

INTRODUCTION TO THE PROPHETICAL HISTORIES OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

The *thorah*, or five books of Moses, which contains an account of the founding of the Old Testament kingdom of God, and the laws which were given through Moses, is followed in the Hebrew canon by the writings of the “earlier prophets,” נביאים ראשונים, *prophetae priores*. This collective name is given to the four historical books of *Joshua*, *Judges*, *Samuel*, and *Kings*, which trace, in the light of divine revelations, and of the gradual unfolding of the plan of salvation, the historical development of this kingdom of God from the death of Moses, the mediator of the old covenant, or from the entrance of the people of Israel into the land of Canaan promised to their fathers, till the dissolution of the kingdom of Judah, and the Babylonian captivity; the whole embracing a period of nearly nine hundred years. The names given to these books are taken from the men whom the God-king of Israel called and appointed at different times as the leaders and rulers of His people and kingdom, and indicate, very suitably on the whole, the historical periods to which the books refer.

The book of *Joshua* describes the introduction of the people of Israel into the promised land of Canaan, through the conquest effected by Joshua, and the division of the land among the tribes of Israel. As Joshua only completed what Moses had commenced but had not been permitted to carry out, on account of his sin at the water of strife (Num. 20:12); and as he had not only been called by the Lord, and consecrated by the laying on of the hands of Moses, to accomplish this work, but had also been favoured with direct revelations from God, and with His miraculous help in the execution of it; the book which is named after him, and contains the account of what he did in the power of the Lord, is more closely related to the Pentateuch, both in its form and contents, than any other book of the Old Testament. In this respect, therefore, it might be regarded as an appendix, although it was never actually joined to it so as to form part of the same work, but was from the very first a separate writing, and simply stood in the same dependent relation to the writings of Moses, as that in which Joshua stood to Moses himself, of whom he was both the servant and successor.

The book of *Judges* embraces the period of 350 years, from the death of Joshua to the rise of Samuel as a prophet of the Lord; that is to say, the time appointed to the people of Israel to establish themselves in the complete and sole possession of the land that had been given them for an inheritance, by fighting against the Canaanites who remained in the land and exterminating them, and, when settled in this inheritance as the congregation of the Lord, to set up the

covenant concluded with God at Sinai, and to maintain and build up the kingdom of God according to the principles and ordinances, the laws and rights, prescribed by Moses in the law. The Lord had promised His help to the covenant nation in carrying on the conflict with the remaining Canaanites, on condition that they adhered with fidelity to His covenant, and willingly obeyed His commandments. It was but very imperfectly, however, that the tribes of Israel observed these conditions, which had been earnestly impressed upon their hearts, not only by Moses, but also by Joshua before his death. They soon grew weary of the task of fighting against the Canaanites and destroying them, and contented themselves with making them merely tributary; in fact, they even began to form friendships with them, and worship their gods. As a punishment for this, the Lord gave them over to their enemies, so that they were repeatedly oppressed and deeply humiliated by the Canaanites, and the nations that were living round about Canaan. But whenever they repented and turned again in their distress to the Lord their God, He raised up helpers and deliverers for them in the persons of the judges, whom He filled with the power of His Spirit, so that they smote the enemy, and delivered both the people and the land from their oppression. But inasmuch as in every instance the judge was no sooner dead than the people fell into idolatry again, they sank deeper and deeper into bondage to the heathen, the theocratic constitution fell more and more into decay, and the life of the nation as a religious community was rapidly coming to an end. This constant alternation, of apostasy from the Lord to the Canaanitish Baals and Astartes and the consequent punishment by deliverance into the power of their enemies on the one hand, and of temporary return to the Lord and deliverance by the judges out of their bondage on the other, which characterizes the post-Mosaic period of the Israelitish history, is clearly set forth in the book of Judges, and placed distinctly before the eye in separate pictures of the various oppressions and deliverances of Israel, each one being complete in itself, and the whole arranged in chronological order. Whilst the book of Joshua shows how the Lord fulfilled His promise to Israel with a mighty arm, and led His people into the land promised to the fathers, the book of Judges shows how Israel continually broke the covenant of its God in the land which He had given it for an inheritance, and thus fell into bondage to its foes, out of which the judges were not able to secure it a permanent deliverance; so that the Lord was obliged to create a new thing in Israel, in order to carry out His purpose of salvation, and to found and erect His kingdom in Canaan, through the medium of the children of Israel. This new thing consisted in the institution of prophecy as promised by Moses, or rather in the introduction of it into the political and national life, as a spiritual power by which it was henceforth to be pervaded, guided, and controlled; as neither the judges, nor the priests as custodiers of the sanctuary, were able to uphold the authority of the law of God in the nation, or turn the idolatrous nation to the

Lord. It is true we meet with certain prophets as early as the times of the judges; but the true founder of the Old Testament prophecy (*prophetenthums*, prophethood) was Samuel, with whom the prophets first began their continuous labours, and the prophetic gift was developed into a power which exerted an influence, as strong as it was salutary, upon the future development of the Israelitish state.

The books of *Samuel* contain the history of Israel from the appearance of Samuel as a prophet to the end of the reign of David, and include the renewal of the theocracy by the labours of Samuel, and the establishment of the earthly monarchy by Saul and David. At the close of the period of the judges, when the ark of the covenant had fallen into the hands of the Philistines, and the removal of this visible symbol and substratum of the presence of God from the tabernacle had caused the central sanctuary of the congregation to lose all its significance as the place where God manifested himself, and when the judgments of God had even fallen upon the members of the high-priesthood itself, in the death of Eli and his worthless sons, when the word of Jehovah was dear, and there was little prophecy to be found (1Sa. 3: 1), — the Lord raised up Samuel, the son of the pious Hannah, who had been asked for of the Lord and consecrated to His service from his mother's womb, to be His prophet, and appeared to him continually at Shiloh; so that all Israel acknowledge him as the prophet appointed by the Lord, and through his prophetic labours was converted from dead idols to serve the living God. In consequence of this conversion, the Lord gave to the Israelites, in answer to Samuel's prayer, a complete and wondrous victory over the Philistines, by which they were delivered from the heavy oppression they had endured for forty years at the hands of these foes. From that time forward Samuel judged all Israel. But when he had grown old, and his sons, who had been appointed by him as judges, failed to walk in his steps, the people desired a king to judge them, to go before them, and to conduct their wars. In accordance with the command of God, Samuel chose Saul the Benjamite as king, and then laid down his own office as judge. He continued, however, to the very end of his life to labour as a prophet, in and through the schools of the prophets, which he had called into existence for the strengthening and confirmation of Israel in its fidelity to the Lord; and not only announced to King Saul his rejection by God, on account of his frequent resistance to the divine command, as made known to him by the prophet, but anointed David to be his successor as king over Israel. He died at the close of the reign of Saul, and did not live to see the accession and reign of David, with which the second book of Samuel is occupied. The reason why the name of Samuel is given to both these books, which form both in style and contents, an indivisible whole, is in all probability therefore, that Samuel not only inaugurated the monarchy in Israel by anointing Saul and David, but

exerted so decided an influence upon the spirit of the government of both these kings, through his prophetic labours, that even the latter may be regarded in a certain sense as the continuation of that reformation of the Israelitish state which the prophet himself began. It was in David that the true king of the kingdom of God under the Old Testament arose, — a mighty warrior in conflict with the enemies of Israel, and yet at the same time a pious servant of the Lord, — a man of true humility and faithful obedience to the word and commandment of God, who not only raised the state of a lofty height of earthly power and glory, through the strength and justice of his rule, but who also built up the kingdom of God, by reviving and organizing the public worship of God, and by stimulating and fostering the true fear of God, through the cultivation of sacred song. When God had given him rest from all his enemies round about, he wished to build a temple to the Lord. But God did not grant him this desire of his heart: He gave him a promise, however, instead, viz., that He would build him a house, and establish the throne of his kingdom for ever; and that He would raise up his seed after him, who would build a house to the name of the Lord (2Sa. 7). This promise formed not only the culminating point in the life and reign of David, but the indestructible basis for the further development of the Israelitish state and kingdom, and was not only a sure pledge of the continuance of the Davidic monarchy, but a firm anchor of hope for the covenant nation in all time to come.

Lastly, the books of *Kings* carry on the history of the Old Testament kingdom of God through a period of 450 years, viz., from the accession of Solomon to the Babylonian captivity, and furnish the historical proof that the promise given by the Lord to His servant David was stedfastly fulfilled. Notwithstanding the attempt of Adonijah to usurp the throne, He preserved the whole of the kingdom of David to his son Solomon, who had been chosen as his successor, and at the very commencement of his reign renewed His promise to him, so that Solomon was able to carry out the work of building the temple; and under his wise and peaceful government in Judah and Israel every one could sit in safety under his own vine and fig-tree. But when Solomon allowed himself to be drawn away by his foreign wives to turn from the Lord and worship idols, the Lord chastened him with the rod of men, and with the stripes of the children of men; but His mercy did not depart away from him, as He had promised to David (2Sa. 7:14, 15). After Solomon's death, the ten tribes, it is true, revolted from the house of David, and founded a kingdom of their own under Jeroboam; but one tribe (Judah along with Benjamin) remained with his son Rehoboam, and along with this tribe the capital, Jerusalem, and the temple. During the whole time that this one brother-nation was divided into two distinct kingdoms, which were frequently engaged in hostility with one another, the Lord preserved the throne to the seed of David; and the kingdom of Judah survived

the kingdom of the ten tribes of Israel 134 years, having as firm a political foundation in the unbroken succession of the royal family of David, as it had a strong spiritual foundation in the capital Jerusalem, with the temple which had been sanctified by the Lord as the dwelling-place of His name. In the kingdom of the ten tribes, on the other hand, Jeroboam introduced the germ of what eventually led to its destruction, by establishing as the state religion the unlawful worship of the golden calves. The destruction of his house was at once foretold to him on account of this sin (1Ki. 14: 7); and this threat was carried out in the person of his son (1Ki. 15:28ff.). As the kings of Israel who followed did not desist from this sin of Jeroboam, but, on the contrary, the dynasty of the house of Omri attempted to make the worship of Baal the leading religion of the kingdom, and the king and people gave no heed to the voice of the prophets, and did not return with sincerity of heart to the Lord, He gave up the sinful kingdom and people to the consequences of their sins, so that one dynasty overthrew another; and after the lapse of 250 years, the kingdom, which was already shattered by the frequently recurring civil wars, fell a prey to the Assyrians, by whom the whole land was conquered, and its inhabitants were led into captivity. The kingdom of Judah was also hard pressed by this powerful empire, and brought to the very verge of destruction; but in answer to the prayer of the pious king Hezekiah, it was delivered and preserved by the Lord for His own and His servant David's sake, until at length the godless king Manasseh filled up the measure of its sins, so that even the good king Josiah could only suspend the destruction for a certain time, but could not ward it off altogether. A short time after his death the judgment fell upon Judah and Jerusalem on account of the sins of Manasseh (2Ki. 23:26, 27; 24: 3), when King Nebuchadnezzar came from Babylon, conquered the land, and laid it waste; and having taken Jerusalem, led away Jehoiachim to Babylon, with a considerable portion of the people. And when even Zedekiah, who had been raised by him to the throne, rebelled against him, the Chaldeans returned and put an end to the kingdom of Judah, by destroying Jerusalem and burning the temple, Zechariah himself being deprived of his sight, and led away into captivity with a large number of prisoners. Yet even when Judah and its king were rejected and scattered among the heathen, the Lord did not leave His servant David without any light shining; but after Jehoiachim had been in prison for thirty-seven years, paying the penalty of his own and his father's sins, he was released from his imprisonment by Evil-merodach the king of Babylon, and his seat was placed above the seats of the kings who were with him in Babylon (2Ki. 25:27-30). This joyful turn in the destinies of Jehoiachim, with which the books of Kings are brought to a close, throws the first gleam into the dark night of the captivity of that better future which was to dawn upon the seed of David, and through it upon the people of Israel when they should be delivered out of Babylon.

These four historical writings have been very justly called *prophetical books of history*: not, however, because they all, but more especially the books of Samuel and the Kings, give very full accounts of the labours of the prophets in Israel; nor merely because, according to the early Jewish tradition, they were written by prophets; but rather because they describe the history of the Old Testament covenant nation and kingdom of God in the light of the divine plan of salvation, setting forth the divine revelation, as it was accomplished in the historical development of Israel, or showing how the Almighty God and Lord of the whole earth continued as King of Israel uninterruptedly to fulfil the covenant of grace which He had concluded with the fathers and had set up at Sinai, and built up His kingdom, by leading the people whom He had chosen as His own possession, notwithstanding all the opposition of their sinful nature, further and further onwards towards the goal of their divine calling, and thus preparing the way for the salvation of the whole world. These books, therefore, do not contain a general history of the natural development of the Israelitish nation from a political point of view, but trace the history of the people of God, or Israel, in its theocratic development as a covenant nation, and as the channel of that salvation which was to be manifested to all nations in the fulness of time. Their authors, therefore, by virtue of prophetic illumination, have simply selected and described such events and circumstances from among the rich and plentiful variety contained in the accounts handed down by tradition, whether relating to families, tribes, or the nation as a whole, as were of importance to the history of the kingdom of God; that is to say, in addition to the divine revelations in word and deed, the wonders wrought by God, and the prophetic declarations of His counsel and will, they have recorded chiefly such points in the life and conduct of the nation and its more prominent members as affected advantageously or otherwise the development of the divine kingdom in Israel. Whatever had no inward connection with this higher aim and peculiar calling of Israel, was, as a rule, passed over altogether, or, at all events, was only touched upon and mentioned so far as it served to exhibit the attitude of the nation generally, or of its rulers and leaders, towards the Lord and His kingdom. This will help to explain not only the apparent inequality in the treatment of the history, or the fact that here and there we have long periods merely referred to in a few general remarks, whereas, on the other hand, the adventures and acts of particular individuals are depicted with biographical minuteness, but also another distinctive peculiarity, viz., that the natural causes of the events which occurred, and the subjective motives which determined the conduct of historical personages, are for the most part left unnoticed, or only briefly and cursorily alluded to, whilst the divine interpositions and influence are constantly brought into prominence, and, so far as they were manifested in an extraordinary manner, are carefully and circumstantially described.

In all these respects the prophetic histories are so intimately connected with the historical narrative in the books of Moses, that they may be regarded as a simple continuation of those books. This not only applies to the book of Joshua, but to the other prophetic histories also. Just as the book of Joshua is linked on to the death of Moses, so the book of Judges is linked on to the death of Joshua; whilst the books of Kings commence with the termination of the reign of David, the point to which the history of David is brought in the books of Samuel. These books, again, are connected just as closely with the book of Judges; for, after giving an account of the high-priesthood of Eli, and the birth and youth of Samuel, which forms the introduction to the labours of Samuel, they describe the continuance and close of the subjugation of Israel by the Philistines, the commencement and prolongation of which are related in the last section of the book of Judges, although in this case the link of connection is somewhat hidden by the appendices to the book of Judges (Jud. 17-21), and by the introduction to the history of Samuel (1Sa. 1-3). This close connection between all the writings in question, which is still further strengthened by their evident agreement in the selection and treatment of the historical materials, does not arise, as some suppose, from the fact that they received a last finish from the editorial hand of some one man, by whom this harmony and the so-called theocratic pragmatism which is common to them all was stamped upon the history; but it arose from the very nature of the historical facts themselves, i.e., from the fact that the history of Israel was not the result of a purely natural development, but was the fruit and result of the divine training of the covenant nation. The prophetic character, by which these works are distinguished from the other sacred histories of the Israelites, consists in the fact that they do not trace the theocratic history from an individual point of view, but according to its actual course, and in harmony with the successive steps in the development of the divine counsels of salvation; and thus furnish their own proof that they were written by prophets, to whom the Spirit of the Lord had given a spiritual insight into the divine law of the kingdom.

With regard to the *origin* of the prophetic books of history, and the *date of their composition*, all that can be determined with certainty is, that they were all composed some time after the last event which they record, but were founded upon written contemporaneous accounts of the different events referred to. Although no sources are mentioned in the books of Joshua, of the Judges, and of Samuel, with the exception of the "book of Jasher" (Jos. 10:13, and 2Sa. 1:18), from which the poetical extracts contained in the passages have been taken, there can be no doubt that the historical materials even of these books have been obtained, so far as everything essential is concerned, either from public documents or private writings. In the books of Kings we meet for the first time with the original sources regularly cited at the close of each king's

reign; and, judging from the titles, “books of the Acts of Solomon” (1Ki. 11:41), and “book of the Chronicles (or ‘daily occurrences,’ i.e., contemporaneous history) of the Kings of Israel and Judah” (1Ki. 14:19, 29, etc.), they were in all probability fuller annals to which reference is made, as containing further accounts of the acts and undertakings of the several kings. We find a similar work cited in the books of the Chronicles under different titles, whilst certain prophetic works are referred to for the history of particular kings, such as words of Samuel the seer, Nathan the prophet, and Gad the seer (1Ch. 29:29); of Shemaiah the prophet, and Iddo the seer (2Ch. 12:15), and others; also the prophecies (vision) of Isaiah (2Ch. 32:32), and words of Jehu the prophet (2Ch. 20:34), both of which are expressly said to have been received into the book of the kings of Israel (or of Judah and Israel). It is obvious from these statements, not only that prophetic writings and collections of oracles were incorporated in the more comprehensive annals of the kingdom, but also that the prophets themselves were engaged in various ways in committing the history of Israel to writing. The foundation for this occupation had no doubt been laid in the companies or schools of the prophets, which had been called into existence by Samuel, and in which not only sacred music and sacred song were cultivated, but sacred literature also, more especially the history of the theocracy. Consequently, as *Oehler* supposes, in all probability the foundation was laid even in the *caenobium* at Ramah (1Sa. 19:19ff.) for that great historical work, which was composed by prophets during the following centuries and is frequently referred to in the books of Kings, and which certainly lay before the writer of the Chronicles, through possibly in a revised form. The task of writing down the history of the theocracy was very closely connected with a prophet’s vocation. Called as they were to be watchers (*zophim* or *mezappim*: vid., Micah 7: 4; Jer. 6:17; Eze. 3:17; 33: 7) of the theocracy of the Lord, it was their special duty to test and judge the ways of the nation and its rulers according to the standard of the law of God, and not only to work in every possible way for the recognition of the majesty and sole glory of Jehovah, to bear witness before both high and low against every instance of apostasy from Him, against every violation of His ordinances and rights, and to proclaim judgment upon all who hardened themselves against the word of God and salvation and deliverance to the penitent and desponding; but also to set forth the guidance of Israel in the light of the saving purpose of God, and the inviolable rule of divine retribution, — to pass sentence upon the past circumstances of the nation, particularly the life and conduct of its kings, according to the standard of the law, — and to exhibit in their fate the reality of the divine promises and threats; and through all this to hold up, in the past history of the fathers, a mirror for the warning and comfort of future generations. With all these facts before us, we are fully warranted in assuming, that the prophetic works of history were employed as sources even in the

composition of the books of Samuel. But this is not a probable supposition so far as the times of the judges are concerned, as we can find no certain traces of any organized prophetic labours by which the national life could be at all deeply influenced, notwithstanding the fact, that beside the prophetess Deborah (Jud. 4: 4), there is a prophet mentioned in Jud. 6: 7ff., and 1Sa. 2:27. But even if the author of our book of Judges could not avail himself of any prophetic writings, we must not on that account deny that he may have made use of other written statement and accounts, handed down by contemporaries of the events. In the book of Joshua it is almost universally admitted, that at all events the geographical portions have been taken from public documents. — For further remarks upon this subject, see the introductions to the different books.

The employment of written sources, from living auditors or eye-witnesses of the events, in all the prophetic books of history, is evident as a general fact from the contents of the books, from the abundance of genuine historical details which they contain although many of them extend over very long periods of time; from the exactness of the geographical *data* connected with the different accounts, and the many genealogical as well as chronological particulars; and, in fact, from the clearness and certainty of the descriptions given of circumstances and occurrences which are often very complicated in their character. But this is still more obvious from the style in which the different books are written, where the gradual development of the language, and the changes which occurred in the course of centuries, are unmistakably apparent. For whilst the books of Kings, which date from the time of the captivity, contain many words, forms, and phrases that indicate that corruption of the Hebrew through Aramaean idioms, which commenced with the invasions of Israel and Judah by the Assyrians and Chaldeans, there are no certain traces of the decline of the language to be found in the books of Samuel and Judges, but the style throughout is the pure style of the age of David and Solomon; whilst in the book of Joshua, as a whole, we still find the old forms of the Mosaic times, although the actual archaisms of the Pentateuch have already disappeared. This difference in the words employed in the different books cannot be satisfactorily explained from the simple fact, that the sources used, and from which extracts were made, were written in different ages. To quote but one example, since the fuller discussion of this point belongs to the introduction to the separate books, this is perfectly obvious from the use of the word פְּחֹרֶת, in connection with Solomon's governors, in 1Ki. 10:15; since the author of our books of Kings cannot possibly have taken this word from his original sources for the history of Solomon's reign, as it was not till the time of the Chaldean and Persian dominion that this foreign word was adopted into the Hebrew language.

The peculiarities in the language of the difference prophetic books of history do furnish decisive evidence, however, against the hypothesis propounded by *Spinoza*, and lately revived by *Stähelin* and *Bertheau*, viz., that “in the historical books, from Gen. 1 to 2Ki. 25, in the form and connection in which we possess them now, we have not several historical works which have been composed independently of one another, but rather a connected treatment of the history from the beginning of the world to the time of the captivity” (*Bertheau*), or “one work, which owes its present form to one man, or at any rate to one age” (*Stähelin*). The arguments adduced in support of this are all very weak. “The close connection in which these writings stand to one another, so that each book in succession is closely connected with the one before it, and presupposes all that the latter contains, and none goes back to an earlier period than that at which the previous book closes” (*Stähelin*), does prove indeed that they have not been written independently of one another; but it by no means proves that they belong to one author, or even to one age. Nor can we infer that they have been composed or finally revised by one man, from the fact, “that very often, in some one writing, as it has come down to us, we not only find two different styles, or a totally different mode of description, so that we can with certainty conclude that the work is founded upon two different sources, but these sources run through writings that are separated from one another, and are frequently ascribed to entirely different ages.” For the circumstance, that a writing is founded upon two sources, is no proof at all that it is nothing more than a portion of a larger work; and the proof which *Stähelin* adduces of his assertion, that the same source runs through several of the works in question, is much too weak and untenable to be regarded as an established fact, not to mention that, according to the first rules of logic, what applies to *several* cannot therefore be predicated of *all*. The actual root of this hypothesis is to be found in the naturalistic assumption of modern critics, that the theocratic spirit, which is common to all the prophetic histories, was not to be found in the historical facts, but was simply the “theocratic pragmatism” of the historians themselves, which had at the most a certain subjective truth, but no objective reality. From such an assumption, however, it is impossible to come to a correct conclusion with regard to either the contents or the origin of the prophetic histories of the Old Testament.