

## THE APPROACH TO THE OLD TESTAMENT<sup>1</sup>

**B**EFORE he died, Moses climbed a mountain range overlooking Canaan, and there the Lord showed him all the land. His eyes could turn to the eternal snows on the mountain peaks, or to the cornfields in the plains, to the Dead Sea at his feet, or to Jerusalem destined to capture the imagination of the world. Wherever they turned, they rested upon the inheritance promised by the Lord to Israel. *Haec sunt per allegoriam dicta !* They are a reminder that too many of us need the bird's-eye view of the rich landscape spread out before us in the pages of the Old Testament. Perhaps other more competent contributors will do the work of Josue and help us master the individual towns and strongholds. Here it will be enough to give a panoramic view, describing our general impressions and pointing out some vantage points from which to appreciate the significance and beauty of this vast inheritance of Israel.

If we wish to reduce the contents of the whole of the Old Testament to a single statement, we might say: the Old Testament is a collection of books recognized by the Church as inspired, made up of songs, prayers, history, proverbs and prophetic oracles, and expressed within the historical and religious framework of the ancient East. They are not the only literary products of Israel, for various Hebrew writings mentioned in the Bible have long since perished. Neither are they meant to be the complete account of the events they describe. For these books differ from secular writings, not only in that they have God for their Author, but also because they subordinate all other interests to the religious one. In the book of Ruth for example, a searchlight of divine publicity is focused upon a widowed Moabitess of no political importance. The reason is she is the ancestress of the Davidic dynasty to whom was promised the future Redeemer.

Perhaps the first general impression made on a cultured pagan by a first glance at the Old Testament would be one of bewilderment. He would find a mixture of early religious traditions, complex laws, sacred oracles and national history written in different styles and belonging to different epochs. His bewilderment would be artificially increased at finding this collection bound in one book and arranged out of chronological order, with little or no indication as to when history began and poetry ended. When due allowance is made, something of the same effect would be produced in us, if we were confronted with Cæsar's Gallic Wars, Milton's *Paradise Lost*, the Code of Justinian, the *Meditations* of Cardinal Newman, and the fulminations of Savonarola, all

<sup>1</sup> See Editorial, p. 81

bound in one book and printed in dull monotonous uniformity. The Bible, as has been said so often, is not so much a book as a library. It is like Solomon's Temple, built by many hands, of materials drawn from all sorts of places, and taking centuries longer than any temple to grow into its present fullness and cohesion. Comparing it with other religious books, Matthew Arnold once remarked: 'The Koran was made, the Bible grew'.

Not only did the Bible itself grow, but this very growth was rooted in a rich background of history of thousands of years. Just how far back these roots are stretched, it is not easy to say. The work of Turville-Petre near the Sea of Galilee, the discoveries in the Carmel district of Miss Garrod, of Miss Gardner and Miss Bate at Bethlehem, and the excavations of Professor Garstang at Jericho have almost ceased to make 4000 B.C. prehistoric. Similar discoveries in Egypt and Babylon give us the back drop-curtain, as it were, for the stage on which the drama of Israel's destiny was played. But what a multi-coloured background it is!—the rise and fall of empires with Palestine as the shuttlecock between the great civilizations of Babylon and Egypt, Assyria, Persia, Greece and Rome. They are a constant reminder that Israel did not live and develop in a vacuum. Syria and Palestine constituted the single land-bridge between the earliest and greatest centres of civilization, the one Asiatic, the other Egyptian. For merchant, politician, or soldier, Palestine was of immense importance. Shalmaneser (in the days of Achab), Tiglath-Pileser (in the reign of Achaz), Alexander, Pompey, Napoleon, and General Allenby have all sought to master this strategic bridgehead. Thus there was a constant ebb and flow of culture, politics, and religious influences pressing in upon Israel which are reflected in the pages of the Old Testament.

This historical development has an important corollary. Unlike the New Testament dispensation, revelation in the Old was not complete and final. Things that are so obvious to us now, were not at all obvious to the early Hebrews. Time and time again the ABC of all religious teaching had to be drummed into the wayward minds of the Israelites. It took many of them centuries to grasp the plain fact that God is One and Holy, loving righteousness and hating iniquity. The picture of Moses, his face haloed by his communion with the Eternal, staring down the mountain at the camp-fires lit around the Golden Calf, and the broken Tables of the Law lying at his feet, is a vision of shattering disillusionment over the wilful heart of Israel. 'The ox knoweth his owner and the ass his master's crib, but Israel hath not known me, and my people hath not understood' was true as late as the time of Isaias. Those people who explain the peculiar history of Israel by saying that the Hebrews had a natural genius for spiritual religion, apart from revelation, need to read their Bibles again. The reaction against the Tyrian gods and their

debauched cultus under the driving force of Elias and Eliseus saved the nation from almost national apostasy. As far back as the time of the Judges two currents of religious tendencies began to flow, which were destined to continue throughout the whole of Israelite history. Sometimes they flowed side by side, at other times they mingled and divided—the one upheld the pure traditional religion of Moses, the other, yielding to the contagion of neighbouring heathen peoples and their own weakness, manifested a more or less debased monotheism. On the one side were souls for whom the religion of Yahweh was the heart of all existence, individual and national. For them that religion was the principle of all prosperity, the source of power and glory, the unique law whereby to judge the incidents of life and the events of history. On the other side were men like Saul, Achab, and Achaz who let themselves be guided by personal interest, for whom religion was but a means to a selfish end, and whose human intrigues hid from their eyes the ever acting hand of God. So it was only gradually from crude, half-savage beginnings and many a relapse that the mingled judgments and mercies of God cleansed the Hebrews' faith from superstition and illusion in preparation for the noble mission imposed on them from on high.

Another element of diversity, if not complexity, is to be found in the wide range of character studies which make the Old Testament so vividly human. At the back of my mind is a paradoxical list of characters who arouse my keenest interest. Adam (the man who was never born), Elias (the man who never died), Job (the man who cursed his birthday), Jonas (the man who sulked with God), David (the man after God's heart), Ruth (the woman who liked her mother-in-law), Jael (the woman who hit the nail on the head), and Respha (the woman who guarded corpses). There is a mine of spiritual experience in the lives of saints and sinners and humdrum folk as they pass before us in the Old Testament story. There are the deepest emotions and highest aspirations of which man is capable voiced in language that can never grow old. In the Psalter especially and in the prophets, the men who wrote the Old Testament knew what it was to have the

'Desperate tides of the whole world's great anguish

Forced through the channels of a single heart.'

Read *aloud* the passage describing David's grief for the death of his worthless son, Absalom (cfr. II Kings xviii). Listen to that cry echoing down the empty halls of his palace: 'My son Absalom, Absalom, my son! Would to God that I might die for thee, Absalom, Absalom my son, my son Absalom!' Or read again of that mother of sorrow in the Old Testament, Respha, Saul's widowed queen, as she stood beneath seven crucified bodies, once the sons of her dead husband (II Kings xxi). For four long months she never left that grisly spot. Night after night she had little sleep as the eyes of beasts of prey gleamed at her in the

darkness. By noonday, when the heavens were a sea of molten brass, there would be dark specks in the sky and vultures wheeled croaking hungrily over the hillside with only a half-demented woman to keep them at bay. Her utter devotion melted the wrath of the fierce men who had slain those sons. They took away their bones and buried them beside Saul and Jonathan, and there in the dust they lie to this day. Within those pages are the cries of penitence and rapture which men feel at their purest moments, and the voices of mighty hopes beckoning them on to the horizons of eternity. They are filled with birth, death, hunger and parting, labour, joy and goodness—very elemental things, it is true, but the very stuff of all human life.

There can be little doubt that the Bible is a complex book, but after reading it, a Greek student once wrote in his own quaint English: 'The gabs are many, but the ghost is one'. He was struggling to express an equally important truth. The individual books are like a long succession of melodies, each in itself fragmentary, but linked up and woven together into the harmonious unity of some vast oratorio. The basic theme from Genesis to the Apocalypse is Christ. After all, the revelation contained in the Bible is from the One Divine Source of all Truth, and though written at sundry times and in divers manners, is directed to One Person, Jesus Christ, the Heir of all things and of all ages. To do justice to that statement would demand a summary of the Biblical theology of the Old Testament. However, at the risk of being superficial, it might be as well to try and reduce the plan of the Old Testament to its simplest elements. We can divide it up under the headings of the People, the Kingdom, and the King. A more theological division into the teaching on Man (Anthropology), the teaching on God (Theology) and their mutual relation in the doctrine of Salvation (Soteriology) is sometimes adopted. This division, however, would be too abstract for our present purpose, and in the Bible we meet these subjects as concrete historical realities, not as abstractions.

(a) *The People*. The Old Testament tells how God revealed Himself to a chosen race. This people started as a single family which was shaped and moulded through the centuries into a nation. The purpose of this ethnographical selection and training which occupy so much of the historical books, was to create and prepare a channel through which salvation could come to all mankind. The title-deeds of that divine election committed to our First Parents and early patriarchs can be summed up in the one word—Covenant. This covenant was ratified in a special way with Abraham and Moses. It contains the root-ideas of a great deal of sacred history and prophecy. By it were expressed the character and conditions of the relationship between Yahweh and His chosen people. Hence for the Hebrew the Law of the Covenant was more than a legislative code, it was the revelation of the Almighty to His

elect, a reflection of the Divine Mind ; and submission to it was the greatest act of adoration of which man was capable. All events and persons in the Old Testament are weighed and measured by their relation to the plan of that redeeming covenant. The book of Genesis, for example, covers the course of events from creation to the death of Joseph. It does so by an arrangement which may be compared to a series of narrowing concentric circles. It sketches in outline the story of how Israel became the bearer of revelation through the election of divine grace. In its genealogical tables those offshoots are dealt with first which were not destined to become bearers of that vocation. They are summarily dismissed in a few words, and the narrative proceeds to concentrate on Abraham and his descendants. Between the giant cities of Babylonia and Egypt we see the shadow of a pilgrim shepherd, and when they are crumbling into dust, his name will still be a blessing and a prophecy, for his adventurous faith is among the things that have changed the history of the world.

To be the vehicle of divine revelation to mankind was a tremendous vocation for Israel. Like many another divine choice it created its own problems and brought with it the possibility of tragedy. It did not destroy human freedom, and man's very intimacy with God carried with it the danger of His jealous anger. Men who jeopardized the fulfilment of God's supreme purpose by lack of faith, worldliness or sensuality were accursed by God, for they were rejecting the very love of God. 'With many of them God was not well pleased' and their bleached bones lay white in the wilderness. Yet the many instances of man's perversity which we find in the story of God's choice and man's response, do not lessen the value or interest of the narrative. On the contrary, these very failures brought out deeper revelations and compassion from the heart of God. In and through the amazing love of the prophet Osee for his degraded wife, we read a new meaning in the history of the chosen people. Israel was betrothed to God in the wilderness and married to Him in the covenant of Sinai, but oftentimes she proved herself shameless and unfaithful to the God who had wooed and won her heart. Yet adulteress and harlot though she was, the love of God pursued her still. It was a love not disillusioned by its failure to redeem, nor repulsed by the treachery with which its advances were met, but which persisted when failure seemed final and hopeless—a love comparable with that which the New Testament declares to be the nature of God. \*

(b) *The Kingdom.* To be the God of the chosen people implied more than that Yahweh would be a national God. It meant that Yahweh would reveal Himself to His people as the Living God in the fullness of His power and the riches of His grace. He bound Himself to protect the nation by His almighty arm, to instruct it in His laws, and guide the complete organization of civil and religious life by His wisdom. In a

word, as Supreme Judge, Administrator, and Ruler of the life of the nation, Yahweh was King of Israel, and Israel was His Kingdom—a holy nation, a kingdom of priests (Ex. xix, 5). It reconstituted that moral kingdom of God's rule over man which the rebellion of Adam had disrupted. In varying imperfect forms it struck root again in the story of the patriarchs, judges, and kings. After the transitional period of the judges the institution of human kingship seemed to threaten the framework of the theocracy, but the necessary readjustment came with the realization that the old theocracy was still at work under a new guise. The human king was Yahweh's deputy, king by God's grace and in some measure in God's stead; not as a rival, but intended to be the reflection of God's sovereignty in visible form. As such David confesses that he and his sons occupy the throne of Yahweh, so that His kingdom is still called '*the kingdom of Yahweh*' (I Par. xxviii, 5). Because his kingship was in virtue of 'covenant', he was obliged to obey the terms of that covenant. This fact lay at the foundation of a political theory that was unique—the king was subject to a moral law higher than himself, and this law gave certain specific rights to the individual under his government. In this respect the prophets like Nathan and Elias voiced the feelings of every true Israelite when from the beginning of the monarchy to its close they fiercely protested against the exercise of arbitrary authority which disregarded the rights of man.

(c) *The King*. All too clearly do we read of the tragedies that cast their shadow over the Hebrew dynasties. The autocratic Saul was rejected, David was a murderer, Solomon an apostate. With few exceptions the Hebrew kings failed to live up to the nation's high vocation which culminated in their own person. The more men saw the glaring contradictions between the reality and the ideal of kingship, the more did God raise their minds by His prophets to a New David. He would not fail to be the Representative of Yahweh as the image of His goodness and the Representative of the people of God whose priestly vocation to holiness and perfection would receive its fulfilment in the High Priest of all mankind. We can see that great thoughts of salvation and the consummation of God's kingdom gather round the person of the promised theocratic King. Just as the imagination uses the images of memory, yet revises, combines and brightens them with the magic touch of poet or artist, so the prophets under divine guidance used and adapted the elements furnished by David's person, power, and achievements to portray the image of the greatest of the Sons of David. This they did the more readily because of God's irrevocable oath to David linking the Messianic promises with the Davidic dynasty. 'No one', says J. O. Boyd, 'can form a just estimate of the influence which the brief oracle of Nathan (II Sam. vii, 12—16) has had upon the thought of later times, without going through the Old Testament, to say nothing of the New,

with an ear open for the many echoes which this one clear voice has awakened in the souls of hoping, believing men of Israel. All criticism admits the priority and influence.<sup>2</sup> If we may change the metaphor, we can watch the stream of Messianic promise broaden and deepen as it pursues its way through every region of Hebrew history and see how profoundly it is coloured by the vicissitudes of the monarchy, till it pours itself into the open sea of the New Testament . . . 'He shall sit upon the throne of David his father, and of his kingdom there shall be no end.'

These random jottings may serve as a popular introduction to the greatest inheritance of Israel. However, from earliest times Christian writers like Barnabas,<sup>3</sup> Clement<sup>4</sup> and Justin<sup>5</sup> remind us that it is an inheritance that now belongs to the Church. Every day in her liturgy she spreads out its riches for our reverence and love. To neglect the Old Testament is to lessen our understanding of him Who is its Perfect Fulfilment.

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## THE LABOUR AND SORROW OF LIFE

A NOTE ON PSALM lxxxix, 10

**I**N *The Observer* for the 18th May last, Bertrand Russell had an article which he entitled 'The Next Eighty Years'. In the course of it he said: 'My last ten years, according to the Scriptures, ought to have consisted of labour and sorrow, but in fact I have had less of both than in most previous decades'. Readers of the article may be glad of a note on the Scripture reference. This is certainly 10 Psalm 89 (90), 10, but it is not so clear which version Lord Russell had in mind. The words 'labour and sorrow' occur in all the following Anglican versions: the Prayer Book Version of the Psalms, for which that of the Great Bible was adopted in 1549; the Authorized Version, 1611; the Revised Version, 1881. The same words are used in the Douay Version, 1609-10. Both the first and the second of these versions lend themselves to the interpretation adopted in *The Observer*. The former reads: 'The days of our age are threescore years and ten, and though men be so strong, that they come to fourscore years: yet is their strength then but labour, and sorrow' (copied from the edition of 1663). The A.V. has:

<sup>2</sup> Cfr. J. O. Boyd, 'Echoes of the Davidic Covenant,' in the *Princeton Theological Review*, 25 (1927), p. 587.

<sup>3</sup> Cfr. Barnabas, 2, 7, 10 (ed. Bihlm., II).

<sup>4</sup> Cfr. I Clem., 19, 1 (ed. Bihlm., 46).

<sup>5</sup> Cfr. Dialog. 23, 2 (ed. Arch., I, 128).