

**TWO SERMONS ON THE
INTERPRETATION OF
PROPHECY, PREACHED IN THE
CHAPEL OF RUGBY SCHOOL**

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Two Sermons on the Interpretation of Prophecy, Preached in the Chapel of Rugby School by
Thomas Arnold

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THOMAS ARNOLD

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1872

TWO SERMONS

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ON THE

INTERPRETATION OF PROPHECY,

PREACHED IN THE

CHAPEL OF RUGBY SCHOOL.

WITH NOTES.

UNIV. OF
CALIFORNIA

BY

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PREFACE.

THE great difficulty of the subject of Scripture Prophecy may be shortly stated. We find throughout the New Testament references made to various passages in the Old Testament, which are alleged as prophetic of Christ, or of some particulars of the Christian dispensation. Now if we turn to the context of these passages, and so endeavour to discover their meaning, according to the only sound principles of interpretation, it will often appear that they do not relate to the Messiah or to Christian times, but are either the expression of religious affections generally, such as submission, hope, love, &c. or else refer to some particular circumstances in the life and condition of the writer, or of the Jewish nation, and do not at all show that any thing more remote, or any events of a more universal and spiritual character, were designed to be prophesied.

*Collin. Formis
& Redman.*

b

955658

For instance, in the account of our Lord's temptation, he is represented as allowing the application of Psalm xci. 11, 12. to himself, as a prophecy of God's miraculous care of the Messiah. Whereas, on referring to the whole Psalm, it appears to be a devout expression of the Psalmist's sense of the happiness of those who serve and love God; a sense which is expressed very strongly after the oriental manner in descriptions at once figurative and hyperbolical, although when divested of this colouring their meaning is perfectly discernible.

Again, the fifty-third chapter of Isaiah is well known as the passage which Philip interpreted to the Ethiopian eunuch as a Christian prophecy, and which led to the eunuch's conversion. Yet, when taken along with the context, the passage, although undoubtedly difficult, seems to refer to events more closely connected with the return of the Jews from the Captivity, as that with its accompanying blessings appears to be the subject of the writer's prophecy.

[Now, first, if we take these and many other similar passages to be Christian prophecies, solely on the authority of the writers of the

New Testament; it is manifest not only that we cannot urge them to those who deny that authority, but that our own use and application of the prophecies must be limited to those citations which we find already applied for us in the New^{or Old} Testament. For unless we understand the principle on which they are applied, we can understand no more of the Old Testament than is explained in the Christian Scriptures, and if we attempt at random to explain other passages in the same way, that way appearing to be at variance with the ordinary rules of interpretation, and having been accepted by us in certain particular cases solely on the authority of those who have adopted it, a door will be instantly opened to the wildest fanaticism, and no man will have any right to reproach the comments of the Jewish Rabbies with any peculiar degree of extravagance.

p. 27.
 Luke →
 Paph. p. 46.

Or secondly, if we at once cut the knot, and say that these passages have not really the meaning which the writers of the New Testament attach to them, that they are either referred to as affording some remarkable coincidence with the circumstances of the Christian times, or when quoted as expressly

[2.

speaking of those times, are so quoted merely in compliance with a fanciful system of Scripture interpretation then prevalent amongst the Jews; we shall then, to say nothing of the pain of so judging of the writers of the New Testament, destroy a great part of our interest in the Old; we shall do away with the harmony and continuity of God's several dispensations, and deprive Christianity of a testimony which Christ himself no less than his Apostles delighted in appealing to, as one of the most satisfactory proofs of its divine origin.

Now if, on the one hand, the applications of the Old Testament made by the writers of the New can be maintained as just and true; and, on the other hand, a principle can be discovered which explains them and warrants them; which takes them out of the range of capricious and arbitrary quotation, and enables us to read the Old Testament in the same spirit as the Apostles read it, and to apply safely and surely to Christ and Christian things passages which are not noticed in their writings; then it will be probable that the principle so answering all the conditions required is the true key to the difficulty, and

Similarly p. 57 - Instead of establishing inductively the double basis -
he deduces it as a necessary consequence from the a priori idea
of Prophecy. - \therefore implies it on all the Prophecies. -

we shall need no further evidence to convince
us that it is so.

And if such a principle presents itself to
us in the first place as the result of an a ^{Meaning as}
priori inquiry into the nature of Prophecy, ^{previous induc-}
and then when applied practically to the case ^{tion inquiry...}
before us be found to solve its difficulties; ^{that our Author}
then the double proof thus afforded would ^{appear to have}
seem to be as complete as we can possibly ^{afforded the prin-}
require, and we cannot doubt that, reason ^{ciple a priori}
and experience at once concurring in the ^[Hart. p. 19.]
same conclusion, that conclusion may com-
mand our assent as certainly true.

The principle here alluded to has been set
forth in the two Sermons now presented to
the reader. I have considered it during a
period of many years; and it has continually
appeared to me to be more and more true,
and has enabled me to read the prophetic
parts of the Old Testament with a feeling
that I could really understand them. I have
thought that it might prove satisfactory to
other minds also; or at any rate that it
might have so much of truth in it, as to
suggest the whole truth to others, however
it might itself fall short of it. And if it be
wholly fanciful and erroneous, still it appeared

incapable of weakening or disturbing the faith of any one, or of adding to the existing difficulties of the question. The publication of these Sermons therefore cannot, I would hope, do harm, even if it fails of doing good. Nay, I would even hope that it may do good, although the view contained in the Sermons should be ever so erroneous. I am quite unable to do justice to the subject of Prophecy; but I should be thankful if my errors, being at any rate harmless, shall provoke attention to the question, and excite some one to write upon it who may discharge the task more worthily. For that it does actually need to be set in a clearer light, and that the general understanding of the prophetic Scriptures is very imperfect, must, I suppose, be evident to every one.

The general principle of interpretation here maintained, that of an uniform historical or lower, and also of a spiritual or higher, sense, has been adopted by commentators in all ages of the Church. And I hope also that the more detailed points which I have tried to make out are not new, although I am not aware of having been led to them by any thing but a study and comparison of the