

THE PROPHET AND HIS PROBLEMS

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The prophet and his problems by J. M. Powis Smith

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J. M. POWIS SMITH

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HIS PROBLEMS**

1894

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BY

J. M. POWIS SMITH, PH.D.

ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR OF OLD TESTAMENT LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE
IN THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

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TO MY WIFE
CATHERINE McKLVEEN SMITH

"The heart of her husband trusteth in her"

P R E F A C E

THE Hebrew prophet has received a new interpretation at the hands of modern scholarship. Prior to its advent he was classified as belonging to an altogether unique species. He was neither of earth, nor of heaven, but had more or less tangible connections with both. He was a thing to be admired—yea, wondered at, but not to be understood. His mental and spiritual processes defied all analysis. He was an unfathomable mystery.

To-day the prophet is, in one sense, as much a mystery as ever; and he will remain so. Genius always eludes definition and exposition; and religious genius is no exception to the rule. But we have come to see that, after all, the prophet was a man among men. He was,

in essence, not differently constituted from other men. Nor was he vouchsafed a monopoly of the facilities for the discovery of truth and of God. This brings him nearer to us, and makes his experiences of primary interest for us, because they are seen to be such as, in kind at least, are common to men. They thus furnish illumination and direction to the modern man in his effort to know God more fully and to do his will more perfectly.

No section of the Old Testament, and but little of the New, comes so close to the needs of our day as does the prophetic literature. Reading it in the light of the conditions that produced it, we cannot but feel constantly the essential oneness of the prophet's problems with our own. They were struggling, and at times in the face of what seemed insuperable difficulties, to justify the ways of God to men. As time went on, these difficulties multiplied, rather than dimin-

ished. Old systems of thought and convictions of duty had to be abandoned, and new ones formulated in the heat of the conflict. Religion had to readjust itself from time to time to a new thought environment. To this task of reinterpreting the always changing phenomena of the world-life in terms of religion the prophet brought all his powers. Its successful achievement was the imperative need, if God was to be kept supreme in the thought of men. The perpetuation of Hebrew religious faith and its continued development in Christianity are proof of the prophet's success.

To a generation that sees many of the old strongholds of religion crumbling, and finds it necessary to seek surer foundations for new structures, the story of the Hebrew prophets should always prove interesting and helpful. They have much to teach those who are called upon to build after them. Their example of unblinking recognition of the facts of life