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The Value of the Old Testament for the Christian Church.

BY THE REVEREND A. E. GARVIE, D.D., LONDON.

I.

THERE are four reasons for this choice of subject :

(1) In the prevalent anti-Semitism, which in Germany especially has assumed the extreme form of a ruthless persecution, it is well for Christendom to remind itself of the debt due to the Jewish people. Of the inheritance of the modern from the ancient world—Roman law, Greek culture, and Jewish religion—the last must be regarded as the most valuable. For whatever defects the Jewish community may now display provoking this antagonism, Christendom by its treatment of the Jews is largely responsible ; and owes that people not only sympathy and succour in present needs, but reparation for the wrongs of the past.

(2) This anti-Semitism has expressed itself in a depreciation and rejection of the Old Testament as a Jewish book ; and professed Christians as well as avowed pagans are joining in the assaults upon it as the objectionable product of a detested race. German nationalism is demanding a recovery of Germanic religion.

(3) Since the War there has been among Sunday-school teachers a complaint against lessons from the Old Testament, not on the psychological ground that the stories are not interesting to the scholars, but on the religious and moral ground that they present a lower conception of God and a lower standard for man than the Christian.

This objection is a real one, if we treat the Old Testament as the Fundamentalist does as of almost (if not quite) equal authority with the New Testament. The Old Testament has been in the history of the Christian Church not only a valuable possession, but also a formidable danger. Christian theology and ethics have been brought to a lower level by our indiscriminate blending of the old and the new covenant. The Christian conscience has escaped the worst consequence of this confusion by a moral and religious discernment of differences, which the dogmatic valuation of the Old Testament would not have justified. Pacifism has so concentrated attention on and devotion to only one aspect of the teaching and the example of Jesus, and of the redemption of man in Him, that it excludes not only Old Testament conceptions, but

even other aspects of the Divine revelation in Him. Many teachers cannot now use the Old Testament in the old uncritical, indiscriminating way ; and most of them do not know enough of the new and better way which modern scholarship offers to make effective use of it ; besides, some of them know that they would by so doing excite prejudice among many of their Christian friends. Sometimes that prejudice has been needlessly provoked by the rashness and folly of some who are in the danger of only a little knowledge. The same difficulty is being raised in the Foreign Mission field. Is it necessary, it is being asked, to familiarize the heathen with such lower conceptions of God and standards for man as the Old Testament presents in the earlier phases of the development ? As in the case of the Sunday school, so here the new and better methods of instruction must be followed, if the danger mentioned is to be avoided. In anything I have here to say about the value of the Old Testament for the Christian Church, and in defence of the continued use in Sunday school and Foreign Mission field, I assume the validity of the literary and historical criticism of the Old Testament, and the estimate of its purpose and character based upon that criticism : for only thus can that value be preserved while the danger is avoided.

(4) The fourth reason for treating this subject is that in connexion with the quatercentenary of the order for the placing of the printed English Bible in every parish church in 1538, the Committee arranging the celebrations next year are desirous of getting the occasion used for argument and appeal for the revival of regular reading of the Bible. Should that end be secured, it is not improbable that the Old Testament might, in view of the reason given above, be comparatively neglected, and the full understanding of the New Testament, so closely connected with the Old, would be missed. Although this event and its celebration concern England mainly, yet the value of the English Bible as a bond of religious fellowship throughout the English-speaking world does justify the hope that all the readers of THE EXPOSITORY TIMES, wherever they may be, will join in this laudable effort to secure that this treasure shall not only be possessed,

but also valued, and used as a God-given means of grace.

II.

(1) No legitimate results of this criticism need challenge the conviction that the Old Testament is the record of *divine revelation*, that the Word of God is in it addressed to, and can be apprehended by, man. (a) We can still affirm that 'God has spoken . . . in the prophets by divers portions and in divers manners' (Heb 1¹), and need not limit that assurance to the prophets only. We can often so catch the divine tone in human voices, as justifies the claim, 'Thus saith the Lord.' The Word of God as a sword pierces our reason, our conscience, and our heart. There is the inward witness of the Spirit to the outward witness of the Scriptures. Nor is this conviction solely *subjective*. There are *objective* facts to sustain it. The discovery of other sacred Scriptures and the consequent comparative study of religions needlessly alarmed Christian people, and offered no adequate warrant for the assumption that all religions are equal, in truth or in error. The Old Testament maintains its superiority to any of these writings; and the reasons which will afterwards be advanced for still valuing the Old Testament will, it is hoped, fully justify this assertion.

(b) When in explanation of the uniqueness of the Old Testament among sacred Scriptures it is asserted that it was due to the religious genius of the Hebrew nation, or to an inherent tendency in Semitic religions to monotheism, we have only to recall the persistent opposition of the popular to the prophetic religion, for most of the prophets could have used the words of Stephen: 'Ye stiffnecked and uncircumcised in heart and ears, ye do always resist the Holy Ghost; as your fathers did, so do ye' (Ac 7⁵¹); we have only to recall the description Hosea gives of the corruption of the worship of the covenant God by blending with the worship of the local Baals, the Semitic heathenism, and what we know of the low level of belief and ritual in the religion of the neighbouring Semitic peoples; and we shall be convinced that the development of the religion in which the revelation came was no normal growth, but was always, as its agents so clearly and firmly declared, from God to and through man. A study of the prophetic consciousness should convince us that these men spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit, not in a verbal dictation, but in an inward divine activity so shaping their experience and their character that through their utterances God could and did convey His mind, heart,

and will. We need not deny that in other religions wherever there was genuine religion there was real revelation, and God was found wherever He was sought, for He Himself is ever seeking, and that the founders of other religions which mark any advance in thought and life were moved by the Spirit of God, and yet we may maintain the conviction that the Word of God can be recognized in the Old Testament as in no other Holy Scriptures, except in its continuation in the New Testament.

(2) To correct the prevalent error of viewing the Bible as primarily an inspired book, we must emphasize the fact that the revelation was *historical*; God spoke in deeds and not in words only, in His *Providence* for the nation as well as His *Inspiration* of the prophets. (a) Carlyle has said that the history of any nation is its Bible; but not only has the prophetic interpretation been lacking; the events and experiences in most nations would not afford so appropriate a material for such interpretation. While we do recognize a universal Divine Providence, God's bounty and care, His guidance and guardianship of all mankind, we may admit a *selective activity* of God within this universal providence. I have already referred to the contributions of Greece and Rome to the inheritance of the modern from the ancient world; and we may here also see this selective activity. But a nation chosen to be the agent of religion and through it of revelation, would possess and necessarily possess a sense of intimate relation to God and distinctive vocation from God such as would not be necessary for nations serving other functions.

(b) Even its geographical position seemed to be so appointed that it might be brought into contact with the succession of the empires of the ancient world—Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Greece, Rome—each of which so affected the history that it could be interpreted by the prophets in terms of the Divine Providence, and become the occasion for some advance in the Divine revelation. As Christians, we believe that God sent His Son in the fulness of the time (Gal 4⁴), that He was, as He claimed to be, the fulfilment of law and prophecy (Mt 5¹⁷), that the Word became flesh (Jn 1¹⁴), can we hesitate in believing that in the preparatory history, the Divine Providence was made manifest? May we not, nay, must we not, believe that in the history of the Church, the body of Christ, the organ of His continued activity, that same Divine Providence is manifest?

(c) While the trivial claims which individual Christians often make of Divine guardianship and guidance do sometimes provoke some distrust of

the doctrine of Divine Providence, it seems to me to be of primary importance not only for our personal assurance, but still more for our confidence regarding the destiny of mankind, that we should appreciate the testimony the Old Testament bears to the presence, interest, and activity of God in human history, as exemplified in His Providence for His chosen people. This truth the history itself might not have disclosed had there not been this continuous interpretation in the succession of the prophets, and to their inspiration as interpreters we may now turn as the complementary aspect of the Divine revelation.

(3) Whether God's Providence does, or does not, include supernatural physical events is a question raising too wide an issue to be here discussed. Regarding the Old Testament 'miracles' we are entitled on the ground of the literary and historical criticism of the records to exercise a suspense of judgment. What we may affirm is that God's Providence as historical manifests itself in the overruling of human experiences and activities for His 'increasing purpose.' So also the *inspiration* of the prophets was *personal*. God by His indwelling and inworking Spirit made the men fit and worthy to be His messengers. We can derive theology and ethics from the writings of the prophets; but these are conveyed in personal experiences, convictions, and character. The difference in the message of Amos and of Hosea, although contemporaries, lies in the difference of the life-story of the men. The difference and even apparent contradiction between the burden of Isaiah and of Jeremiah is not due solely to difference of temperament, but also to change of circumstance. Whatever value the substance of their teaching as Divine revelation possesses, and with that we shall afterwards deal, that value is enhanced as coming to us not as abstract doctrine or command, but in concrete personal form. How interesting the Bible is because the Divine Author of the revelation disguises Himself in the dress of the human authors of the writings. Because the revelation is historical and personal it is also *progressive*.

(4) The idea of progress has been much assailed, and the circumstances and experiences of recent years do give occasion for doubt and question. (a) Progress is not inevitable, because it is not due to an inscrutable fate or an ineluctable deity; but is affected by man's wisdom or folly, love or hate, holiness or sin, even if 'there's a divinity that shapes our ends, rough-hew them how we will.' There may be retreat and halt as well as advance in the march of mankind, often unwitting of whither

it leads, sometimes responding to a Divine call like Abraham, often yielding to the *élan vital*, of which Henri Bergson is the prophet.

(b) But taking the broad and the long view, a chastened confidence may still be cherished that forward is the watchword of discerning men, and the command of the directing God. Even if we could place all the prophets in their strictly chronological order, we could not trace through the teaching of them all uniform progress. Haggai and Zechariah are in the plane after Deutero-Isaiah on the mountain-top. But progress there is in the conception of God, in the standard for man, in the expansion from nationalism in religion through Isaiah's remnant and Jeremiah's individualism to the universalism of the Deutero-Isaiah or the Book of Jonah, from the stern Judge of Amos to the compassionate God who saves through His Suffering Servant (Is 53).

(c) If there seems to be a reaction in the later prophets, the legalism and the ritualism of the Law seems to have been the necessary protective husk for the kernel of the prophetic teaching in the precarious and parlous situation of the people scattered amid the Gentiles after the independent nation had ceased to be. This is also an instance of what I believe to be a tendency in human history, the ebb and flow in religious thought and life; the gains of an advance need to find permanent investment.

III.

This prophetic succession is the core of the Divine revelation. Other parts of the Old Testament have value, and to them we shall turn. Most important is the unique contribution of the prophets to the religious thought and life of mankind in their conception of God, for all religious or moral truth is a corollary to that. (1) It has been summarized in the term 'ethical monotheism.' (a) What monotheism affirms is not only the existence of *one* God, but also that His nature is so conceived that He is God *alone*. If He be what He is believed to be, there can be no other. God as presented in this *monotheism* is beyond and above all, transcendent not to be identified with the world as in pantheism, and yet He is *in* and *through* all, immanent not separated from the world as in deism. The heaven of heavens cannot contain Him, yet He dwells in the humble and contrite heart. In His holiness the Altogether Other of man, yet in His love making Himself one with man. Compare, for instance, Is 40 and Hos 2. If men are to believe in any Divine reality in distinction from, and yet

in relation to, the Universe, such a monotheism is the only possible belief. The Christian doctrine of the Trinity has sometimes degenerated into tritheism; but Christian theology must preserve untainted this inheritance from the prophets. Polytheism must lead to intellectual confusion, mesal conflict, religious distraction. Only monotheism can present one Source of all, one Purpose for all, and one Satisfaction to all.

(b) The descriptive epithet adds to the significance of this prophetic conception. With the unity of nature goes the perfection of character. The term *holy* which at first expressed the difference of God from man, now expresses the affinity. God is the eternal reality of man's ideals and aspirations. It is an ethical monotheism not only in the *content*, but also in the *source* of the conception. God is one, because there can be only one moral standard and one moral authority. Am 1-3 exalts Jehovah, the covenant God of Israel as Judge of all the surrounding peoples; and the standard of judgment is moral not ritual: what is condemned is 'man's inhumanity to man'; and Israel and Judah, despite the election which was their boast, are no less brought to the bar. Greek philosophy also reached a qualified monotheism, but a metaphysical dualism survived, and there was tolerance of polytheism. Hebrew monotheism was so exclusive and exacting because it had its roots not in an intellectual conclusion, but in religious experience and moral conscience.

(2) While the nationalism of the religion developed into individualism and universalism, it was no disadvantage that the human channel of the Divine manifestation was a *nation*. The history of the Christian Church in the New Testament covers so restricted a period, and its testimony and influence was so confined, that it is a great gain for the Christian Church to have for its guidance this record of God's dealings with a *nation* during so many generations. The lessons of the Divine Providence are presented in so much larger a scale. Moreover, although there is the large and lofty conception of the Kingdom of God as regulative of the moral teaching of Jesus, the ethics of the New Testament tend to be individual, and a valuable complement is presented in the ethics of the prophets, who, addressing a nation, taught social righteousness and compassion. That value is being appreciated to-day more highly than ever, as a corrective of the individualist tendency of Christian morality last century and the consequent divorce of piety from politics and economics. The social Gospel has its antecedents in the prophets.

(3) So vigorous and unreserved was the denunciation by some of the prophets of the substitution in the popular religion of ritual for righteousness, of sacrifice for loving-kindness, that it has been inferred that the prophets desired to put an end to the customary modes of worship. It is not necessary to make that assumption, for worship is as essential an expression of faith as are works, and forms of corporate worship are necessary as complementary to personal devotions 'walking humbly with God.' And the practice of sacrifice is so general, that the impulse to it lies deep-rooted in the religious consciousness. If that had been the prophetic intention and had been achieved, religion would have suffered incalculable loss. Accordingly, next to the prophets we may place in value the *Psalms*, the response of the human heart to the Divine communication in the prophets. Many of them are as inspired as were the prophets, for it is God who also gives the faith which receives His grace. What God *is*, is disclosed in the aspiration, adoration, devotion, and consecration of His saints. The hunger and the thirst of the soul for the living God is witness that not only has He made us for Himself, but that He gives Himself to those who seek Him as their highest good. While there are psalms expressing an exclusive, arrogant, and even vindictive piety, which the Christian cannot make his own in worship, yet on the other hand there are psalms which so express penitence and faith, the whole range of the inner life, that they may be fitly used in the worship of the Christian Church.

(4) The Wisdom literature has its value also as showing how this *ethical monotheism* confronted and contended with the problems of human experience, and afforded guidance for human practice. Of all the Wisdom literature it is the *Book of Job* which makes the deepest impression and strongest appeal. A revelation which ignored the problem of the sufferings of men, especially when seemingly undeserved, would not be adequate for man's inquiring mind and tortured heart. If no solution is offered, the majesty of God and the insufficiency of man as there presented rebuke any challenge of the character and the purpose of God, which leaves so much mystery in life for the trial and the triumph of faith. Surely the righteous servant of God who saves through His suffering is the answer to the question Job sets (Is 53). The Book of Proverbs has an interest as a record of human sagacity, but cannot rank as a revelation of Divine Wisdom. The right of inclusion in the Canon for the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes was long disputed, and does not claim the advocacy of the Christian Church.

(5) The value of the *historical* books lies for religion, apart from the purely historical and human interest, in the prophetic interpretation which runs through them of the course of events as Divine Providence. We cannot but feel that that interpretation is often forced; consequences do not, in fact, always follow conduct with so swift a foot; the mills of God do grind more slowly; the righteous do not always prosper, nor the wicked so soon perish. The Book of Job offers a needful corrective to this pragmatism. But nevertheless, as I have already indicated, the Divine Providence is made more manifest in the history of this nation than in any other. The religious beliefs and the moral standards presented in these writings are relative to time and place, and are not final disclosures of the mind and the will of God, having any absolute authority for us. They have interest as illustrating the progress of revelation as men were able to receive and respond to it, and claim respect, even as the gleams of dawn share light as does the glory of noon-day. *Man's* dome of many-coloured glass stains the white radiance of *God's* eternity. Myth, legend, folk-lore, as well as annals, have to be discriminated by criticism as constituents of the history. As regards the ceremonial, ritual, sacrificial precepts and practices of the Law, their antiquarian interest survives for the scholar; but for the Christian Church the Law has been done away in Christ. To find Christian truth by spiritualising the plagues of Egypt, the structure of the Tabernacle, the details of the sacrificial ritual, and all such other devices is merely a trifling which shows a lack of any sense of the Divine reality, or the kind of response demanded thereby from man's actuality; and does not lead to, but away from, the true apprehension and the worthy appreciation of the value of the Old Testament for the Christian Church.

(6) It is the conviction of every Christian that the full value of the Old Testament cannot be discovered in it by itself, apart from the New; since the progressive historical revelation of God it contains is consummated in Christ and His gospel; but this subject would demand an article all to itself. His own life in and for God had been nourished by the Old Testament, so had the lives of those who first believed in Him as Messiah, experienced Him as Saviour, and acknowledged Him as Lord. He claimed to be the fulfilment of Law and Prophecy, not because there were correspondences between events in His life and predictions of former days, but because He 'filled full' what was still lacking in the older revelation by His revelation of God as Father, by the redemption from sin and reconciliation unto God of which He is the sole Mediator. The Apostles found in these same Scriptures the interpretation, and the defence of their faith in Him. The New Testament could not be understood apart from the Old, which it presupposes. And the Word of God, which is contained in, and conveyed by, the Holy Scriptures, has manifest unity in the old covenant as the preparation of the new, and the new as the completion of the old. 'God, having of old time spoken unto the fathers in the prophets by divers portions and in divers manners, hath at the end of these days spoken unto us in his Son' (He 1¹. 2). 'Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and to-day, yea and for ever' (13⁸). As by the guidance of the Spirit of God, who inspired the prophets, dwelt without measure in the Son, and is given to all who believe in Him according to their faith, we are led to discover all the truth as it is in Him, we shall also understand the Old Testament, for in His light alone can we see any light from God clearly, whether it came to us from psalmist, prophet, sage, or saint.

Recent Foreign Theology.

The Enigma of Ezekiel.¹

PROFESSOR BERTHOLET has done a rare thing in the field of criticism; he has now written two commentaries on the same book. Since his earlier edition, in another series, was published, the prophecies of Ezekiel have become more of a literary

¹ *Hesekiel*, von Alfred Bertholet, in 'Handbuch zum Alten Testament' (J. C. B. Mohr, Tübingen; M.8.10).

enigma than ever. During these forty years as many hypotheses about their meaning and origin have been spun as about the Gospels in the New Testament, and it is not surprising that Dr. Bertholet's fresh theory, as he himself admits, leaves hardly one stone standing of the previous construction. The sum and substance of his present opinion is that Ezekiel had two prophetic missions, one in Jerusalem and the other in the Exile. The