

NATIONAL SECULAR SOCIETY

BIBLE- MAKERS:

MOSES
JOSHUA AND JUDGES

RUTH, SAMUEL, DAVID
SOLOMON & OTHERS

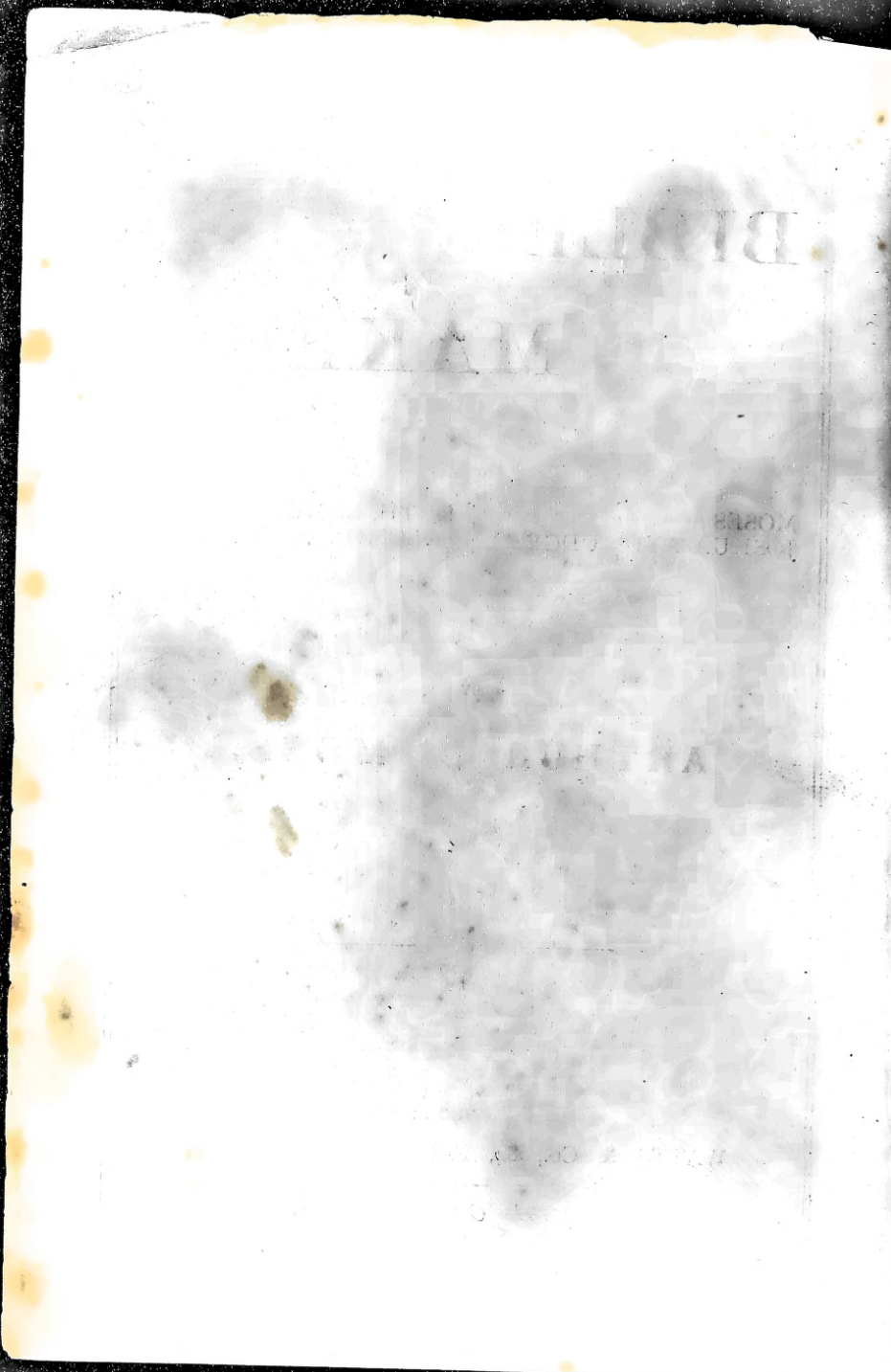
BY

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BIBLE-MAKERS.

MOSES.

EMERSON says that "the sacred books of each nation express for each the supreme result of their experience." This is undoubtedly true. By reference to the sacred writings of a people we can, to a very large extent, form a correct estimate of their intellectual and moral advancement. A Bible, in fact, should be the result of the joint labours of the best scientist, moralist, social reformer, historian, poet, dramatist, and novelist of the time in which it is written. Not that these eminent personages collaborate to produce a book, as dramatic authors now-a-days do to produce a play, one supplying the plot, the other the dialogue, and in some instances a third being called in to compose some music for a song or two, introduced for the special reason of giving the hero or heroine a chance of displaying his or her vocal talent, and relieving, in some degree, the heavy character of the piece; but each writer supplying, independent of the other, essays on those subjects with which he feels himself most conversant, sometimes venturing an opinion on matters upon which his knowledge is of the scantiest kind.

Moses, or whoever the author of the Pentateuch may have been, belonged to the class of versatile writers sometimes to be found on the staff of our daily journals, who feel themselves competent to write on all subjects in heaven above and earth beneath; who can with ease polish off an article either to refute Darwin, turn Mill's logic inside out, expose its many weaknesses, and, as a light diversion, pulverise the arguments in Mr. Gladstone's latest speech into the most minute particles of rubbish it is possible to conceive, and with one whiff of journalistic wisdom scatter all that remains to the four winds of heaven. Accordingly, we find Moses figuring

first as a scientist, then as a historian, then as a biographer ; next, after bringing the children of Israel out of Egypt safely through the Red Sea, as a poet ; and lastly as a moral teacher. Of course, it would be unreasonable to expect Moses to write ahead of the knowledge of the times in which he lived, unless, like the theologian, we credit him with being divinely inspired—a claim which, as far as I can judge, he never put forward on his own behalf.

When Moses, on his own responsibility, made Jahveh create the earth in six days, throw into the infinite expanse the sun, moon, and stars, and finally make man and woman after his own image, he merely reflected the current beliefs of the best informed persons of the time. Had he done more than this, he would not have succeeded in pleasing the people for whom he wrote ; and to be a successful man even in one's own day is no small task : it is indeed to gain a position after which many strive very arduously, but which few manage to attain. To be successful through ages, to win the admiration of the people as they increase in wisdom and goodness, is given only to a few men of rare genius, whose works shed imperishable lustre upon the nation in which they are born, only that it may be spread through various sources to all the peoples of the earth.

“Sufficient for the day is the success thereof” is the motto of most men of the world. A popular dramatist, upon being spoken to by a friend, a short time ago, anent the unenduring character of his work, and asked why he did not consider the judgment posterity would pronounce upon it, caustically replied : “What do I care for posterity ? Posterity does not pay me.” And Moses and others among the Biblical writers regarded posterity with the same air of supercilious disregard, having seemingly much more care for the certain popularity of the hour than the enduring regard of subsequent generations. Not alone in his unscientific disquisitions did Moses show that he did not possess an idea above the common prevailing sentiments of the Jewish people, but he told them to act towards slaves and blasphemers in precisely the way we may fairly suppose they would have chosen to act when left to be guided by their own uncultivated

feelings and judgment. He told them to buy slaves "of the heathen round about them," and to brutally ill-treat them, if it pleased them so to do. He commanded them not to "suffer a witch to live," and to barbarously stone blasphemers to death. Mohammed, in establishing a new religion many years later, was equally careful in the Koran (chapter entitled "The Cow") to warn his followers of the fate of unbelievers, who, he said, would not believe, whether they were admonished or not.

In his poetical efforts Moses was singularly tame: he sang not the song of love or labour, but of strife and warfare; and it lacked the true poetic ring. But, if his poetry was bad, his history was worse. When he records the doings of the Israelites, even though he himself is commander-in-chief, priest, and deliverer, he writes a comedy of errors, which at last degenerates into the broadest of farce. His tragic seriousness is drily and unconsciously humorous, so much so that I can fancy the late Mr. Compton causing shouts of merriment over the solemn delivery of Moses' inimitably grotesque account of the plagues. Even when he is describing such a sad and shameful occurrence as the flood—a god-wrought crime unparalleled in the history of the world for its vindictiveness and cruelty—he gives Noah the stupendous task of collecting all the animals prior to packing them "close as herrings" in the ark, and the tragedy is unnecessarily delayed while this unspeakably comic business is enacted.

As to Moses's biographical sketches, they are sadly wanting in many important respects. He does not give us a particle of information concerning the earlier life of Abraham, Isaac, or Jacob, though we should be much better able to estimate their qualities if we knew how they were trained, who were their instructors and companions, and what were the social conditions by which they were surrounded. He gives us an account of such unimportant affairs as the quarrels of Abraham's and Lot's servants, of Jacob's dream, and of the angel's acrobatic performances on the ladder; but of the career of the magnanimous Esau he supplies us only with the faintest possible outline.

As a writer of unconsciously grotesque and amusing

narrative, Moses was, perhaps, the equal of any of the Biblical writers. Nothing can surpass in this respect the story of Balaam's visit to Balak on his talkative donkey, except it be the candid account of his own death and burial. But, taken altogether, spite of its many imperfections of style and its ludicrous stories, its tales of vice and crime and bloodshed, the Pentateuch is exceedingly interesting reading, especially to the Freethinker, who, discarding the silly notion of Divine inspiration, is better able to estimate its true value as indicating the moral and intellectual advancement of a people who, though they plume themselves on being the "chosen children of God," have been one of the most unfortunate among the races of men.

JOSHUA AND JUDGES.

Many things, it will be admitted, are extremely doubtful in reference to the authorship of the books of the Bible ; but no manner of doubt can, I imagine, exist in any thoughtful mind that Joshua was no more the writer of the book that bears his name than Moses was the author of the Pentateuch. For the purpose of having names to refer to as the accredited authors of the various books of the Bible, it will be convenient to assume that these persons were in reality responsible for the books of which they are the alleged authors. And it may at once be said that the contents of the Book of Joshua show that that personage entertained not only a very good opinion of himself, but a very poor one of everybody else.

When an author is writing reminiscences of his career as a general, and describing, in vivid language, the rapine and murder of which the soldiers under his command were guilty, it is positively in bad taste to say a word on his own behalf, as though pleading for promotion or a pension, and to declare that "his [Joshua's] fame was noised throughout all the country." Joshua seemed to think that fame and notoriety were much the same. In this, however, as in most other things, he greatly erred. Any murderer may get notoriety if he only display enough brutality or callousness in the execution of the deed ; but fame can be achieved only by meritorious conduct, and

we have no evidence that Joshua understood even what that meant. Being the successor of Moses, he thought it incumbent upon him to imitate, as far as possible, the deeds of wanton cruelty, deceit, and villainy which characterised his predecessor. Or, supposing that Joshua did not do these things, but merely recorded them as having happened for the edification of future generations, then he must have imagined that the people would be satisfied with stories of bloodshed, or of wonders wrought by the Lord for the special behoof of his chosen people. He must have thought, too, that the credulity of his readers was practically unlimited, and that it did not matter much how stupid the event was that he recorded, so long as something similar was said to have occurred before, or that nobody could doubt that such and such a miracle had been performed, if only the Lord could be placed in the background—behind the curtain, as it were—to act as the performer.

As a historian Joshua was a dead failure. He was too ignorant to understand even ordinary events, and extraordinary occurrences simply bemuddled what little reason he may have possessed. Like all careless students of nature, he was prone to grossly exaggerate the things he saw, and to exaggerate still more monstrously the things that he did not see, but only heard spoken of by his friends and co-workers. He would have done very well for the war correspondent of the *Daily Telephone*; for his special telegrams of one day could have been very easily contradicted on the day following by some other correspondent who was an "eye-witness" to the event recorded, but did not see it "in the same light" of the gentleman who did the special. In point of truth, Joshua was one of that class of writers—always assuming that he wrote anything at all—who could have done his correspondence, and appeared to have been on the field, just as well in the back parlour of a Fleet Street restaurant as in a rude tent near the seat of war.

When Joshua wrote the account of the sun standing still upon Gideon, and the moon in the valley of Ajalon, he forgot for the nonce in which department of the literary staff of the said journal he was engaged, and thought

that his views on astronomical phenomena would be quite as acceptable to the Jewish public as his opinion on the best method of decapitating the Midianites. It was as though the sporting correspondent of a paper had ventured to send in, unsolicited, a descriptive account of an archbishop's last sermon, or the musical critic had supplied an article on the "germ theory of disease." If Joshua meant that the sun stood still in order to allow him to win a battle, he must have been joking; for, as every little boy now knows, the sun, so far as this earth is concerned, never moves. But what about the moon? Was not the light of the sun enough? Did Joshua imagine that a night-light would be of assistance in the daylight—a rushlight an important auxiliary to the sun? If we suppose that Joshua tried to be poetic in referring to the sun and moon, his figurative language must have got slightly mixed—he made too much of the moon. As Thomas Paine pointed out, as a figurative declaration Joshua's is inferior to one by Mohammed, who, when a person came to expostulate with him upon his doings, retorted: "Wert thou to come to me with the sun in thy right hand and the moon in thy left, it should not alter my career." For Joshua to have eclipsed Mohammed he should have put the sun in one pocket of his waistcoat and the moon in the other, and used them as watches—one to time his doings by day, the other to regulate his conduct by night; or, as Paine remarks, "carried them as Guy Fawkes carried his dark lanterns, and taken them out to shine as he might happen to want them."

In addition to being special reporter, historian, poet, and commander for the Israelites, Joshua varied these occupations by occasionally acting as executioner. Among his many achievements I find that he burned the city of Ai and hanged the king, and performed the office of executioner (without a special request) to five other crowned heads. I must not, however, dwell at greater length upon the writings or doings of Joshua, but come at once to the gentlemen who describe themselves as "Judges."

What these persons were judges of we have no means of knowing. It is pretty clear, however, that they could not very well have been judges of a man's capability,

single-handed, of destroying brute beasts or his fellow creatures, else they would not have favoured us with the silly account of Samson's encounter with a lion, or his great feat with a jawbone. As a profane wag once remarked, if Samson could have slain a thousand people with another ass's jawbone, it is extremely difficult to understand why he could not have done it with his own.

On the subject of dreams the Judges were authorities. If any wandering lunatic dreamed a dream, these writers were sure to allow it to come true. Indeed, a very large portion of the Bible is made up of accounts of religious dreams, and the "Bible makers," being themselves mostly dreamers, attached great importance to the interpretation of visions which the dreamers themselves had half forgotten. And so, in the seventh chapter, we are told that when Gideon had come into the city of the Midianites "there was a man that told a dream unto his fellow, and said, Behold, I dreamed a dream, and, lo, a cake of barley bread tumbled into the host of Midian, and came unto a tent, and smote it that it fell, and overturned it that the tent lay along. And his fellow answered and said, This is nothing else save the sword of Gideon, the son of Joash, a man of Israel; for into his hand hath God delivered Midian and all the host." The writers of the book of Judges then proceed to show that the barley loaf in the dream did really mean the sword of Gideon; and though no tent was overturned by either the loaf or the sword, nor even the walls of the city, the Midianites were put to flight, pursued, and those of them that were unfortunately overtaken were mercilessly slain, even to the princes who were taken prisoners.

Judges, with its stories of dreams, battles, and the man whose strength lay in his hair, may be considered very good pabulum upon which to feed religious babes and sucklings; but it is decidedly poor stuff upon which to rear children of a large and more vigorous growth; and of such are the children of earth.

RUTH, SAMUEL, AND DAVID.

Sandwiched between Judges and Samuel is the book of Ruth. How it came to be incorporated in the Bible

it would be difficult to tell, without great faith and a prayerful spirit ; and, unless we suppose that some lewd fellow, thinking that a little more pruriency would be an improvement, by some dexterous and surreptitious means slipped the book in, there is no accounting for its appearance among the sacred writings at all. It is, however a pretty love-story. It tells of a poor simple girl from the country, who came up to town to see her cousin, Boaz, and, having successfully repelled the advances of numerous young men who were infatuated with her charms, steals slyly to bed with her cousin, who blesses her for her unselfish kindness, and ultimately rewards her by making her his wife. As no more mention is made of them, we will be generous enough to suppose that they lived happily ever after. If Miss Ruth, however, wrote this brief autobiographical sketch, it must be confessed that she was as candid in revealing her failings as Jean Jacques Rousseau was in revealing his, if, indeed, she meant this little business with her cousin to be considered as an iniquity at all.

We come now to Samuel. He was the son of Elkanah. He wrote a book, or a number of books, and followed his predecessor, Moses's, example in being careful to give a full account of his own death and burial. His father he described as "a certain man of Ramathaim Zophim and Mount Ephraim." Most fathers are "certain men." He gives an account of a man named Saul, who was seeking his father's asses, which had gone astray. The children of Israel at the same time were in search of a king. The asses were found ; so was Saul, who was at once anointed king by Samuel, who, from an early age, was a prophet of the Lord. His early appointment to this profession took place in this wise : he received a "call" from the Lord, who, hiding himself in an obscure corner of the sky, had an inoffensive game at bo-peep with the child Samuel, and, after allowing the lad to make a couple of wrong guesses as to who it was that had called him, permitted him to guess correctly the third time, and thus save his bacon, and become a perpetual prophet of the Lord of Hosts ever after.

Samuel faithfully recorded the lives of such illustrious kings as Saul and David ; gave a graphic description of

the unequal encounter between David and Goliath, in which he showed how easy it was for a little boy with a sling and a stone to kill a giant ; and, further, how difficult it is for a harpist—a Jew-harpist—by dulcet strains of music to soothe the savage breast of a king, after having taken from him the favour of the people. Samuel also demonstrates that a high degree of mental culture was not an indispensable accomplishment of a prophet.

David prophesied upon a harp ; many of the people prophesied with cymbals and with song ; and some, no doubt, produced the same result upon the bango, or with the bones ; but King Saul put them all to the blush. Finding that everybody was going in for prophesying, he divested himself of all his raiment, and lay on his back and prophesied as hard as any of them. This, as an honest historian, the prophet Samuel has faithfully set down, not in a spirit of malice or uncharitableness, but in that of candour and truth, that ordinary folk might understand the strange doings of the godly.

Samuel's account of the life of David is filled with interest. Thackeray's "Four Georges" or Carlyle's "Cromwell" are not more graphic. If only the letters of David to his various mistresses had been preserved, what a splendid addition they would have made to this fascinating biographical sketch ! Great affection, unselfish devotion, David unquestionably displayed towards Jonathan ; but how infinitely small it was compared with the unbounded love he showed towards the wives of Nabal and Uriah. David robbed, outraged, and murdered wherever he went ; and, in true prophetic strain, Samuel describes him as a "man after God's own heart," clearly showing that he knew the character of God very well ; he, therefore, represented David as much "after the image of his maker" as possible. It is said that David, at the end, repented ; so, too, did Charles Peace—at the rope's-end. Worthy couple !

The books of Kings and Chronicles, which are merely a combination or repetition of the stories of Samuel, I pass over, as also the book of Job, a Gentile production which deserves to be considered on its merits, apart altogether from the place it occupies in men's minds on account of being one of the books of the Bible.

We come now to the Psalms of David, which throw a flood of light upon the inner life of the king and prophet. They are a collection of songs—not comic; mostly expressive of praise to Deity. What many-sidedness of nature these poetic expressions disclose! What infinite piety, combined with consummate rascality—what unctuousness, covering the imperious dogmatism of a king and a priest! How anxious David is that the religious shall have no “fellowship with the ungodly;” that the Lord shall rebuke the unbeliever, and afflict him with great suffering!

David’s God was essentially a butcher and a king. Give heed to this poetic strain :—

O clap your hands, all ye people ; shout unto God with the voice of triumph.

For the Lord Most High is terrible ; he is a great king over all the earth.

He shall subdue the people under us, and the nations under our feet.

He shall choose our inheritance for us, the excellency of Jacob whom he loved. Selah. (Psalm xlvii.)

As for the Atheist, David loathed him with every drop of his blood. He regarded him as a fool, and said as much. Most people call those persons names whom they cannot answer :—

The fool hath said in his heart, there is no God. Corrupt are they, and have done abominable iniquity : there is none that doeth good. (Psalm liii.)

In a more humble mood was the Psalmist when he penned the following :—

Lord, my heart is not haughty, nor mine eyes lofty ; neither do I exercise myself in great matters, or in things too high for me.

Surely I have behaved and quieted myself as a child that is weaned of his mother : my soul is even as a weaned child.

Let Israel hope in the Lord from henceforth and for ever. (Psalm cxxxi.)

But in his true colours David is seen when, from the lowest depths of his fiendish heart, he gives vent to his views as to how God should treat those who had been his (David’s) and God’s enemies :—

Set thou a wicked man over him, and let Satan stand at his right hand.

When he shall be judged let him be condemned, and let his prayer become sin.

Let his days be few, and let another take his office ; let his children be fatherless, and his wife a widow.

Let his children be continually vagabonds and beg ; let them seek their bread also out of their desolate places.

Let the extortioner catch all that he hath, and let the strangers spoil his labour.

Let there be none to extend mercy unto him ; neither let there be any to favour his fatherless children.

Let his posterity be cut off, and in the generation following let his name be blotted out.

Let the iniquity of his fathers be remembered with the Lord, and let not the sin of his mother be blotted out.

Oh, what a difference between the sentiments of the Atheist poet, Shelley, and the Theist poet, David ! The one wrote for the ignorant and cruel and despotic people of ages that have gone ; the other, in incomparably grand verse, breathed the pure and lofty sentiments of the humanity of the future.

SOLOMON AND OTHERS.

Interspersed among much that was unwittingly funny, and more that was deliberately barbarous, it was only natural that the Bible-makers should supply a few chapters of gloomy sermonising, to lend a kind of moral respectability to the whole work. King Solomon was, therefore, specially retained to supply the article. Credited with almost unlimited knowledge and wisdom, but possessing, if we may judge from his writings and conduct, a very infinitesimal quantity of either ; a notorious man of the world ; devoid altogether of principles or sincerity—a more appropriate person could scarcely have been chosen for the task. No men are more prone to preach—and sometimes very good sermons too—than those whose practice is in flagrant and diametrical opposition to their teachings. From the judge upon the bench to the unpaid magistrate in an obscure country town, or from the opulent bishop to the poor underpaid curate, we have hundreds of examples of men who, in their official position, give admirable lessons to the public as to how they should conduct themselves morally—lessons which they themselves not only never attempt to put into

practice, but which they persistently and deliberately disregard. The Spartans, it is said, used to make a slave drunk, and set him before their sons, so that the exhibition might disgust them, and thus influence them against the excessive use of intoxicating drinks. Solomon seems to have been chosen as a contributor to the pages of the Bible on the same principle. Having divided his attentions mainly between wine and woman, especially the latter; monopolising several hundred wives and three hundred concubines, he was considered to be a high authority upon the things of life in general, and upon women and wine in particular. And a very gloomy opinion it was—pessimistic to the last degree. The reclaimed drunkard is often considered the best advocate of temperance; the converted burglar the most admirable teacher of morality; the reformed prize-fighter the best example of the influence of the meek and lowly Jesus. In Solomon the qualities of all these persons were combined. He had had experience of life in all its varied aspects; he had prostituted his physical and mental faculties for the sake of transitory pleasures; and at last, when he had become a decrepit, used-up debauchee, he yelled out, in the agony of his despair: "Vanity—all is vanity!" To Solomon childish laughter seemed fiendish, innocent playfulness agonising folly, honest toil madness; and he summed up life as comprising nothing but "vanity and vexation of spirit." He had wasted his life, and he longed for death to escape from what, to him, was a dreary and miserable existence. And while he was in this unpleasant mood he contributed twelve chapters to the Holy Bible, for which the long-faced, lugubrious gentlemen of orthodoxy will ever thank and praise him.

Having finished Ecclesiastes, Solomon apparently rested for a time, and then rushed into song, which, being written when the author was in a better state of mind—in fact, in quite an affectionate mood—with, doubtless, one of his many wives sitting upon his knee caressing him, are, therefore, much more pleasant, though not altogether decent, compositions. The metaphor, at times, is very coarse, as the reader will see, if he glance cursorily over chapter seven and the first few

verses ; and one cannot avoid the conclusion that the writer was inebriated at the time with something of a stronger nature than exuberant verbosity.

The book of the prophet Isaiah follows. Isaiah was a dreamer, and all the terrible events which he foresaw as certain to happen he had had revealed to him in a vision. Many of these predictions were perfectly safe. They were not to take place till the "last day," and, as that interesting period is unlikely to come very soon in a world that is, as the Prayer Book properly says, "without end," the events are not likely to be carefully verified. When we are assured that "it shall come to pass in the last days that the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established in the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills ; and all the nations shall flow into it," we can only remark that, if ever the mountain of the House of Lords—or Lord's House, which is the same thing—should get elevated at all, it is not unlikely that it will be exalted much higher than the hills—probably elevated off the face of the earth ; and so that prophecy will be fulfilled. As to the composition itself, I think it may not unfairly be said that it is the most incoherent and meaningless jargon to be found in the Bible, save and except, perhaps, the ravings of St. John, the divine maniac, in the book called Revelation, which reveals nothing but the hopeless imbecility of the writer.

Prophesying was once a good business. Every priest practised it, and every ignoramus believed in it. Old women of both sexes gave it their countenance and support. The Bible-makers knew the importance of it, and so, to every single historian or poet on the staff, they kept four prophets.

After Isaiah come Jeremiah and Ezekiel, the former of which contains nothing of importance, and the latter only a parable concerning a boiling pot and a faithful narrative of the disgusting practices of Aholah and Aholibah, two painted harlots of Babylon. These, with Daniel, Hosea, Joel, Amos, Zechariah, and Malachi, and one or two others that are never read, complete the first part of the Bible. Most of these last-named writers were in the prophetic line, and their prophecies need a

revelation before they can be understood. I don't profess to understand them, and I do not know any sensible person who does; but, if there are any who understand them, or think they do, they are sure to be numbered among the Bible-makers of the future.

ALSO BY THE SAME AUTHOR.

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