.

|| See the headings of many of the later chapters of Isaiah in particular.

in his mind, in writing the words. Indeed, I once heard an excellent bishop of our Established Church, long since dead, a man of high reputation for his learning, preach a kind of expository sermon upon a verse in this chapter; in which he took it for granted, without hesitation, or any attempt to justify his position, that the whole was a prediction, wonderfully fulfilled in the event, of the establishment of Christ's kingdom, and the success of the Gospel in future times.

But now, to see the true purport of the passage, let us look a little more closely into some of its expressions and into its contents. The last verse, for example, reads thus :

“ And the ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come to Zion,  
With songs and everlasting joy upon their heads ;  
They shall obtain joy and gladness,  
And sorrow and sighing shall flee away.”

We see at once that the prophet is speaking of a return of his people, or some of them, to their own homes. The wilderness, through which they have to march, he says, shall rejoice and blossom for them as they come. They that are of a fearful heart are told to be strong and fear not ; behold their God shall come with vengeance. He will come and save them. There shall be plenty of water for them in the desert. They shall not miss the way. No ravenous beast shall be there to injure them, but they shall come safely back to Zion.

That such is the purport of this passage is apparent from the preceding chapter, with which ch. xxxv. is closely connected, as shown by the language and spirit of the entire passage. Indeed, it is an accepted conclusion with the best authorities, that these two chapters form *one* prophecy and ought not to have been separated. Turning therefore to ch. xxxiv., we there read that the day of the Lord's anger is come. He is about to avenge his people's cause and deliver them from their enemies. The enemies meant are clearly indicated. “ My sword shall be bathed in blood. It shall come down upon Idumea and upon the people of my curse to judgment.” Again it is said, “ For the Lord hath a sacrifice in Bozrah, and a great slaughter in the land of Idumea.” The inhabitants of Idumea were the Edomites, ancient enemies of the Jews, and Bozrah was one of their chief

cities. Thus it appears that these enemies were now to be defeated and put to the sword, while the Israelites, whom they had held in captivity, were to be delivered and return safely home, with songs of joy and thanksgiving.

This passage affords one example out of many that might be given of the common and almost wilful misunderstanding of the prophetic books. Misinterpretation of this kind may be said to be the rule among modern preachers and expounders, led away, as they are, and pre-occupied by long established systems of what is called Evangelical doctrine. Under these influences, it is the practice to apply every possible expression to Christ and the Gospel, with little regard to the context or original intention of the words. Thus it would often appear as if the ancient prophets existed mainly for the purpose of saying one thing while meaning another, or of delivering obscure announcements about Christianity which their contemporaries did not understand, which have never been fulfilled, and which it is easy to see never can be fulfilled.

For, let it be observed, when Jesus of Nazareth claimed for himself the character of the expected Messiah (or when this was claimed for him by others), he was a very *different* kind of person from what the Jews of his time were looking for under that title. The ancient prophecies had by no means proved to be a true "preparation" for his advent. His own people, with few exceptions, would have nothing to do with him, but rejected him, and let him be tried for blasphemy and crucified by Roman soldiers. Of what use, then, were all the ancient and elaborate predictions so commonly supposed to foretell his coming! Clearly they did not *answer* their presumed purpose. Nor is it a sufficient reply to this question to say, The Jews of Christ's time were blind, and did not understand their true interests, or know how to interpret their sacred books. The Jews of Christ's time were what the course of their history and the training of providential events had made them; and it is far more likely that our modern expositions of prophecy are ill-founded and often altogether wrong, than that the Jewish people missed the meaning of their own sacred books so entirely as is usually supposed.