

## The Disobedient Prophet.

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**'And, behold, there came a man of God out of Judah by the word of the Lord unto Bethel : . . . Now there dwelt an old prophet in Bethel.'**—1 Kings xiii. 1, 11.

THE strange, old-world story recounted here by the ancient historian contains much that we can easily understand along with not a little that is not quite so clear. What is plain is also inspiring : it shows us the difficult duty of denouncing the idolatry of the king bravely done and the hard temptation of accepting the royal favours successfully met. The part that is not so plain has also its teaching for us : it reminds us that temptation lieth ever in wait in unsuspected places, and that disobedience is the fruitful parent of grievous loss and suffering.

The difficulties which attend our understanding of this curious story connect themselves chiefly with the old prophet who lived in Bethel, the prophet who tempted his fellow to ruin and death. He seems to be both a false prophet and a true prophet ; for he told a lie to the undoing of the other, while he was also inspired of God to utter a true prediction about the man he had deceived. He deliberately deceived his victim, and yet he esteemed him so highly that he desired to be buried in the same grave with him. If we can find some solution of this complex, contradictory character, we may find some solution of the whole episode and understand the better its lessons. Josephus (Bk. VIII. ch. ix.) calls him 'a certain wicked man . . . who was a false prophet, whom Jeroboam had in great esteem, but was deceived by him and his flattering words,' and adds—'he was afraid that this stranger and prophet should be in better esteem with the king than himself, and obtain greater honour from him.' I think this description is misleading in that it calls the old prophet of Bethel 'false,' as if he was not, and never had been, anything but 'false.' I take him rather to have been one of the class of 'true' prophets but degenerate, fallen from the highest ideals and purposes of his sacred calling ; a man who had allowed worldly interests, it may be the thought of personal safety or the desire to be on the popular side, to rule his conduct ; a man who knew truth and goodness, sometimes appreciating them when

he saw them in exercise, sometimes hating them when he remembered his own vanished vision, his own broken ideals. We must not think of the prophets merely as men moved from time to time by the Spirit of God to utter predictions, to say things that they themselves perhaps understood not. They were preachers, preachers to the men of their own age and generation ; they could be mistaken, as the preachers of to-day are often mistaken, uttering words and opinions of their own. The greatest authority on Hebrew prophecy, A. B. Davidson, came to the conclusion that 'a hard-and-fast line of demarcation between true and false prophecy can hardly be drawn. . . . When the spirit that animated the prophet pursued predominately national ends, he was a false prophet ; when the ends pursued were religious and ethical, the prophet was true.' And if we make the wide term 'national ends' include the narrower 'personal ends'—the having selfish, crooked, or temporal purposes in view—we can understand how easily a certain type of prophet might belie his claim to be 'true' and slide into the ranks of the 'false.'

The old prophet of Bethel, we take it then, was 'true' enough so far as his original call to the prophetic office was concerned, but debased and unworthy. That he was not what he ought to have been—a minister of God for righteousness—is suggested to us by the fact that another prophet was called from a distance to denounce the idolatry that existed in his own city : it is indeed proved to us not only by the fact that he continued to live beside that idolatrous worship, but by the fact that he allowed his sons to attend the unlawful and heathenish service. He winked at, if he did not actually share in, the worship of the Golden Calf. Then, either from wanton mischief to see how much this stranger prophet would stand in the way of temptation, or from the actual desire to break the integrity of one who had shown a spirit so much more bold and sincere than his own and thus reduce him nearer his own sunken level, he uttered the deliberate lie that deceived the visitor. But even while he triumphed in his deceit, he well knew what he had done, what ruin

he had brought on a hitherto faithful prophet; and in the spirit of true prophecy he declared the fate of his victim. Finally, touched by feelings of humanity, he saw to the burial of the stranger, and recognizing even in his unworthy soul that truth will triumph and that righteousness alone is

abiding, he, with superstitious veneration, desired to be buried in the same grave, knowing that thereby his bones would escape being burned in the coming day when the stranger's prophecy against the idolatrous altars would receive its fulfilment (cf. 2 K. 23<sup>16-18</sup>).

## The Study of the History of Religions in the German Universities.

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ABOUT eighteen months ago<sup>1</sup> an account was given in these pages of the first official recognition accorded to the History of Religions by the University authorities of Germany. When it became necessary to fill the post left vacant by the death of the late Professor Pfeleiderer, Dr. Lehmann of Copenhagen was invited to become his successor. At the same time, the invitation was extended upon the distinct understanding that the occupant of this notable chair was no longer to lecture upon the technical apparatus of Christian Apologetics, but was to devote himself to a systematic exposition of the History of Religions. It was only at this very recent date that a study in the national Universities of the countries surrounding Germany which had already made conspicuous and confident progress was, in Berlin, formally endorsed and introduced.

Professor Lehmann during the past two years has admirably fulfilled his commission. On the whole, the results have been satisfactory. Prior to his coming, teachers in several of the Universities had delivered occasional courses of lectures upon this theme: but their success, in the absence of official support, had not been altogether encouraging. Even yet, fortitude and persistency are virtues which are imperatively demanded. The lack of interest in this subject which, during so long a period, has characterized the educational leaders of Germany, accounts for that indifference and inertia which can only gradually be outgrown and discarded.

A new academic era, however, has plainly been

ushered in. The University authorities of Germany, now thoroughly awake, are about to lend their invaluable aid to the promotion of a very timely enterprise. They have just taken a step which one may well hasten to chronicle. Their action cannot too warmly be commended: for not only does it mark a stage in a decided and bold advance, but the procedure adopted is in many respects even more noteworthy than the scheme which Berlin has already carried into effect.

A short time ago the Government of Saxony decided to found, at its splendid University in Leipsic, a chair allotted to the study of the History of Religions. In October that chair was formally inaugurated. Its origin, however, is quite different from that of its predecessor in Berlin. There, Dr. Lehmann occupies a post the range of whose teaching has merely been enlarged; the professor in Leipsic, on the other hand, has been invited to supervise an entirely new foundation. The subject with which this additional chair is to deal has never hitherto been included in the authorized curriculum: yet it is now deemed to be of sufficient importance to warrant the large and permanent expenditure which its creation must involve.

It may fairly be contended, therefore, that Leipsic has surpassed Berlin in the emphasis with which it has declared that, in Germany, the History of Religions is bound in future to occupy a prominent place in the study of Theology. Berlin, to be sure, was the first of the German Universities to recognize the growing prominence of this discipline; nevertheless, Leipsic will always enjoy the distinction that, having discerned aright the serious

<sup>1</sup> Cp. THE EXPOSITORY TIMES, February 1911, pp. 198-201.