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Hebrew Prophecy a Unique Divine Bestowal.

In his recent book *The Hebrew Literary Genius* (Princeton University Press, 1933) Duncan Black MacDonald, professor emeritus of the Hartford Theological Seminary, presents a modernized revision of the widely heralded theory which finds in the early Arabic the prototype of Hebrew literature and Old Testament institutions. Dr. MacDonald, a leading Arabist of this generation and an honorary member of the Arab Academy of Damascus, has brought Wellhausen up to date, removed scientific archaisms from Robertson Smith, and in the light of more recent investigations has revised the details of Goldziher and of other professional Islamic studies. But the basic theory remains the same. It is the *proton pseudos* of comparative Semitic religion, this proposition which the author submits on the first page: "The Hebrews, it has become plain, were simply an Arab clan which under strange and unique guidance entered Palestine and settled there. But they remained Arab, although they denounced the name. And their literature throughout all of their history and to this day, in its methods of production and in its recorded forms, is of Arab scheme and type."

In applying this pan-Arabic thesis to Old Testament literature, the author, like his highly reputed critical predecessors, must deal with the prophetic books and with the phenomenon of prophecy itself. He does not hesitate to posit an Arab beginning of Hebrew prophecy and to deduce the origin of "the institution itself, from the desert" (p. 2). Indeed, he incidentally goes beyond the scope of his thesis to suggest parallels between the activities of Biblical prophets and the policies of the officials at the oracle of Apollo in Delphi (p. 83). Finally, he makes a significant, if ultimately rationalistic, contribution to the revolt against the dogmas of scientific skepticism and materialism by resorting to metaphysical psychology. Calling attention to the psychical researches of Charles Richet, Sir Oliver Lodge, and the older studies of Andrew Lang, he declares: "The fact of precognition has been widely accepted even among those who reject all connection with spiritualism and disavow its creeds." (P. 86 f.)

In other words, then, we are presented, directly or indirectly, with three theories advanced to account for the extra-Hebrew origin of prophecy, first, the Arabic genesis with the later Islamic evidence of prophecy; secondly, the extra-Semitic traces of prophetic activity; thirdly, the reduction of prophecy to the natural phenomenon of "automatisms" and the "flashes of precognition . . . apparently through crystal-gazing." These are the three anti-Scriptural claims that will be analyzed in the following and rejected by a summary of the indictments which conservative Biblical scholarship raises against these assaults by comparative and evolutionary religious history.

I.

In substantiation of this Arabic origin of prophecy two general claims are advanced: first, that certain terms of prophetic phraseology are derived from the Arabic, and secondly, that characteristic customs of Hebrew prophetic conventions have Moslem counterparts. Thus we are told "that the commonest Hebrew word for 'prophet' is a borrowed word from an Arabic root" (p. 2). The inference is this: If the word has been borrowed from the Arabic, then the institutions have also been taken from the same source.

This assumption is contradicted by the very salient fact that Dr. MacDonald's etymology of נָבִיא lacks final certainty. It is true, the Arabic has a cognate root, which in one of its conjugations has the meaning "to make an announcement" (*naba'a*). But the Assyrian has the same root, *nabu*, in the sense of "to call," "to announce," "to name." It also appears that the Ethiopic may have a parallel root. In other words, the term occurs in the north and south branches of the Semitic languages, and to insist that it is derived from the Arabic levies a demand which cannot be justified. The word may be part of the common treasury of all Semitic languages and therefore as indigenous to the Hebrew as to any other language of this group. Theoretically it may be a niph'al formation from נָבַא, literally, then, "one who is entered in," i. e., by the Spirit of God. Or if it is derived, it is much more reasonable to suppose that the etymological contact is established through the Assyrian; for it is precarious to insist upon Arabic origin when the earliest demonstrable occurrence of the Arabic term is found many centuries after the latest Biblical use of the word. — But even if we could follow unreservedly the claim that Arabic perpetuates more closely the pristine purity of the original Semitic and concede that the Hebrew נָבִיא is derived from the Arabic root, this would in no way admit that the institution of prophecy was borrowed from the same source.

Another term associated with Old Testament prophets which is said to be derived from the Arabic is the disparaging epithet מְדַבֵּר, meaning, as perpetuated in the Jewish jargon, "mad," "insane." MacDonald declares: "Exactly the same root in Arabic is never used of madness, but is regularly used of the speech of prophets." (P. 80.) The inference drawn again is this, that the Hebrews borrowed this technical term, together with the entire prophetic system, from the Arabic and then applied it to the "diviners' apparently senseless behavior and talk." MacDonald admits that the last is conjecture, and a study of the use of the term מְדַבֵּר in association with the prophets of the Old Testament reveals that it must be rather poor conjecture. As the term is used in three Old Testament passages (2 Kings 9, 11; Jer. 29, 26; Hos. 9, 7), it is employed as a popular term of disparagement. In none of these passages is there any evidence of any sense-

less raving on the basis of which these men could be regarded as mad. Their "madness" could, with less tax on our credulity, be ascribed to the drastic protest and predictions of the prophets, which their sophisticated contemporaries might label as "mad" or "insane."

It is further asserted that the political activities of the Hebrew prophets must be placed side by side with similar activities of the Arab prophets. MacDonald claims: "The mixing in, and influence on, the politics of their time, exercised by the Hebrew prophets is strangely paralleled by that of the saints of Islam and was feared and resented by the kings of Islam in much the same way as by the kings of Judah and Israel." (P. 2.)

But the Hebrew prophets did not deal in palace intrigues nor in the maneuverings of statecraft. They were ambassadors of God, with a message of spiritual import and an appeal for true religion and resultant morality. Even in their deep social passion the prophets of the eighth century disdained any participation in political programs. Hosea presents thirteen chapters of prophetic discourse on divine love without the suggestion of monarchical machinations. Micah seathingly denounces man's inhumanity to man, but without even a tinge of partisan coloring. True, Isaiah meets Ahaz and offers him the help of God in preference to the Assyrian coalition, but there is neither political ambition, partisan prejudice, nor the ulterior motive of a dynasty creator or of a court sycophant in his conversation with the king. He simply voices God's plan for the preservation of Israel. Jeremiah, too, protests against the crown ethics and palace policies in the tragic days before the fall of Jerusalem; but when the enraged king destroys the prophetic scroll, he burns this document not because of any subversive political contents, for it is innocent of these. Among the non-literary prophets of the North it is likewise true, for example, that the coronation of Jehu was quietly effected by a prophet and that prophetic voices were repeatedly raised against infidelity and excesses. But all this was inevitable with the theocratic background of Israel and is infinitely remote from the scheming cunning of the Arabian Nights.

Finally we are assured that "the organizations and usages of the prophets in the Old Testament with their so-called 'schools' are closely the same as the Muslim darwishes and their fraternities at the present day" (p. 2). We are not now concerned with the discussion which might profitably ensue in regard to the salient differences between these two organizations; for even granting a close similarity, the late origin of Sufism and the mystical life in Islam are thoroughly incompatible with the theory of the desert origin of Biblical prophecy. If modern dervishism traces its origin to the early Middle Ages, and if in all the extant Arabic literature there is no evidence of similarly organized bands in the pre-Mohammedan eras, by what show of right

can the anachronistic demonstration be completed that the prophets of the Old Testament are dependent upon the medieval dervishes and their contemporaneous descendants?

Throughout this argumentation the objective investigator must be impressed by the absence of real evidence. But the weakness of this theory is further emphasized by the observation that, if the world owes its conception of prophecy to Arabia, we might reasonably expect to find this institution most highly developed in its homeland. At least this country should have produced immortals whose names have been emblazoned in the history of prophecy. Yet all Arabic literature contains no prophetic genius. Mohammed, even disregarding his obvious misrepresentations, was no prophet in the technical sense of the term. He wisely refrained from prophecy and refused to accredit his mission by signs. His doctrine does not breathe the standards of the morality and purity expounded in the prophetic discourses, and his religion was satanic. It was only with conscious imitation of the true prophets that he endeavored to lay claim to the prophetic dignity. Outside of its arch impostor orthodox Mohammedanism knows no one who was regarded as a divine oracle.

II.

Are there traces of prophecy among the other Semites or among non-Semitic peoples? Do we know of a Babylonian Elijah? Does Egyptian history reveal imposing figures like Amos of Tekoa, the shepherd and pincher of sycamore figs, God's emissary to decadent Samaria, who foretold the doom of that self-indulgent, *dilettante* luxury and predicted the restoration of the fallen hut of the Davidic lineage through the conversion of Gentile nations to the salvation in Christ? Is there a Greek or Roman Isaiah who strides through the pages of classical records, as the oracle of God, to unfold a detailed panorama of prophetic vision, climaxing in the suffering Servant, cut off from the land of the living for the sins of His people, yet whose days are lengthened and whose Messianic kingdom of grace and truth and peace abides forever?

MacDonald answers the general question involved in the affirmative by asserting: "The methods by which they [the Hebrew prophets] worked were strikingly like those of the Greek oracles." But he overlooks entirely the fundamental characteristics of the Delphic oracles, the pythoness on the tripod, the mephitic gas with the alleged convulsions, the unintelligible murmurs interpreted according to the whim and the will of the attendant priest, and the palpable fraud of the whole arrangement. He who finds in Delphi a parallel to the spiritual revelation of God through His chosen prophets can find a parallel in any form of fraudulent prognostication, simply because he permits himself to be misled by the bias of an intellectual complex which makes theory overrule evidence and facts surrender to

fancy. The only impression which an unbiased observer can derive from a comparison of Old Testament prophecy and Delphic Shamanism is one of fundamental and irreconcilable difference.

If there is no parallel in the classical oracles, are there evidences of other parallels to Hebrew prophecy? If the Pharisees traveled over land and sea to make one proselyte, the aggregate of contemporaneous liberal thought has not only crossed the seas, but has also delved deep into archeological *débris* to find corroborative evidence for the extra-Biblical occurrence of true prophecy. But the failure of their joint efforts and the significant paucity of material forebodes the final futility of this theory.

A typical collection of the materials marshaled in this connection is found in the twenty-sixth chapter of Barton's *Archeology of the Bible* (sixth edition, 1933). From these pages we catalog the following "Parallels of Prophetic Thought."

First of all we find the prophecy of an Egyptian king from the reign of Seneferu, before 2900 B. C. It is a prediction that foreigners will invade Egypt, drink the water of the Nile, but find themselves repelled by a king called Ameni, who will establish justice in Egypt and bring about a reign of gladness and plenty. The blessings of his rule are compared with the benediction with which the Messianic prophecies foretell Christ's reign. — But, one asks immediately, was this prediction fulfilled, or is it only an empty dream, one of the fraudulent prognostications that have perpetually deluded men? There is not a scintilla of evidence that these words were ever fulfilled; and the comparison with the Messianic reign is just another of the exaggerations which materialize the spiritual and will not stand the practical test that any observer can make on the basis of the translated Egyptian document.

Another ideal king is mentioned in the admonitions of the Egyptian sage Ipuwer, whose pictures are said to resemble the prophetic conception of the Messiah as presented in Is. 9 and 11. A closer scrutiny of the translation will bring the reader to the conclusion that Gardiner, who translated this document and comments upon its statements, is correct when he asserts that this is no prophecy, but rather a lament that the ideal king, who was really the god Re, has now disappeared without leaving any warrant of an expected return.

Under the heading "A Prophetic Vision," Barton also presents the well-known dream of Assur-banipal on the eve of his battle against the Elamites. In this dream Ishtar appears to Assur-banipal and promises him victory over King Tiuman, the Elamite sovereign. This, Barton says, "reminds one a little of Isaiah's vision of Jehovah in the Temple." Now, Assyriologists are quite well agreed that Assur-banipal, lily-livered coward, fought his battles largely on *bas-reliefs* and that consequently his visions may be the result of a *post-eventum*

piety. But even if for the moment we accept the authenticity of this nocturnal vision, it offers no parallel to the institution of prophecy in the Old Testament. Abimelech (Gen. 20) received a vision from Jehovah, yet he was no prophet. And the comparison of this "prophetic vision," featuring a prebattle palaver between a lustful goddess and her pampered devotee, with the majestic revelation of the Trinity and of the seraphim sounding forth the vibrant *Tersanctus*, shows not only how deeply modern criticism has fallen, but also to what extremes of artificialities the enemies of direct revelation will resort.

The other evidence for extra-Scriptural prophecy which Barton, Smith, and others adduce is even weaker. Parallels have been drawn between Biblical prophecy and Babylonian divination; but the hepatoscopy, the astrology, and the necromancy that flourished on the banks of the Euphrates only emphasize the fundamental differences that separate the two unrelated institutions. Stade's theory of the Canaanite origin lacks even the approach to demonstration; and the more recent discovery of "close parallels" to Old Testament prophecy (Wenomon's report concerning the "divine seizure" of a courtier at Byblos and the oracle sent to Zakar, king of Hamath, through his seers) are nothing but expressions of the ceremonious divination of heathendom as it has been practised throughout the aging centuries.

III.

If prophecy is thus neither of Arabic nor of extra-Semitic origin, is it related, as MacDonald suggests, to psychic precognition, the phenomenon which appears with apparent spontaneity and allegedly reveals the future? MacDonald insists: "It is becoming assured that certain human beings, under certain conditions, in certain ways, and from time to time have flashes of precognition; . . . they are of the most multifarious character, come unexpectedly, mixed with non-veridical matter; a door opens and shuts, and that is all. There seems no purpose to them; no mind behind them. That is of course because we do not yet know enough about them. They are irrational in a sense; but there seems no escaping it that they precede their events in our world of space and time. . . . This means that we can, not irrationally, conceive of the Hebrew prophets as having had in *flashes* precognition of events still to come. This would be in flashes only." (P. 86.)

This is not the occasion for a review of psychic investigation, though it may be said that all of MacDonald's assertions have been challenged. But the very suggestion of reducing the Hebrew prophet to a crystal-ball gazer, who is illumined by sporadic psychic flashes, is preposterous. No flashing automatism could reveal to Isaiah the intricate details of his fifty-third chapter, which Luther describes as a clearer record than that of the evangelists. No psychic process could make Abraham rejoice to see the day of Christ or give David

the provision of the crucifixion, death, and resurrection of our Savior. With all its emphasis on the new psychology, this theory of prophetic automatism catalogs itself as a flare-back to the days of coarse rationalism, when everything miraculous and supernatural was explained away as a manifestation of physical or psychical forces.

IV.

These investigations, which eliminate the theory of the extra-Biblical and merely naturalistic origin of prophecy, directly corroborate the fundamental Biblical attitude that the institution of prophecy is a unique and exclusive gift of God. It is a basic truth of Scripture that "prophecy came not in the old time by the will of man" (2 Pet. 1, 21); and any theory which eliminates the direct will of God in bestowing the revelations of prophecy stands condemned by the clear utterance of Scripture. Prophetic revelation, then, is not a natural process, but the conscious and deliberate bestowal of divine love. It is furthermore a commonplace of the Scriptures that God spoke to His chosen people Israel through the prophets in a particular manifestation of His love. The preeminence of Israel, according to God's own Word in Amos (2, 11, 12), is among other blessings this, that God "raised up of your sons for prophets." When God "at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past," He addressed Himself "unto the fathers by the prophets," Heb. 1, 1. It is furthermore evident that every specific, spiritual prophet to God's people mentioned in the Old Testament is of the chosen race. Even those who address foreign nations and raise their voices against Gentile atrocities are Israelites. It is true of course that God sent dreams to an Egyptian (Gen. 41, 1), a Midianite (Judg. 7, 13), a Babylonian (Dan. 2, 1), a Roman (Matt. 27, 19), but these exceptional cases are not instances of prophecy. It is true also that Balaam was employed to utter a glorious Messianic prediction; but this does not make him a prophet any more than numerous other Biblical figures to whom God appeared and who were granted a glimpse of the future can be called prophets. As we reexamine the Scriptural records, the conviction forces itself upon us with increased emphasis that the Biblical statements regard Hebrew prophecy as a unique institution among God's people of the Old Testament, granted by His abundant mercy for the revelation of His will. And when this Scriptural truth is found to be corroborated by the demonstrable fact that there are no traces of prophecy, in the Biblical sense, in any other nation, and that there is no naturalistic explanation for this function, the Christian will cherish his Bible and the prophetic statements of its sacred pages as a unique and priceless offering of divine love, which culminates in the prophecy of that highest love, the prophesied and fulfilled self-sacrifice of God's only Son as the world's Redeemer from sin.

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