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The Spiritual and Permanent Value of the Old Testament.*

THE temptation is considerable to preface our subject by a reference to the transmutation of values brought about by the War. The attitude of all of us towards the Old Testament Scriptures has been sub-consciously influenced by recent events. The conflict for righteousness against an unscrupulous foe, who worships the God of Force, has awakened a new interest in the historical record of the trials and victories of God's ancient people. The language of the Psalms, which appeared in some instances strained, comes naturally to our lips as the expression of our deepest feelings, while we pass through the fires of affliction. The voices of the Prophets provide us with just the message which we feel to be needed by a careless and optimistic attitude in the midst of an unexampled crisis. The time is so short, however, for the consideration of so important a topic, that I shall endeavour to be severely practical and as far as possible non-contentious.

The number of subjects illustrated in the Old Testament is almost innumerable. We have the working of Divine Providence (Esther); the Sovereignty of God (Job and Jonah); the Holiness of God, the Majesty of the Law, the Sin of Man, the certainty of Retribution and Reward (David and Daniel); the Triumphs of Faith (Joshua and Judges); Examples of Prayer, Devotion to Duty, Simplicity of Life (Ruth); Gratitude and Ingratitude, the Evils of Jealousy, Revenge (Saul); Ambition, Lust, Covetousness, Pride, Selfishness (Balaam and Lot); the Beauty of Holiness, Humility, Filial Devotion, Diligence, Faithfulness (Jonathan); Honesty, Obedience, Kindness (Joseph). Then there are the great subjects of Prophecy, Typology, Symbolism, Miracles, Parables, Poetry, Proverbs, Devotional exercises and finally Imprecatory expressions—all of which would admit of separate and exhaustive treatment. The difficulty is to know which to select for the purposes of a brief paper. Obviously many of them are too complex for even the most perfunctory discussion. The

* A paper read before the Birmingham Clerical Society.

very enumeration, however, of some of them is sufficient to emphasize the Spiritual and Permanent value of those Sacred Writings.

The question of the character and degree of inspiration lying behind the Old Testament scriptures I shall not touch, save to make the somewhat obvious remark that no truth is uttered apart from the promptings of the Spirit of Truth and that God never employs human agency as a mere tool apart from its own volition and responsibility. Probably all our varying views on the vexed question of Inspiration revolve around our particular standpoint as to the relative importance of these two sides of Truth.

Surely it cannot be a mere accident that the events recorded in the Old Testament so exactly prefigure the truths of the Gospel; that Paradise lost should lead up to and find its antidote in Paradise regained; that the tree of life forfeited by man's sin should reappear in the Apocalypse as the result of the manifestation of the second Adam "who hath brought life and immortality to light through the Gospel"; that the blood of Abel which cried to God for vengeance against his brother, who ignored his responsibility, should find its antithesis in the precious blood of Christ, which pleads to God for mercy on behalf of his guilty brethren; that the confusion of tongues, brought about by man's effort to scale Heaven by worldly ambition, should have its counterpart at Pentecost, when after waiting upon the Lord in humility and love men of every race learned to speak and understand a common spiritual language; that Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his well-beloved son should shadow forth the eternal love of God, who gave His only begotten Son, and that Isaac in his meek bearing of his own pyre should prefigure Him Who bore His cross on the way to Calvary; that Joseph, hated of his brethren and sold for twenty pieces of silver, should forgive them and minister to them the bread of life, anticipating the Spirit of Him Who cried "Father, forgive them," when He gave His own flesh for the life of the world; that Egypt with its pomp and vanity should be such an eminent picture of the world, which tempts us with "the pleasures of sin for a season," and which must be forsaken if we are to reach the promised land; that the Paschal Lamb should be without blemish and that its blood sprinkled upon the door-post should secure immunity from destruction and should afterwards become the food of the ransomed, in marked exemplification of the immaculate

Lamb of God, that taketh away the sin of the world, and upon whom we feed in our hearts by faith with thanksgiving ; that the passage of the Red Sea and the enemy overwhelmed should prefigure the rite of Holy Baptism and the remission of original sin ; and that the Wilderness wanderings should present us with so many examples for the Christian life, both of warning and encouragement, e.g. the worship of the golden calf, the murmurings and rebellion of the people, the presumption of Nadab and Abihu and of Korah, Dathan and Abiram, the rebukes of Miriam, Aaron and Moses, the failure to go up and possess the land, the presumption and stiffneckedness and hardness of heart ? On the other hand the mighty hand and stretched out arm, the pillar of cloud and fire, the manna, the quails, the brazen serpent, the smitten rock, the triumph over Amalek resulting from the uplifted hands, the Mercy Seat and Shekinah, the Tabernacle with its ritual and worship, the priesthood, the sacrifices, the law, are all emphasized and spiritualized in the Epistle to the Hebrews, which has literally no meaning apart from these references.

Surely it is not accidental that the Holy of Holies was shut off from the common gaze, that the High Priest alone could enter the sacred precincts, once a year, and then not without blood ; that the sin and trespass, the meat and peace and burnt offerings, should emphasize the principles of vicarious sacrifice and atonement, of communion and fellowship, of consecration and self-dedication, and that the incense offerings should symbolize prayer, and that all should be so completely fulfilled in Him " Who bare our sins in His own body upon the tree," Who died " the just for the unjust," " by whose stripes we are healed," " Who is our Peace," " Who made peace by the blood of His cross, having slain the enmity thereby," Who " presented Himself to God an offering and a sacrifice for a sweet smelling savour," Who offers the prayers of all saints upon the golden altar, before the Throne : Who, our merciful and faithful High Priest, " after He had offered one sacrifice for sins for ever," " entered in once by His own blood into the holy place, having obtained eternal redemption for us " ? Was it a mere accident that the veil of the temple was rent in twain at the moment when the victorious soul of Christ burst from the tabernacle of His human flesh, delivering us from the curse of the Law, being made a curse for us ? So that we can sing—

Finished all the types and shadows
 Of the ceremonial law :
 Finished all that God had promised :
 Death and Hell no more shall awe.
 " It is finished " :
 Saints from hence your comfort draw.

If these are mere accidental analogies, it is the most wonderful chapter of accidents that the world has ever seen. The only other alternative to orthodox belief is to assume that we have read into the Gospel Judaistic ideas and elements which are alien to its purpose. It is striking to think out how little Gospel you have left if you eliminate Old Testament ideals. In fact, hardly anything but the Sermon on the Mount and the missionary command.

Again we think of the teaching of the Old Covenant on sin and holiness : the majestic scene at Mount Sinai, the bounds set round the mountain—so terrible the manifestations of Jehovah that even Moses said, " I exceedingly fear and quake " : the ceremonial washings and purifications : the treatment of leprosy as such an eminent type of sin with its loathsome, all-pervading, disabling effects : the detailed and graded provision for the sins respectively of the Priest, congregation, ruler and one of the common people, with its emphasis upon the enhanced guilt of iniquity in holy things, and that privilege and responsibility go hand in hand. It is surely significant that the ordinances of the two birds in the cleansing of the Leper and of the two goats on the Day of Atonement, in each case one sacrificed and the other set free, should set forth the double truths inherent in our blessed Lord's death and resurrection, to be of sin the double cure, cleansing from its guilt and power.

The majesty of the law is one of the great features of the Old Testament. The fact that in later times this principle was interpreted in a hard, dogmatic and superstitious spirit is no argument against the value of the original promulgation. The law of the Ten Commandments with the further moral enactments and precepts has never been abrogated. True, they may appear somewhat negative in form, but this was inevitable in the infancy of religion, and it might fairly be argued that the Christian who keeps the Ten Commandments whole and undefiled is a much more positively righteous person than most of us can claim to be. The ceremonial law was admittedly " our schoolmaster to bring us to Christ," but the old pedagogue had some grand characteristics.

On the hygienic and practical side the old regulations regarding meats, purifications, and sanitation are applicable to-day and are greatly needed. It is notorious that the Jews through their observance of these rules have been conspicuous by comparison with other nations in matters of health and purity. Again, the old laws connected with the Sabbatic and Jubilee years anticipated by centuries our tardy legislation relating to slavery and property. In fact the land laws of the Jews largely effected what Socialism has so far vainly attempted to solve, viz. the problem of accumulated and exclusive possessions.

If the old Jews' conceptions of God depicted Him as somewhat austere and aloof, they at least inculcated that fear of the Lord which is the beginning of wisdom, the reverence without which there can be no true religion, and the obedience which, whatever its motive and character, is the essential of all organized life. It would not be difficult to prove that the conditions which necessitate our National Mission arise almost exclusively from the ignoring of just these principles. If the Jewish ideal erred in the direction of glorifying the arbitrary tyrant, the British caricature is that of the indulgent sensualist, John Bull, whose god is his belly.

The merciful provision of the cities of refuge for sins of inadvertence must not be overlooked with its interesting typical suggestion. While sins of ignorance were treated as sins and not infirmities, they were on a different plane to sins of presumption against light and knowledge, and with a high hand for which there was rightly neither forgiveness nor mercy.

"Our God is a consuming fire"—"I will be sanctified in all them that come nigh Me"—"Holiness unto the Lord." This principle was inculcated again and again by such incidents as the punishment of Uzzah and the men of Bethshemesh for trifling with the ark: and the sin of Achan with its weakening influence upon the morale of the people before Ai and the subsequent judgment. Objection is sometimes raised against the implication of the family here, and in the case of Korah's rebellion, as being crude and vindictive, but after all it is only making concrete the abstract truth that the children have to suffer for the sins of the parents, as may be observed every day in the infant mortality of the Floodgate Street area in this city. Perhaps in no other way could the baneful nature of sin be more effectively brought home. Again we have the case of

the man who was put to death for gathering sticks on the Sabbath Day, but looking at the matter from a purely utilitarian point of view, assuming that it proved a sufficient deterrent, would not the apparent cruelty of the sentence be altogether outweighed by the cumulative evils of systematic Sunday desecration observable under our own charitable régime? Again, take the case of Samuel hewing Agag to pieces before the Lord, which shocks the susceptibilities of some hypercritical souls. Just assume for a moment that Agag was a German and Samuel a Briton and even the most advanced of our critics would hardly grudge the latter his full aureole. On the other hand Saul, who made a virtue of sparing Agag, went to pieces on that very rock. It is all a question of motive and results, subject to the will of God.

This seems a convenient place to say something about the so-called imprecatory expressions in the Psalms and elsewhere, with their apparent spirit of vindictiveness and identification of the sinner with the sin. One preliminary observation is important. The Jewish nation was a theocracy, and therefore every violation of the law was a sin against God and every enemy of the nation was the enemy of God; in marked contrast with our own depraved democratic system, under which it was possible for a leading article in one of our daily newspapers to say recently that there is no such thing as an absolute standard of right and wrong, which could only be determined by the general sense of a particular community at a given time, than which sentiment it would be difficult to imagine any more grossly immoral, though it contains a germ of truth.

Here again the war has come to our help. The most restrained and cultivated people do not hesitate to employ such terms as the Devil and Hell in speaking of German methods and German personality, and rightly so. It is simply calling a spade a spade. There may be, but there *need not* be, anything vindictive in the feeling any more than in the case of a judge who in assuming the black cap sentences a murderer to the extreme penalty of the law, possibly with tears of compassion on his face. The treatment of Adoni-bezek recorded in the first chapter of Judges appears barbarous, but see his own confession "Three score and ten kings having their thumbs and their great toes cut off, gathered their meat under my table; as I have done, so God hath required me." Surely it was a cheap

price to pay for the stamping out of such a crime? Compare the case of Agag—"As thy sword hath made women childless, so shall thy mother be childless among women." It is merely an anticipation of the New Testament principle—"Whatsoever a man soweth that shall he also reap." This explains even such phrases as "Let his children be fatherless and his wife a widow" (Ps. cix. 9). Why? See v. 16, "Because that he remembered not to show mercy, but persecuted the poor and needy man, that he might even slay the broken in heart. As he loved cursing so let it come unto him, as he delighted not in blessing so let it be far from him." Before you reject the sentence, ponder carefully the crime. Or again—"O daughter of Babylon who art to be destroyed; happy shall he be who taketh and dasheth thy little ones against the stones," Ps. cxxxvii. 8. It is very horrible, but it is only "rewarding thee as thou hast served us," and most criminals understand no other argument. It does not mean, "This is my ideal," but "your inevitable fate." The Gospel teaches forgiveness of our personal enemies, but not of our country's foes. It is just this passion for justice and righteousness which makes the Psalms a very tract for the times. It was the jelly-fish indisposition to look things in the face and call them by their right names that caused the German policy of frightfulness to spring up: in that atmosphere it flourished. Directly we bring down a Zeppelin, they stop coming: when we catch the submarines they repent; when we start using gas, they desist. It is the most merciful policy in the long-run. So if we were to eliminate all the strong, passionate and disdainful language of the Psalms concerning the ungodly they would lose half their value. It goes without saying that what we love are the sweet comforting words of Ps. xxiii. or ciii. or cxxxiii., but you cannot have the sweet without the bitter. It is only the strong man who has faced the stern realities of life and has grown hard by overcoming the assaults of the world, the flesh and the devil who has really earned and can enjoy rest and peace. He alone has a claim to be called a *gentleman* who is prepared to knock down the cad. You have the whole idea beautifully portrayed in the well known picture of Lord Roberts with the little Boer girl seated upon his knee.

What grander sentiments could we have than, "I will set no wicked thing before mine eyes: I hate the sins of unfaithfulness; there shall no such cleave unto me" (Ps. ci. 3). "Ye that love the

Lord see that ye hate the thing that is evil (Ps. xcvi. 10). "Do not I hate them, O Lord, that hate Thee, and am not I grieved with those that rise up against Thee; yea I hate them right sore even as though they were mine enemies" (Ps. cxxxix. 21, 22)? It is just this spirit that we need to cultivate in connexion with the National Mission, and we shall never go forth with true compassion and attractiveness to win the world until we have learned to hate evil. Then and not till then will the world take knowledge of the Church, when she "looketh forth clear as the sun, fair as the moon and terrible as an army with banners."

We cannot leave the subject of sin and holiness without a reference to the beautiful picture of Moses coming down from the awful height of communion with God with his face reflecting the glory of the Heavenly Vision, as he mixed with men and things, himself unconscious of the beauty of the Lord which shone forth from his hallowed features.

The Hebrew had a lofty conception of the claims of God upon man's absolute devotion. A special blessing is pronounced upon the head of Joseph, as separate from his brethren. Samuel was lent unto the Lord for life in the Temple service. The Nazarite was to separate himself from all moral and ceremonial defilement, and as seen in the case of Samson his power was lost when he broke his vow: "My strength is as the strength of ten because my heart is pure."

Then there was the solemn dedication to God of that which was of most value to man, e.g. the fruits of the land, enemies and spoil taken in war, or as in Jephthah's vow regarding his daughter. This might involve the destruction of the devoted thing, if so demanded by God. There appears to have been the double motive of the recognition of Jehovah as the source of all blessing and success and the self-discipline involved in giving up what was most valued, as further exemplified in the dedication of the firstborn to the Lord and the firstfruits of the produce of the land.

The clear demarcation between right and wrong is strikingly illustrated by the ceremony carried out after entering the promised land, when the blessings of the Covenant were formally declared from Mount Gerizim and the curses of the law proclaimed from Mount Ebal, forming as they do the groundwork of our splendid Communion service, the infrequent use of which has been corrected

through the beneficent influence of the war. It is important to notice, that in St. Luke's version of the teaching of the Sermon on the Mount, the curses upon the unrighteous are given in the form of woes, as well as the benedictions upon the righteous.

"Life and good; death and evil" is the choice set forth in Deuteronomy xxx. 19. "I call heaven and earth to record against you this day, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore choose life," and in Joshua xxiv. 15, "Choose you this day whom ye will serve, but as for me and my house we will serve the Lord." Moreover, when the people somewhat lightly express their decision for righteousness, Joshua emphasizes the all-important consideration, v. 19, "Ye cannot serve the Lord, for He is an holy God; He is a jealous God; therefore put away the strange gods which are among you."

A word or two seems desirable upon the expression "a jealous God," which has been so much misrepresented. Far from being a crude conception of a mere tribal claimant for rival honour, it anticipates the root principle of the Gospel, viz. God's absolute claim upon His people. "Ye are not your own, for ye are bought with a price, wherefore glorify God in your body, and in your spirit which are God's." "Love so amazing, so divine, *demands* my life, my soul, my all." It is most unfairly over-looked that while the second Commandment speaks of God as visiting the sins of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generation (which is a law of nature) it is added "of them that hate Me, and shew mercy unto thousands in them that love Me." So that even here mercy rejoiceth against judgment.

On the other hand is it not just that loss of a proper sense of jealousy which causes parents to leave the care of their children to others, and that lies at the root of the sordid proceedings of the Divorce Court? The dignity of lawful authority and the glory of devoted obedience (apart from the war), are almost lost virtues in England to-day, which we have to deplore, while we admire the hoary splendour of the old Hebrew ideals.

It is time now that we turn to the inspiring subject of Old Testament teaching on the subject of Prayer. It is here perhaps that the innate spirituality of the saints of early days most impresses us. We think of Abraham, the Friend of God, who as prototype of the Beloved Disciple lay so near to the heart of God,

that he had a right to His inmost secrets. "Shall I hide from Abraham that thing which I do?" Then comes the magnificent and pathetic work of intercession for Sodom with its mingled reverence and importunity, "O let not the Lord be angry and I will speak but this once," with the important lesson that it was after all Abraham's demand and not God's response which fell short of the need, as also in the case of Joash, who smote thrice and stayed and so just missed the succession of victories which would have crushed Syria. How many prayers, good in themselves, have just fallen short of the persistency which ensures success? The other side is powerfully illustrated in the case of Jacob, who as he wrestles with the Angel of the Covenant, declares "I will not let thee go except thou bless me," and with a new name "Israel" comes forth as a prince having power with God and man and prevails.

Moses to whom God spake face to face, as a man speaketh unto his friend—"With him will I speak mouth to mouth and not in dark speeches"—beholds the similitude of the Lord and anticipates St. Paul's passionate patriotism, "I would that myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren's sake." Compare here Moses' words, "Oh this people have sinned a great sin, yet now if Thou wilt forgive their sin—and if not, blot me I pray Thee out of Thy book." Then comes the assurance, "My presence shall go with thee and I will give thee rest," which evokes the beautiful response, "If Thy presence go not with me, carry us not up hence, for wherein shall it be known here that I and Thy people have found grace in Thy sight? Is it not in that Thou goest with us?"

Again take the prayer of Nehemiah, so touching in its simplicity, directness and efficacy. As he stands in the presence of the great Artaxerxes, with his heart full of anxiety for his people and his city, and in response to the leading question, "for what dost thou make request?" (like Elijah before Ahab, realizing the super-presence of the King of Kings) he tells us, "So I prayed to the God of Heaven," and "I said unto the king," and "the king granted me according to the good hand of my God upon me."

Again, Hezekiah receives a threatening letter through Rabshakeh, with its reminders of the failure of other nations to resist the imperious will of the King of Assyria, with its taunt as to Judah's own unworthiness and claim to have God behind him. Instead of worrying over it or acting upon impulse, or consulting others, he

does what every God-fearing man ought to do, goes up to the House of the Lord and spreads the letter before Him, believing that He really knows, cares, and can help. An immediate response comes back through the Prophet Isaiah, "That which thou hast prayed to Me against Sennacherib King of Assyria I have heard." With the result that "that host on the morrow lay withered and strown, and the might of the Gentile, unsmeared by the sword, hath melted like snow at the glance of the Lord."

Or we think of the prayer of Asa who cried unto the Lord his God and said, "Lord, it is nothing with Thee to help whether with many or with them that have no power. Help us, O Lord our God, for we rest on Thee, and in Thy name we go against this multitude. O Lord, Thou art our God, let not man prevail against Thee." "So the Lord smote the Ethiopians before Asa."

Then take the incomparable Prayer of Jabez, the sorrowful, embedded in a long list of names in 1 Chronicles iv. 9. More honourable than his brethren, he called on the God of Israel, saying, "Oh, that Thou wouldest bless me indeed and enlarge my coast, and that Thine hand might be with me, and that Thou wouldest keep me from evil that it may not grieve me," and the sequel is, "God granted him that which he requested." If you add the prayers of Solomon and Daniel and come to think it out, you find every aspect of New Testament teaching on Prayer anticipated in the Old, and therefore every possible experience and need expressed.

It is often implied that the old Hebrews had but dim visions of a future life and that it was only towards the dawn of Christianity that hope began to irradiate the tomb. Leaving on one side all the well known passages which speak positively, if reservedly, upon the subject, I would ask you to notice how the Psalms, which breathe the inner life and aspirations of the faithful, are full of sure and certain hope beyond the grave. "I have set the Lord always before me." "Therefore my heart is glad." "My flesh also shall rest in hope, for Thou wilt not leave my soul in Hell." "Thou wilt shew me the path of life; in Thy presence is fulness of joy; at Thy right hand there are pleasures for evermore" (Ps. xvi. 8-11). "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil." "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever" (Ps. xxiii. 4, 6). "Into Thine hand I commit my spirit, Thou hast redeemed me" (Ps. xxxi. 5).

“ But God will redeem my soul from the power of the grave ; for He shall receive me ” (Ps. xlix. 15). “ Thou shalt guide me with Thy counsel, and afterward receive me to glory. Whom have I in Heaven but Thee ? My flesh and my heart faileth, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion for ever ” (Ps. lxxiii. 24, 25). In contrast with men of the world who have their portion in this life, “ As for me, I will behold Thy face in righteousness ; I shall be satisfied when I awake with Thy likeness ” (Ps. xvii. 15).

The prophetic section of the Old Testament is full of deepest interest. The prophet was pre-eminently the seer, who from communion with God had understanding of the times and therefore of necessity foretold, though his essential province was to forthtell. Every wise man can foretell the future more or less. The prophet inspired by the Holy Spirit did so to a peculiar degree. It is not a question of whether the Prophets could foretell future events. They could not help doing so, though often unconsciously. Instead of explaining away obvious prophetic utterances, we ought to be on the look-out for many more. All history is prophecy to the enlightened mind. The Old Testament literally teems with Messianic hope and promise. It matters very little which were pre-exilic and which post-exilic ; whether there was one Isaiah or twenty. The hand of God was upon the Prophets, leading them, often against their own inclination and interests, to utter home truths which did not belong to their times, and which are generally characterized by the frankest criticism of men and things, the unveiling of hypocrisy, the rebuke of formalism, making people see what they were in the sight of God and not what they appeared to be before men.

The miracles of the Old Testament do not seem to me to differ from any other kind of miracle. You either disbelieve altogether in the supernatural, or “ all things are possible to him that believeth.” Nothing is miraculous, when you understand all the laws which govern its manifestations. Everything is miraculous unless you profess to know the last thing which can be said about it. The harvest is as much a miracle as the Resurrection, or the latter as little a miracle as the former according to your view-point. We are of course bound to test the evidence for every alleged miracle, but the main question is, *cui bono?* and the Old Testament

miracles are all practical, beneficent and spiritually instructive.

The Songs of Moses, Deborah, David and Isaiah present a high level of inspired poetic fervour and devotion. The Proverbs and wise sayings are a compendium of well balanced instruction. "Wisdom is the principal thing, therefore get wisdom, and with all thy getting, get understanding" (Prov. iv. 7). "Her ways are ways of pleasantness and all her paths are peace" (Prov. iii. 17). "Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: fear God and keep His commandments; for God will bring every work into judgment with every secret thing, whether it be good or whether it be evil" (Eccl. xii. 13).

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