**THE EXPOSITION OF HOLY SCRIPTURE BY ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

**DEUTERONOMY-004. PROPHETS AND THE PROPHET by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"9.* *When thou art come into the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee, thou shalt not learn to do after the abominations of those nations. 10. There shall not be found among you any one that maketh his son or his daughter to pass through the fire, or that useth divination, or an observer of times, or an enchanter, or a witch, 11. Or a charmer, or a consulter with familiar spirits, or a wizard, or a necromancer. 12. For all that do these things are an abomination unto the Lord: and because of these abominations the Lord thy God doth drive them out from before thee. 13. Thou shalt be perfect with the Lord thy God. 14. For these nations, which thou shalt possess, hearkened unto observers of times, and unto diviners: but as for thee, the Lord thy God hath not suffered thee so to do. 15. The Lord thy God will raise up unto thee a Prophet from the midst of thee, of thy brethren, like unto me; unto Him ye shall hearken; 16. According to all that thou desiredst of the Lord thy God in Horeb in the day of the assembly, saying, Let me not hear again the voice of the Lord my God, neither let me see this great fire any more, that I die not. 17. And the Lord said unto me, They have well spoken that which they have spoken. 18. I will raise them up a Prophet from among their brethren, like unto thee, and will put My words in His mouth; and He shall speak unto them all that I shall command Him. 19. And it shall come to pass that whosoever will not hearken unto My words which He shall speak in My name, I will require it of him. 20. But the prophet, which shall presume to speak a word in My name, which I have not commanded him to speak, or that shall speak in the name of other gods, even that prophet shall die. 21. And if thou say in thine heart, How shall we know the word which the Lord hath not spoken? 22. When a prophet speaketh in the name of the Lord, if the thing follow not, nor come to pass, that is the thing which the Lord hath not spoken, but the prophet hath spoken it presumptuously: thou shalt not be afraid of him."*

*Deuteronomy 18:9-22*

It is evident from the connection in which the promise of a prophet like unto Moses is here introduced that it does not refer to Jesus only; for it is presented as Israel's continuous defence against the temptation of seeking knowledge of the divine will by the illegitimate methods of divination, soothsaying, necromancy, and the like, which were rampant among the inhabitants of the land. A distant hope of a prophet in the far-off future could afford no motive to shun these superstitions. We cannot understand this passage unless we recognise that the direct reference is to the institution of the prophetic order as the standing means of imparting the reliable knowledge of God's will, possessing which, Israel had no need to turn to them that peep and mutter and bring false oracles from imagined gods. But that primary reference of the words does not exclude, but rather demands, their ultimate reference to Him in whom the divine word is perfectly enshrined, and who is the bright, consummate flower of the prophetic order, which spake of Him, not only in its individual predictions, but by its very existence.

A glance must be given to the exhaustive list of pretenders to knowledge of the future or to power of shaping it magically, which occurs in verses 10, 11, and suggests a terrible picture of the burdens of superstition which weighed on men in these days of ignorance, as the like burdens do still, wherever Jesus is not known as the one Revealer of God, and the sole Lord of all things. Of the eight terms employed, the first three refer to different means of reading the future, the next two to different means of influencing events, and the last three to different ways of consulting the dead. The first of these eight properly refers to drawing lots, but includes other methods; the second is an obscure word, which is supposed by some to mean a murmurer, and may refer rather to the low mutterings of the soothsayer than to the method of his working; the third is probably a general expression for an interpreter of omens, especially of those given by the play of liquid in a cup, such as Joseph divined by.

Two names for magicians follow, of which the former seems to mean one who worked with charms such as African or American Indian medicine men use, and the latter, one who binds by incantations, or one who ties magic knots, which are supposed to have the power of hindering the designs of the person against whom they are directed. The word employed means binding, and maybe used either literally or metaphorically. The malicious tying of knots in order to work harm is not dead yet in some backward corners of Britain. Then follow three names for traffickers with spirits,--those who raise ghosts as did the witch of Endor, those who have a familiar spirit, and those who in any way consult the dead. It is a grim catalogue, bearing witness to the deep-rooted longing in men to peer into the darkness ahead, and to get some knowledge of the purposes of the awful unseen Power who rules there. The longing is here recognised as legitimate, while the methods are branded as bad, and Israel is warned from them, by being pointed to the merciful divine institution which meets the longing.

It is clear, from this glance at the context, that the prophet promised to Israel must mean the order, not the individual; and it is interesting to note, first, the relation in which that order is presented as standing towards all that rabble of diviners and sorcerers, with their rubbish of charms and muttered spells. It sweeps them off the field, because it is truly what they pretend to be. God knows men's longings, and God will meet them so far as meeting them is for men's good. But the characteristics of the prophet are set in strong contrast to those of the diviners and magicians, and lift the order high above all the filth and folly of these others. First, the prophet is raised up by God; the individual holder of the office has his call and does not prophesy out of his own heart. The man who takes this office on himself without such a call is ipso facto branded as a false prophet. Then he is from the midst of thee, of thy brethren,--springing from the people, not an alien, like so many of these wandering soothsayers, but with the national life throbbing in his veins, and himself participant of the thoughts and emotions of his brethren. Then he is to be like unto Moses,--not in all points, but in his receiving direct communications from God, and in his authority as God's messenger. The crowning characteristic, I will put My words into his mouth, and he shall speak unto them all that I shall command him, invests his words with divine authority, calls for obedience to them as the words of God Himself, widens out his sphere far beyond that of merely foretelling, brings in the moral and religious element which had no place in the oracles of the soothsayer, and opens up the prospect of a continuous progressive revelation throughout the ages (all that I shall command him). We mutilate the grand idea of the prophet in Israel if we think of his work as mainly prediction, and we mutilate it no less if we exclude prediction from it. We mutilate it still more fatally if we try to account for it on naturalistic principles, and fail to see in the prophet a man directly conscious of a divine call, or to hear in his words the solemn accents of the voice of God.

The loftiness and the limitations of the goodly fellowship of the prophets alike point onwards to Jesus Christ. In Him, and in Him alone, the idea of the prophet is fully realised. The imperfect embodiments of it in the past were prophecies as well as prophets. The fact that God has spoken unto the fathers by the prophets, leads us to expect that He will speak to us in a Son, and that not by fragments of His mighty voice, but in one full, eternal, all-embracing and all-sufficient Word. Every divine idea, which has been imperfectly manifested in fragmentary and sinful men and in the material creation, is completely incarnated in Him. He is the King to whom the sins and the saintlinesses of Israel's kings alike pointed. He is the Priest, whom Aaron and his sons foreshadowed, who perfectly exercises the sympathy which they could only feel partially, because they were compassed with infirmity and self-regard, and who offers the true sacrifice of efficacy higher than the blood of bulls and goats. He is the Prophet, who makes all other means of knowing the divine will unnecessary, hearing whom we hear the very voice of God speaking in His gentle words of love, in His authoritative words of command, in His illuminating words of wisdom, and speaking yet more loudly and heart-touchingly in the eloquence of deeds no less than divine; who is not ashamed to call us brethren, and is bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh; who is like, but greater than, the great lawgiver of Israel, being the Son and Lord of the house in which Moses was but a servant. To Him give all the prophets witness, and the greatest of them was honoured when, with Moses, Elijah stood on the Mount of Transfiguration, subordinate and attesting, and then faded away when the voice proclaimed, This is My beloved Son, hear Him,--and they saw no one save Jesus only.