

SOME PHASES OF THE LITERATURE OF THE
OLD TESTAMENT AND THE LITERATURE
OF THE ANCIENT ORIENT.

BY PROF. IRA M. PRICE, PH. D., LL. D.,

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO.

Literature is crystallized human life. "Language is the coin-current of thought" (Robertson, *Early Relig. of Israel*). Its preservation in written form represents the truly permanent and valuable remains of civilization, in every period of the world's history. Indeed, the literary remains of any age are a true revealer of the character of that age. Through these we see not only the mental, but the physical, moral, and spiritual life of any given period or people. I would not affirm that literature is the only revealer of such character, but as we look back into the past it is the chief and most reliable one.

Accessory to it, are the remains of architecture, sculpture, painting, religion and commerce. Each of these elements of civilization possesses its increment of value, and helps us to fill out the picture of the people or the nation whom we may be endeavoring to present. But of all the nations great and small, of the past and present, with all their magnificent achievements in political power, and literary fame, there is none which possesses the same charm for the Christian student and scholar as the ancient Hebrews. They were and are 'the people of the Book,' as the Rabbis are fond of saying. To them we are indebted for the reception, preservation, and promulgation of the doctrine of one God. They were the lineal antecedents of the writers and speakers of the New Testament. Their religion was the basis, and contained the germ, of much that grew up, blossomed, and came to full fruition in the life and teachings of our Lord Jesus Christ.

But the task that lies before me in this lecture necessarily has its limitations, and even within these, I can give merely a bird's eye view, of some of the facts and problems that face every thoughtful reader and student of the literature of the Old Testament. It is not within my range to discuss either the revelation or the inspiration of this literature, and this fact must be kept constantly in mind, but rather to look at it in this lecture from the point of view of literature as such.

The Old Testament is the most valuable literary storehouse of antiquity. In the variety of literary form employed, in the range of themes discussed, and in the maintenance of a high moral and spiritual tone, it towers above every literary product of all the centuries preceding the Christian era. Such literary excellence and pre-eminence have given it first consideration in every discussion that pertains to the Semitic race, and the history of religion.

Before we attempt to pass judgment on the literary form and style of the Old Testament, we must fully realize that it was the literary product of an Oriental people, and was permeated through and through with distinctively Semitic thought that was cast in a Semitic mould. In the very nature of the case, an Occidental cannot understand or interpret a Semitic Oriental, even today, as some of us have learned by severe experience, until he has made his mysterious stranger a subject of comprehensive and thorough study. Much less should any one of us presume to be able to understand, to interpret, and to dogmatize on the writings of a people of ancient days, when we have slight familiarity with their history, language, and customs. No one can appreciate more keenly the full import of this statement than the translators of the Old Testament. They must transfer, or carry over into English, a language of almost unbounded range of vocabulary—the thought of the Hebrew, which has only about 6,000 words in its vocabulary, and is replete with Oriental pictures, idioms, and customs.

What wonder, then, that some parts of the Old Testament are obscure, that many of its customs, hints, and references, are still mysterious! The simple marvel is, that we who read, not simply the English, but the Hebrew, can get near enough to it to feel the warmth of the life-blood that makes it glow with beauty and power.

I.

Let us now turn our attention to a brief inquiry as to the origin of this remarkable collection of Semitic books. Whence did they arise? By whom, and for what purpose, were they written? What is their content?

The answers to these questions within the last century have filled our library shelves. They have been written by every school of biblical thought, and have reached all the way from the adamantine position of the dogmatist, to the wildest speculations of the extreme radical. In other words, the answers are graded from the method of the man who first lays down a dogma and decides absolutely, in his own mind, "what was," to the arrant critic whose cherished hypothesis determines what "must have been." Or still more definitely the answers are as wide apart as these statements: (1) the writers of the books of the Old Testament received all that they said and wrote it down as a direct, verbal revelation from God, and (2) the literature of the Old Testament as such arose comparatively late in the history of Israel, not dating back of the song of Deborah, in fact, that poem is cited as the earliest specimen of Hebrew literature.

Neither the dogmatist nor the radical has the correct point of view. And the discoveries of the last century have compelled every writer to modify his answer. On what grounds? When we survey the arguments and conclusions of the writers who have decided for themselves the origin of the literature of the Old Testament we find that, up to within a quarter century, they have discussed Israel as practically an isolated race or people, with no

literary antecedents or contemporaries. From this viewpoint they have naturally determined the origin, growth, and final literary form of the Old Testament books.

But the last three-quarters of a century have seen stupendous revelations in the Orient. God has led man to the treasures hidden away and preserved for these days of minute scholarship and speculation, of investigation and research. The temples, tombs and tablets of Egypt and Babylonia have spoken. Vast libraries of ancient literature, on cylinders, seals, statues and papyri, now enrich the great museums of the world. The disintegrating ruins of the Mesopotamian valley, the dismantled fortresses and fastnesses of Elam and Persia, have contributed their part to the immense body of Oriental literature that now claims a place on the shelves of our libraries.

The fascinating and romantic stories of the decipherment and interpretation of these once mysterious remains of ancient civilizations must be passed over in regretful silence. The significance of these interpretations, however, is of untold value to us. What do they reveal? In the first place, they affirm in unequivocal terms, that the ancient Oriental world of South Western Asia and Egypt was occupied almost as long before Abraham's day, as we live since his day, by great nations and mighty empires who were in possession of a culture that every year, and after every inscription newly deciphered, shines forth with new lustre. In the second place, we discover that these old people were not illiterates, nor mere wandering nomads, but that they employed languages now known to us, that reveal in a wonderfully graphic manner their actions, thoughts and aspirations—and these, many centuries before Abraham left Ur of the Chaldees. Now, as we come down the centuries to Abraham's day and beyond, we discover a literary talent—particularly in Babylonia as seen in the code of Hammurabi, and other contemporary matter—that smites us with amazement. And this at 2250 B. C. in Babylonia, the place from which

and about the time when Abraham migrated westward! If now, we take a stride forward of about 1,000 years, we reach the time of Moses. Certainly there was no literary deterioration either in Babylonia or Egypt during this period. The phase of the question that is of prime interest to us is, that these great nations millennia before the time of Moses produced documents, that we may justly call in a broad sense, literature. These compass a large range of subjects, and are in character, historical, religious, magical, astrological, genealogical, philological and commercial. And they were written, too, in languages that were read and understood, at least, by the ruling and educated classes of the people. As we leave the time of Moses (locating the exodus of Israel from Egypt at 1276 B. C., and later) and come on down to the time of the fall of Samaria (722 B. C.) or the fall of Jerusalem (586) or the fall of Babylon (538), we pass through periods in which masses of literature were produced in the great nations of which we to-day, have many thousands of volumes in the form of clay tablets, bricks and seals. We know also that the small people on the east coast of the Mediterranean Sea were not ignorant of writing even in the fifteenth century B. C., as the Tel el-Amarna tablets, discovered in Egypt in 1887-8, tell us, as well as do hints here and there in the Old Testament. Professor Sayce long ago pointed out that the name of one ancient city of Palestine, Kirjath-Sepher, means "book-city."

I think I have said enough to indicate that Israel was simply one little one among the great nations of antiquity, and that her leaders were doubtless acquainted with the civilization of those days. It is not at all improbable that they were acquainted with methods of writing such documents as were prepared by those great nations. This acquaintance, too, must have extended to methods of preservation as well as to material used, and so vitally affected the good sense that preserved such records as we find in the Old Testament.

Thus the great civilization from which Abraham migrated, the people and lands through which he traveled, and the land of Egypt in which his descendants sojourned, wrote down and preserved their records, both to emphasize their own importance, and to encourage and inspire posterity. It would have been physically possible so far as environment was concerned, for the patriarchs and their immediate descendants to have put into writing the records of their times. Certainly, the education and training of Moses, in view of all the literary activity of the great nations of his day, are favorable to the view that he had a part in the production of the Hebrew literature that comes down from his day. In fact, it is most probable that each period of Israel's history produced its own records, and that these were put into form by compilers, revisers and editors at some later date. Now in all this I am not saying that these documents were merely the records of men's words and deeds. In many places, the writers say, "Thus said the Lord," an explicit statement that what follows was conveyed to the speaker or writer in some way by the Spirit of the Lord.

In view of the statements already made regarding the peoples contemporary with Israel, it is clearly evident that Israel herself, through her leaders, could and would have produced records of her political, social and religious life. In fact, enough evidence is found in the Old Testament to show that there were regularly constituted officials, whose business it was to record the events of their times; also that the prophets even from David's day were now and then the historians of the successive periods of history.

II.

This brings me to the second point in the discussion, namely the form of this literature. What is the form that we find as we examine it?

On turning to the Old Testament the thoughtful and careful reader very soon discovers that almost no book

of it reads straight ahead like a modern production. This discovery may be due to one or both of two things. In the first place, let us suppose that the reader is not an Oriental, and that he looks at things through Occidental eyes. This may seem to be of slight consequence, but one illustration may serve to make my meaning plain. The Oriental usually states a result, and then goes back to recite its cause, e. g., Gen. 10 gives the distribution of the people on the earth, and chapter 11 the reason for that distribution. In the second place, he finds that the narrative is abruptly broken here and there, and that the events in the historical books and the chapters in the prophetic books are not always arranged in chronological order. It is also discovered at the same time, that the narrative passes over long years of activity with but few verses. E. g., the reign of Jeroboam II. of Israel, extending over forty-one years is disposed of in seven verses; and the reign of Manasseh of Judah, covering fifty-five years is dispatched with eighteen verses. More than this, he finds at the conclusion of Jeroboam's reign this statement (2 Kings 14:28). "Now, the rest of the acts of Jeroboam, and all that he did, and his might, how he warred, and how he recovered Damascus, and Hamath, *which had belonged* to Judah, for Israel, are they not written in the book of the chronicles of the kings of Israel?" And at the close of the record of Manasseh's reign (2 Kings 21:17), this reference is made: "Now the rest of the acts of Manasseh, and all that he did, and his sin that he sinned, are they not written in the book of the chronicles of the kings of Judah?" In other words, the reader of these records in the Book of Kings is referred for any further information regarding these monarchs to the annals that were officially kept by the king's recorder. This fact very naturally leads to the question as to the method by which this book or these books were prepared.

The Books of Kings and Chronicles contain scores of references to annals, records, biographies and other writ-

ings which were the sources of information used by their compilers. It is evident that the editor or editors selected from these numerous and various original documents only such matter as served their very definite purpose. These books then are compilations of a selection of matter gathered from a wide range of original sources. They were most probably put into their present form not much later than the time of the latest event mentioned therein.

On examination of this literary compilation, it does not take long to find one of the principles of selection. Only such matter is woven into the narrative, as serves to teach a moral or religious lesson. In the reigns of the kings, many things that a modern historian would regard as essential to the perfection of his account, are not even hinted at. E. g., what was the exact order of events that resulted in the dissolution of Solomon's kingdom? How was it possible that Jeroboam II. was able to carry his conquests so far northward and win back territory that had once been conquered by David and lost by Solomon? And some things that we should have put into a foot-note or left out altogether—such as the long dry-as-dust genealogical tables—are sacredly retained and given an important place in the whole record. The compiler was not a historian, nor did he arrange his selected material primarily to teach history. Hence, while we have not a continuous or connected narrative, the matter in general is arranged in chronological order.

The form of the Books of Samuel is likewise that of Kings and Chronicles. It is clearly evident that the matter was compiled, as any one can readily see, by the putting together of pieces of information, here and there, that break any continuous thread of the narrative. As for example, the two accounts of David's presentation to Saul, and the supplemental chapters 21-24, of 2 Samuel, that gather up individual and scattered documents touching the life of David. Joshua and Judges, likewise, present the same kinds of evidence that they were put together by some sacred editor or editors, who carefully

collected out of the contemporary records such specific events, persons and words, as would enforce some specific phases of truth.

And the book of Genesis, on any estimate, contains material, all of which was compiled by an editor. And its present form is the result of the putting together of these pieces of ancient records to serve the high and noble purpose of the editor.

Coming down to post-exilic times, we find that Ezra and Nehemiah were constructed on a principle similar to Kings and Chronicles, and are as fragmentary and unsatisfactory, as secular history as any book we have in the canon.

Now what can be said of the prophetic books? In many cases we know that the prophets both spoke and wrote down their prophecies. Indeed, it is rightly thought that this was the then regular method of procedure. But when we take the books that are attributed to them—and I speak mainly of the great prophets—we discover that the arrangement of the discourses and of the chapters is not chronological, or even doctrinal. Neither were they placed in the order of utterance. There are, however, little groups of prophecies set here and there; e. g., those against foreign nations in Isaiah are found in chapters 13 to 23, in Jeremiah, chapters 46-51, and in Ezekiel, chapters 25-32. And even within these groups they are not arranged in chronological order, but on same principle, not self-evident, nor yet agreed on by students and scholars. Outside of, and beyond, this group in each great prophet, the chapters have probably been placed in their final order which is chronological—for the purpose of enforcing some great truth. Of all the prophets, Jeremiah was most free to quote, and comment on, the words and prophecies of his predecessors. Isaiah quotes about two chapters (15 and 16) of an earlier prophecy against Moab, and Ezekiel combines in chapters 27-32 a vast amount of valuable information, gathered from wide sources, on Tyre and Egypt. The most that internal evidence reveals in the minor prophets is that they consist

of short discourses pieced together, sometimes with a consecution of thought, but oftener without any such connections.

When we turn to the poetical books we have a variety of form before us. The Book of Psalms is one of the most interesting books of the Bible, merely from a literary point of view. Its 150 psalms are documents that stretch through the larger part of Israel's history, from David's time down into the post-exilic period. These charming little poems were, at some time, collected into five books, each closing with a doxology. These books, however, do not present the poems either in chronological or doctrinal order. For, psalms attributed to David are found in the last as well as in the first book. It is probably true that there is a general chronological order, for there are more late psalms in Book V., than in either of the previous books. It is evident that the compilers of this great collection gathered up and inserted here and there groups that cluster about one name or one theme. We find groups in the psalms of Asaph (73-83), the psalms of the Sons of Korah (42-49), the Hallel psalms (111-118), the psalms of the Ascents (120-134). These may have constituted small collections that were in use in the temple services and in the final compilation of their great hymn book, the Psalter, they were given a permanent place. Both these small collections of poems, and the great compilation itself were revised from age to age as the demands of the temple-service and the modifications of the language required. The changes introduced were just about what is done to some of our old and beloved hymns, by modern editors of music books. They removed obsolete words, and inserted new words for those whose meanings had been modified by the march of time and custom. These statements find their proof in a careful and minute comparison of Psalm 18, and 2 Sam. 22, which are one and the same poem; and also in Psalm 53 which is another edition of Psalm 14. Wherever the word Jehovah occurs in Psalm 14 it has

been changed to Elohim "God," in Psalm 53. In fact, there seem to have been times in which one name for God rather than the other, was held in chief esteem. When we examine the Hebrew of the entire 150 psalms, we find in Psalms 1-41 the word Jehovah used 272 times, and Elohim "God" 15 times; Psalms 42-84, Elohim is used 176 times, and Jehovah only 46 times; while in Psalms 85-150, Jehovah is used 339 times and Elohim of the true God only once.

All of this evidence is cumulative to the effect that there was an active revisional and editorial spirit in the preservation of the psalter, and one that must be reckoned with in any exhaustive study of this "heart of the Bible."

The Book of Proverbs was, of course, collected out of the wisest sayings of the wise men, beginning with Solomon. It is said that Solomon spoke 3,000 proverbs; but the Book of Proverbs as it now stands contains altogether less than 1,000. Furthermore, after we pass the first twenty-four chapters, we have several additions to the great body. Chapter 25:1 reads: "These also are proverbs of Solomon which the men of Hezekiah copied out"; chapter 30:1, "The words of Agur, the son of Jakeh, the oracle;" chapter 31:1, "The words of King Lemuel, the oracle which his mother taught him." These superscriptions inform us that these supplementary chapters were added at some time subsequent to the uniting of the main body of the book, and were gathered from various sources.

The Book of Job will never cease to weary the student by its unending problems. The prologue in prose, and the epilogue in prose, and the Book with its semi-dramatic form, give us a production that is unique in every way.

Now, what is the meaning of this bird's eye view of the form of Old Testament literature? This question can scarcely be answered without a glance at some of the elements of form in other Oriental literature. When

we turn to the documents and records of ancient Egypt we discover that almost all of them are such as were originally produced, and were practically, if not entirely, unchanged by later ages. They recite the heroic deeds of a king or of a high official, and stop there. The texts that prescribed the duties of a priest or scribe belong, as a rule, to one age, without much editorial revision of subsequent days. To this general principle there was one notable exception, the "Book of the Dead." This famous religious document—the most important in all Egyptian lore—was written, revised, interpolated and re-revised to answer the demands of each successive age through thousands of years, until the jumble of its vocabulary, its idioms and its syntax has made it one of the most difficult documents to translate into plain English.

The inscriptions of Babylon, Assyria, Elam and Persia are not compilations as a rule. They are made up of single inscriptions of kings, priests or scribes that have for their purpose the laudation of the author or promoter. They have no high historical or moral motive, but are rather intended to perpetuate the valor and greatness of some official. In other words, we find no history proper, carefully collected and compiled among these Oriental peoples. What they have left us is good material as far as it goes for us of later days to work over, and by eliminating self-laudation, bombast, and exaggeration, to construct a history.

As soon as we turn from these single local documents, historical, personal and commercial, to the religious and legal texts, we discover that they have been the result of long experience, of varied regulations, and of many writers. The codified laws of Hammurabi, and the religious rituals of temple service, have many points in common with the form and content of the provisions of the Pentateuch, and show us as did the Egyptian Book of the Dead, that the religious and legal literature of Israel's great neighbors, as of themselves, occupied their

chief attention, and carries the marks of the most scrupulous care in its perpetuation. The most introspective and psalm-like religious texts of Babylonia are poetry, not as majestic in form as our psalter, but still poetic and often truly supplicatory in tone, revealing a vast similarity between the Semitic mind of Babylonia and that found living on the hills of Judea.

III.

The content of these literatures has been partially mentioned, because in some instances it has been difficult to draw a hard and fast line between form and content. This theme must be greatly condensed, as I am already reaching the limits of my space and time. I shall begin with the stories of Genesis and proceed down through the Old Testament citing only some phases here and there.

The creation accounts of Genesis are paralleled by documents of Babylon. While the Genesis account tells a straightforward story in which God is the creator of the heavens and the earth, of the sea-monsters and man, the Babylonian story attributes all creation to the god Marduk, who was only one of the great divinities of the Babylonian pantheon.

The next item in Genesis most completely paralleled in the cuneiform inscription is the account of the flood. The content, even to the birds sent out to search for dry ground, is almost a duplication of Genesis—the chief differences being: first, in the reasons for the causing of a deluge, and second, in the presence in Genesis of one God, and in the Babylonian of many deities.

The contents of the legal literature, particularly of the civil laws of Ex. 21-23, and many others scattered through to the end of Deut. have found many parallels in the code of Hammurabi, codified about 1,000 years before Moses led Israel out of Egypt. Indeed it seems that some of these laws must have been statutes that were in common use among the great Semitic peoples of those

centuries. The existence of them in a code of 2250 B. C. and in the Pentateuch is extremely significant, first, as touching Israel's relations with the nations of that day, and second, the method by which the codes of the Pentateuch were produced. Scores of questions arise right here that would require a whole course of lectures to furnish adequate answers.

The historical literature has been already discussed at some length, and I have shown that its contents are not history in any real or modern sense of that term, but a description of personages and events covering continuously a portion of Israel's activity, out of which the writer could draw a moral and religious lesson. In other words, the history contained in the Old Testament is a moral or religious history of Israel, such as could be used with telling effect in subsequent times. Of this peculiar character of Old Testament literature there is no exact parallel in the literature of the great peoples of ancient days.

Of the contents of the prophetic literature, we have no parallel that deserves mention. The transcendent utterances of the great religious leaders of Israel stand alone, as the sublimest literary documents of the pre-Christian centuries.

But the poetic literature, stamped with the form of true Semitic rhythm, finds its parallels both in Babylonia and in Arabia. The lofty sentiment of a penitent soul, expressed in poetical form, is seen in the following from a Babylonian psalm: "O my God, who art angry with me, accept my prayers! O my God, who art wroth with me, receive my supplication. He who guideth the span of life, who stayeth the hand of death, my God, accept my prayer. Forgive my sins, and I will humble myself before thee. May my sins be forgiven, may my transgressions be forgotten! May the ban be loosened, may the chains be cast off! May the seven winds carry away my sight."

“Make me bright like gold!
Like a string of diamonds may I be precious in thy sight!
Cleanse me from wickedness, save my soul!
I will watch thy court and pledge myself to thee!”
(*Assyrian-Babylonia Literature*, p. 438).

These marvellous sentiments, many of them parallel in thought to the psalms of David, show us that men were moved by similar motives whether in Babylonia or in the hills of Palestine. Their recognition of guilt, desire for forgiveness, and joy in the presence of divinity were almost equally fervid on the Euphrates or on the east shores of the Mediterranean Sea. But the one far-reaching and fundamental difference consists in the monotheism of Israel's psalms and the rank polytheism of the verses from Babylonia.

Let us now summarize some of the points touched upon in this brief survey of the theme. The discoveries of the past three-quarters of a century have brought to light great masses of literature antecedent to, and contemporaneous with, ancient Israel. The existence of such documents argues for literary ability and productivity in Israel from the earliest times. It likewise prepares us to expect Israel to preserve her own records of events, thoughts and aspirations. Evidence shows that Israel possessed a class of men whose business it was to prepare and preserve her annals, the biographies of her great men, and commentaries on her events.

The form of the literature was such as we designate prose and poetry, embracing therein history, prophecy, wisdom and psalm literature. The present form of the history shows that it was compiled out of antecedent documents; the prophecies are arranged on a principle unknown to modern students, and the poetry was collected from a variety of sources.

The contents of the Old Testament narratives in distinction from those of the inscriptions of Babylonia and all other early Eastern nations are permeated with the

idea of the one true God, as over against hosts of lifeless divinities; they abound in moral and religious teaching that is uplifting and ennobling, while the lofty sentiments of the ancient Orient are weighted down by the cringing attitude of the devotees of the polytheism.

Purely as literature then, full of inspiring sentiment, the Old Testament towers far above all the choicest inscriptions of the magnificent civilizations of the long centuries before the coming of the Redeemer Christ.