

HOMILETICS AND CRITICISM: II SAMUEL 21:1-14

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It is not proposed to write a general article under the heading given above, but to use the striking, and from the modern point of view difficult, story as an illustration of the principle involved. It has always been understood that, in expository preaching, homiletics must be based upon exegesis and exegesis preceded by introduction. This is, if possible, truer than it was before; in other words, if a minister would now preach a genuine expository discourse on a passage chosen from the Old Testament he must bring to bear upon the particular text thus chosen his whole point of view, that he has gained by careful criticism, concerning the nature of the Hebrew documents and the course of Israel's history. This does not mean that the questions of criticism or introduction are to be directly discussed in the pulpit, but that the background gained by critical study makes itself felt in the treatment of such narrative, prophecy, or poem. In the pages of this journal we may take for granted that preaching of this kind, that is, exposition with a living historical atmosphere, is desirable. There are, of course, other kinds of preaching, but if this is altogether neglected the pulpit will be poorer and the preacher himself will be less completely equipped for his great task.

The passage now before us is chosen to illustrate this kind of exposition, for the very same reason that it has sometimes been avoided, because it seems so remote from our life, and from the standard of conventional orthodoxy is full of difficulties. The present writer sometime ago lectured before a conference of ministers, in which, along with younger men, several were present who had had long and varied experience, and in reply to a question it was stated that no one had ever preached on this subject. The aim of the lecturer was to show that in the hands of reverent believing men modern criticism restores to us the oldest stories and shows that they are full of noble lessons that grow out of the very heart of them and are not

attached to them by any fanciful allegorical treatment. The critical method simply means that we cease to apologize for narratives which, just because they differ so widely from our style of thought and expression, are such a real revelation of men's thoughts and God's ways in a distant age; that we no longer stretch and twist them on our dogmatic rack, but allow them freely to tell their own tale. In this sphere at least the best critical constructive work that we can do is also the best apology. Briefly let us take a specimen of what the old fashioned apologetic can do with such awkward material.¹

1. It concedes that this is a horrible story. Surely that is a mistake to begin with! The story has a tragic interest, a sad pathos; but there is, in our view, nothing sordid, vulgar, or mean connected with it. These people are face to face with a great perplexity, they find the solution of their difficulty, and though the process is painful they carry out what they regard as a solemn duty. We do not need to go back very far into the history of Christian nations in order to find examples of poor wretches suffering the death penalty for comparatively trivial offenses. We explain that philosophically by saying that society was then dominated too much by the idea of the sacredness of property and thought little of the individual life. If we go still farther back in the same spirit, we recognize that the oneness of the family and clan was "a ruling idea" capable of doing beneficent work even if at times it caused injustice to the individual.

2. In reply to the statement that "God did not command this," we must point to the fact that these men in their perplexity turned to the church, consulted the oracle and received an answer which was authoritative for them. "And Yahweh answered, it is for Saul and for his bloody house, etc." When the terrible transaction was completed we are told that "After that God was entreated for the land." To say that the men were mistaken and had no real revelation from God is to empty the story of its spiritual significance. To do this in the name of orthodoxy and in defense of God's honor produces a somewhat ironical situation. He who controls the long course of history scarcely needs that kind of apology.

3. Surely it is still worse to suggest that David was moved by political influence and availed himself of this pretext to remove from

¹ See article on Book of Samuel in Smith's Dictionary, 1863.

his path these sons of Saul. Now we can no longer regard David as the kind of saint that he was pictured to be by the later ages; he was not a saint of the Jewish and mediaeval type; he did not spend all his time in composing psalms and conducting church festivals. But we have too much admiration for the real David to believe him capable of anything so devilish as this. To poison the very sources of justice for personal and political ends; could anything be more vile and malicious? No! David with all his weaknesses was too great a man to stoop to any such meanness. There is a certain poetry of spirit, a magnanimity of temper about Israel's greatest king; it is a very poor exposition of the story that cannot solve its problems without blackening his character. It should not be necessary to insist upon this, but before we indicate the line along which the history can be allowed to speak for itself, it is well to see that the apologetic which proceeds from a strong dogmatic bias is now played out. The ancient methods rendered good service in their day, but while we seek to preserve what is best in them, we must give larger scope to the great idea of historical development or progressive revelation.

There is no need in this case for an elaborate critical discussion; for minute textual discussion we must refer to the commentaries; any point of this kind involved does not affect the broad expository outlines here prescribed. It is evident that the story is a separate fragment preserved in the records of David's life; it does not stand in any definite chronological order, but is found in the appendix. Questions of age and authenticity do not trouble us; all admit that here we have reliable tradition which takes us back to the earliest days of the Israelites' history in Palestine. Our difficulty is altogether with the ideas; with what we would in modern language call the theology of the passage; these men look at God and the world, at things human and divine, in a way quite different from that which prevails now. Surely they had a right to do this; we may have a larger perspective and a better balance of thought, but if our forerunners had not struggled painfully with life's problems and acted vigorously according to the light they possessed we would not have been in such a favorable position. In this spirit then let us look at the narrative.

1. *A Primitive Interpretation of Nature.*—There is a famine in the

land that causes great distress; this famine is traced to the direct action of God and its cause must be sought for in some definite offense. We are justified in calling this theology primitive, although it still persists and is occasionally preached from our pulpits, because it is one of the earliest forms in which men have attempted to build up a systematic interpretation of God's relation to the world and to human life. A famine in those days was not a mere inconvenience; when means of transportation were very limited it was apt soon to assume tragic proportions. It was quite natural for them to receive such a thing as a direct chastisement from the hand of their God; it was just the other side of the great truth that natural blessings come from Him. There is the beginning of a great truth here but like all other truths of the first rank it must have time to grow and show its many-sidedness. We have come now to see that there is scarcely any truth that can be literally carried over from those days to our own. We have read much brilliant nonsense about "the timelessness of Scripture." We cannot now digress into a discussion of allegorical mysticism; but this we know, that the divinest thing clothes itself in the aspect of its own time. If we would find eternal principles we must patiently investigate temporal forms. We cannot accept this interpretation of nature in this precise form. We know too much about the "reign of law," and what we really know is also an oracle of God; we must not conceive of the reign of law as a mere piece of mechanism, but we may contend that, rightly understood, it gives us a larger and juster view of God's action than was possessed by the Hebrews 3,000 years ago. We can apply the thought that is embodied here to our own life; within certain limits. In the middle of the last century Christian teachers and men of science did good work by proclaiming that such visitations as cholera and typhoid were tokens of God's anger, in the sense that they were punishments for neglect of the laws of cleanliness. To make sacrifices and offer prayers was not sufficient propitiation: attention must be paid to the vulgar things, the drains. In that way the spirit of this text can be applied, but we cannot go to the extent of believing that the city that is visited by earthquake or flood is a special object of God's wrath. We have to admit that only in a limited fashion can we moralize the great cosmic forces. Faith has still its burden of mystery to bear.

2. *A Stern Sense of Justice.*—We can easily disentangle the idea of justice from the form in which it is embodied, and then we find that it is a lofty one, in germ at least; one of those great prophetic ideas for which we are indebted to the Hebrew race. Faithfulness is not limited by tribe or sect. Saul in his patriotic zeal had broken the covenant with the Gibeonites and because of the wrong done to a non-Israelite tribe the vengeance of Yahweh had come upon the land. Here in pictorial form we have the thought which comes out so clearly in the teaching of Amos, that the God of Israel values righteousness more than he values Israel's political life. We may say this kind of vicarious suffering is wrong: let a man suffer for his own sin, do not attack the innocent children. We would have on our side such prophets as Jeremiah and Ezekiel, but these men had not reached that individualistic point of view, and we must not judge them from the later and higher standard. In the meantime, leaving them to express their ideas of justice according to the forms of thought in their own age, we concentrate our attention on the idea. Yahweh is the avenger of the broken covenant, even when an alien is one party in the case. The time comes when money compensation will not meet the demands; the blood of the firstborn is demanded. If the liberty of the slave on this continent had been purchased by money, even an extravagant price would have been a great economy. But in this world, after things go beyond a certain point they pass out of our control; there is a stern fate that seizes them; there is a tragedy at the heart of things. We must remember that justice is a supreme need of society. If we give the people law instead of justice, quibbles instead of reason, they will rise under the influence of the primal instincts, blood will be shed and it may be innocent blood. History is full of illustrations of this great truth; every preacher can find them for himself. The great lesson is to stop the flood at its source by carrying into our social life and politics this strong sense of justice. The bargain once made should be kept even if we suffer; the first suffering is noblest and best. The treaty should be faithfully observed, even if furious patriotism seeks to set expediency over justice.

3. *A Magnificent Exhibition of Motherly Love.*—Perhaps this poor woman feels that it is unjust for the sons to suffer for the father's mistakes; we cannot be sure of that; these ancient historians do not

revel in psychology after the style of the modern story-teller. Probably the mother accepts the sad fate without reflection of that kind; it is part of the established order of things. In those days it was woman's lot to bear a large share of the human burden and to suffer in silence. Rizpah was a subordinate wife, a piece of Saul's property, she had no high rank and few social rights. She could not spend her time on light amusements; the daily toil consumed her strength; yet we have here a real woman, a typical mother. All she can do is to witness the tragedy with pathetic sorrowful interest and give herself wholly to the last sad duty of protecting the lifeless bodies of her boys. Day and night she watches to keep off the beasts and birds until she is relieved of the sad task; until by kingly authority a decent burial is decreed for those who had suffered for a sin not their own. But we cannot escape from theology even here; the form that the mother's last sad service takes is determined by the belief that unless the body was properly placed in mother earth the soul was not at rest. We may have outgrown that particular belief, but the sentiment, the feeling of it, still remains in our bones and blood, so that we think that the most graceful end of our earthly struggles is to rest under the green sod side by side with our loved ones, in some spot hallowed by family memories and sacred associations. Thus even in this apparently repulsive story from a far-off time we find great ideas that in some form must always play their part in human life. And thus we must testify that there is a grim earnestness, a passionate reality about the way in which these people strive to understand nature as a revelation of God and to carry out with stern conclusiveness the divine will thus dimly made known. Surely they are on the way to something higher and they hand down a legacy which cannot be despised. If we, with our fuller light, have something of their serious determination we will find a presence of God and a divine oracle in the problems and duties of our own day.