

THE OLD TESTAMENT IN RELIGIOUS EDUCATION.¹

By PROFESSOR EDWARD L. CURTIS, PH.D., D.D.,
Yale Divinity School, New Haven, Conn.

OWING to the inferiority of many of the teachings of the Old Testament compared with those of the New, a feeling ever and anon arises that the Old Testament has but little religious value and might almost be dispensed with.

The Old Testament, it is true, will always be studied as a means of understanding the New. Jesus was a Jew. Christianity is but a further development of the Hebrew religion. The historical background of the person and teaching of Christ is largely made up of influences derived from the Old Testament. He who has never read the Old Testament cannot understand the New. Old Testament laws and customs are constantly referred to in the New Testament. Old Testament narratives furnish a wealth of illustration for exhibiting New Testament doctrines. Old Testament ideas form, indeed, not only the very foundations, but also a goodly part of the structure, which we may call the edifice of Christian thought. Christ also in his person, and through the kingdom which he has introduced, is a fulfilment of Old Testament prophecy. From the point of view, then, of enabling one to understand the New Testament, the Old Testament has a most important part in religious education. One must study it who is to have any comprehensive grasp of Christianity or the true religion. My purpose, however, is not to speak of this use of the Old Testament in its connection with the higher religious education or instruction of the college and the theological seminary, but of its place and use in the religious education provided by the church through the Sunday school, the pulpit, and the home.

Religious education differs from religious instruction. The latter aims at giving information or exact knowledge, the former

¹Address given at the opening of the Yale Divinity School, September 24, 1903.

includes more. It seeks to influence the will, to fashion or mold the character. It is a process of soul-nutrition, of the development of one's moral and spiritual nature. Through a religious education one becomes true and loving in one's relation to his fellows, and obtains an abiding personal peace, having a word of comfort for those in the sorest distress; and the fundamental postulate of this is the recognition of an all-controlling, all-loving personal force in nature and in human life; or, in other words, a belief in God. This is the substratum of a religious education, as the meaning of the word "religious" itself implies. And the Old Testament is the incomparable means for impressing this belief, because of all writings having this idea of God in a high and worthy form it takes this idea the most for granted. One reads the modern newspaper without necessarily a thought of divine activity in the world. One reads the Old Testament with scarcely any other thought. God is at all times and in all places present. One is constantly reminded of the words of the Psalmist:

If I ascend up into heaven thou art there:
 If I make my bed in sheol, behold thou art there.
 If I take the wings of the morning,
 And dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea;
 Even there shall thy hand lead me,
 And thy right hand shall hold me.

— Ps. 139:8 f.

The philosophy of life of the Old Testament is that

In [the divine] hand is the soul of every living thing,
 And the breath of all mankind.
 With God is strength and effectual working;
 The deceiver and the deceived are his.
 He leadeth the counsellor away spoiled,
 And judges maketh he fools.
 He looseth bonds of kings,
 And bindeth their loins with a girdle.
 He leadeth priests away spoiled,
 And overthroweth the mighty.
 He removeth the speech of the trusty,
 And taketh away the understanding of elders.
 He poureth contempt upon princes,
 And looseth the belt of the strong.

He increaseth nations and destroyeth them;
 He spreadeth nations abroad and destroyeth them.
 He taketh the hearts of the chiefs of the people of the earth,
 And causeth them to wander in a wilderness where there is no way.
 They grope in the dark without light,
 He maketh them to stagger as a drunken man.

— Job 12:10, 16–21, 23–25.

This universal presence of God in all history, in all human life, is stated by the Old Testament writers, not as an inference, but as a fact. He is absolutely and directly at hand. He is as real as the events and actors with whom he is associated. We speak of the different characters of Israel's history, of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, of Moses, Joshua, and the Judges, of Solomon, Jereboam, Ahab, and the rest. But in the Pentateuch, in Joshua, Judges, 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings, Jehovah is just as real a character in the history of Israel and is playing just as concrete a part as any of these human actors; and one more readily and truly learns of God and becomes impressed with the idea of his all-controlling presence in human life through the Old Testament than through any other means. This gift of seeing God thus directly in human affairs belonged to antiquity, and since then in its freshness has been lost. We find it, for example, in the *Iliad* of Homer, where the gods are ever present in the fray around Troy; but the Old Testament alone presents the conception of a true and worthy divine activity in human affairs. God is one; and he is essentially the Jehovah of the Old Testament. Were the Olympian deities true representatives of the personality back of the universe, then the *Iliad* would have a fundamental place in religious education.

With equal directness and impressiveness does the Old Testament teach the fact of the controlling personal force in nature as well as in history. Through simple fiats in beautiful order and completeness God brings the earth with all its creatures and environment into being. The winds are his messengers, the clouds his chariot, the thunder his voice, the earthquake his touch, the volcanic eruption the manifestation of his wrath. He always abides in nature. The grass growing, the dew sparkling, the rain falling, the cattle living or dying—all speak of him,

declaring his activity. Thus the Old Testament reveals God as the all-controlling personal force back of human life and natural phenomena. And if one wishes in the most natural way possible to communicate this idea to one with undeveloped powers of reason, and devoid of all ideas save the simplest, he would recount to him the narratives of the Old Testament. Now, in religious education we begin with children whose minds are in this condition (many adults also are "but children of a larger growth"). We teach them thus the fundamental idea of God. They can grasp him as he is presented in the Old Testament. He appears there under anthropomorphic forms or as a species of a man. He walks in the garden in the cool of the day. He descends to inspect the tower of Babel. He talks with Abraham and Moses and the prophets. He awakens Samuel at night. He is in one place apparently more than another. He has passions like a man, repenting on account of the things that he has made. He becomes very angry at those who thwart his purposes. He assists his chosen people in most marvelous and wonderful ways.

Hence children will listen to the Old Testament stories with delight, and will receive through them impressions of God which in their substance are entirely correct. God *is* everywhere present. God does take care of the good, and he does punish evildoers. A person *is* back of the universe, and the universe is one of moral order. The character of God displayed in the Old Testament, it is true, is incomplete. He is pictured as the father of Israel only, and not of all men. He is loving toward Israel his friends, but is merciless toward his foes, whom he ruthlessly commands to be destroyed. He is also arbitrary and capricious at times in his rewards and punishments. Abraham, for example, comes off well at the courts of Pharaoh and Abimelech, where he had prevaricated; while those who had innocently wronged his wife are made to suffer. The general scheme of the divine government portrayed in the Old Testament is also in some respects false. The failure of crops and the spread of disease cannot really be directly connected with the neglect of certain religious rites and ceremonies.

But reflection on these matters lies outside of the thought of children, and whenever it does arise as youth approaches manhood, the wrong notions of the Old Testament are easily enough rectified by those of the New Testament and the modern church. Difficulty only appears when the Old Testament is taught as an infallible book. It represents the thought and experience of the Jewish Christian church during the period of its childhood, and this is the very reason why it is so wonderfully adapted for use in the education of children.

The elements of the imagination in the Old Testament render these writings most interesting and implant the lessons they were meant to convey. The story of Elijah fed by the ravens, and of the unfailling barrel of meal and cruse of oil, impresses a child far more with the thought of divine care than the prosaic narrative of Obadiah sustaining the one hundred prophets with bread and water in two caves. From the latter the child would infer that Obadiah was a good man, but little of the protecting care of our heavenly Father. But this truth having been lodged in the soul cannot be displaced, even if we are later taught that the story of the ravens, and the meal and oil, may be a parable.

Questions of the historical reality of the Old Testament narratives ought never to be presented to children until they raise them themselves. Then children must be dealt with honestly, and teachers should express their own candid belief and that of the church.

We are to observe that the teaching of the history of the Hebrews, which involves biblical criticism, is not the same as the teaching of religion. The two things ought to be kept distinct. A great fault, to my mind, in the usual expositions of the Sunday-school lessons taken from the Old Testament, is that these two spheres of teaching are inextricably jumbled together. Apparently the endeavor is made to teach a bit of history and a bit of religion at the same time, and each as equally important. The danger is that a wrong impression may be left of both. Religion, roughly speaking, is to be taught taking the Old Testament narratives as they are; but history very frequently by taking them as they are not.

Historical investigation, however, has a place in religious education in interesting persons in religious truth. While a child receives directly, for example, the religious lesson of the story of Cain and Abel through a simple exposition of the story according to the material of the Scripture, the lesson of the tragedy of human history after sin entered the world may doubtless be sharpened for an adult by meeting his inquiry in respect to the origin of the story; and thus historical study becomes the handmaid of religious teaching.

I have emphasized the fact that the Old Testament has special value in the religious education of children. But it must not be overlooked that for this very reason it also has value for the religious education of grown-up men and women. Education is a continual process. Sentiment influences the soul; association and recollection move the will. The source of first impressions quickens and revives them in later life; and for this reason the Old Testament should always be read in our homes and churches.

And then also, though in certain respects the teachings of the Old Testament in reference to God as he is revealed in connection with human life and with nature need the supplement of the New Testament teachings and those of the modern church, yet they are very beautiful and full of truth. There is a wondrous revelation of divine love in the Old Testament. The whole aspect of God as there revealed is, indeed, that of love. Man is made in the divine likeness and image, as though God would have a fellow upon whom he could lavish gifts and affection. Paradise is prepared for him; and when Paradise is lost, then begin promises and manifestations of divine grace looking ever forward to a Paradise to be regained. The whole story of Israel is one of grace and love. Israel was the least of all nations. She had nothing to recommend her. She was always stiff-necked and rebellious. And yet Jehovah loved her. Her woes became his woes; her affliction his affliction. She might, like an adulterous woman, be faithless toward him, but he would never leave nor forsake her. Her redemption was sure in the end to come, because he changed not and his love never wavered.

Equally, however, with these conceptions of divine love given

in the Old Testament, we need those of divine wrath against sin. Stories like that of the flood and of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah are still timely, not only because God was gracious to Noah and Lot and their families, but also because he destroyed the inhabitants of the earth and of the cities of the plain. Israel's extermination of the Canaanites is an awful picture. But seeds of moral decay at the present time work destructions comparable to those given in the Old Testament; and while our philosophy may differ from that of the Old Testament writers in some particulars, it is well to remember that sin is accompanied with horrors at the present day.

It is interesting also to note how even the modern scientific thinker recurs to forms of expression identical with those of the Old Testament in reference to the relation of God to nature. In one of his recent works the late John Fiske says: "I often think, when working over my plants, of what Linnæus once said of the unfolding of a blossom: 'I saw God in his glory passing near me and bowed my head in worship.'" This utterance of Linnæus is a perfect Old Testament expression and form of thought. It is paralleled, when we turn from the flowers to the stars, in the words of the Psalmist who says:

The heavens declare the glory of God;
The firmament showeth his handiwork.
Day unto day uttereth speech,
And night unto night showeth forth knowledge.

— Ps. 19: 1, 2.

The simple Old Testament expressions convey religious truth in a way that cannot possibly be matched by any modern forms of thought, because nature, according to the Old Testament, is never viewed for her own sake, but only as a revelation of God.

But to become religiously educated one needs not only the inspiration of a knowledge of God, but also the inspiration of the knowledge of man and of oneself. This also is most abundantly imparted by the Old Testament. Human nature is there revealed. Humanity speaks through its pages. The joys and sorrows of mankind are pictured, of youth and manhood and age, of motherhood and fatherhood, of home, of wars and peace.

And all the delineation is in respect to man's relation to God or in respect to the question of right and wrong. This was the uppermost question to the Hebrew people, as their story is told in the Old Testament records. Other questions seem to have faced other peoples—that of commercial prosperity, the Phœnicians; of beauty, the Greeks; of order and dominion, the Romans; but of righteousness and holiness, the Hebrews. In reality the thought and struggle of all these peoples may have had much in common, but the Old Testament records the life of the Hebrews only from this religious point of view, and presents in a far more extensive and concrete form the struggle for righteousness and holiness than even the New Testament. The New Testament gives precept and rule and the sublime ideal in the life of Christ; but ordinary human action is in a large degree wanting. This is given in the Old Testament in typical characters. In the story of Adam and Eve we behold how man is tempted to sin and how he yields and falls; in the story of Cain and Abel, how jealousy can lead to murder; in the story of Noah, how the righteous are saved. Abraham is a type of the faithful; Isaac, of the weak and yielding; Jacob, of the strong and crooked whom grace finally subdued: Esau, of the frivolous; and Joseph, of the noble and wise.

Thus through the entire Old Testament glimpses are given of human life which, like the lives of men and women around about us, arouse thought and regulate conduct. No such types of religious significance can be found anywhere else in literature; and these are all labeled at their moral worth, and in them is the rarest combination of the simple and the profound. Children read Old Testament stories and are duly impressed with the lessons which they are designed to teach. Yet they contain material showing a deep knowledge of human nature and wonderful dramatic skill. In the story of the Fall the mysterious connection between knowledge and boldness to sin, the workings of conscience, the relation of guilt, if not to death, yet to the terror and curse of death, are given with such essential truthfulness that George Adam Smith says: "After all the centuries of man's acquaintance with himself, after all the analyses of philosophy

and ethics, we have hardly reached deeper than this ancient examination of the human heart." Something similar we find in other narratives, and thus they furnish the most usable material for the preacher.

All of the complex workings of the human soul appear to be given in Old Testament characters. With a few bold strokes of the pen they are sketched, where a modern writer requires a volume. The dramatic action also is often wonderful. Take, for example, the story of Naaman the Syrian, where we have the great and valiant captain a leper, the sympathy and saving advice of the little captive maid, the quest for health with the letter to the King of Israel, the fright of the king at the demands made upon him, the prophet's reply that there was a God in Israel, the message of the prophet to Naaman, the Syrian's anger, the persuasion of his servants, his healing bath in Jordan, his return to the prophet, Elisha's refusal of gifts, the vow of Naaman, Gehazi's appropriation of gifts, his hiding the stuff, his detection, Elisha's rebuke of Gehazi, and the servant's going forth as a leper white as snow. All this is compressed into a single chapter as solid and as eloquent as ever was written. "They have a miraculous talent of style, those Old Testament writers," says Alexander Whyte, speaking of this chapter; "our very best authors cannot hold the candle to them."

Modern scholarship tells us that many of the Old Testament characters are touched by the imagination. Doubt is cast upon the historical reality of some. But this does not diminish their value in conveying religious lessons. Criticism may teach that the story of Joseph is in many respects ideal. But no criticism can ever dislodge the moral feeling that the story of Joseph arouses: that one ought not to yield to temptation; that one should go to jail rather than do wrong; that God somehow and somewhere does vindicate the righteous. Criticism will dull the force of the story of Joseph only when it intrudes itself. Here again distinct religious use of the Old Testament and its literary and historical study are liable to be conflated. They should be kept clear and distinct. Historical investigation often lessens the religious value of an Old Testament character. Ahab in the

Bible is a type of a very bad man; in reality he was an able and vigorous king. Modern scholarship unearths that side of his character which the sacred writer passes over as recorded in the book of the Chronicles of the Kings of Israel. That lost book had great historical value; but we are not aware that it had any religious value. One does not necessarily receive a religious education through becoming acquainted with the history of the Hebrews, and much less with the history of the Assyrians; but one does receive such an education in taking the Old Testament at its face value; in studying it to receive the spiritual nutriment which it was designed to give, rather than the process by which that nutriment was created.

My consideration thus far has been chiefly of the historical books of the Old Testament, which appeal to children and youth. In the prophetic we have another class of literature, in which, since narrative is wanting, the appeal is made almost exclusively to adult minds. How, then, do men and women receive a religious education through the prophetic books? First, in the way which I have already emphasized, in being impressed with the righteous and loving and retributive character of God and his all-controlling power over the destinies of mankind. A spirit of optimism is given from the prophets: faith grows large; nerve and strength are implanted to endure the ills of life.

But the prophetic books have a function especially in arousing the conscience in reference to public wrongs. These writings are concerned with the fortunes of nations and classes in society rather than with the life of specific individuals. They proclaim the impending fate, not only of Israel, but likewise of Assyria, Babylon, Egypt, Tyre, Philistia, Moab, Ammon, and the other neighbors of Israel. These nations are weighed sometimes in the balance simply in regard to their treatment of Israel; and here is a notion which we must abandon as an incomplete statement of fact. Humanity is one; all mankind are the Lord's people. But almost equally are the nations weighed in reference to moral conduct in general—that of one people toward another, and that of one class in society toward another. And thus warnings are given against the greedy and covetous oppression of the

poor by the rich; against the prevalence of drunkenness, against bribery and corruption in high places; against cruelty in warfare; against lawlessness of every kind; against the lust for national conquest. These writings on public questions stir the conscience. Through them men may be aroused to abolish the sweat-shop and the gin palace, to protect the Indian and the negro, to purify the halls of legislation, to forbid the partition of China, and to repress "the unspeakable Turk." This is the great educational value of the Old Testament prophets.

The question is sometimes mildly raised at the present time whether nations or even corporations are amenable to the laws of Christian conduct which we apply to individuals. The Old Testament answers this question in the affirmative, and in a way that applies directly to modern life. There is no hereafter for nations. The divine reckoning of rewards and punishments for them takes place here. And prophets lay bare the secret of national ruin and disaster. The fall of Israel, followed by that of Assyria, Babylonia, Egypt, and other peoples, is depicted according to moral causes, and serves as a perpetual warning to communities and peoples of the present day.

In the poetical books and those of wisdom literature we have, in addition to material common with the other books, that which we may call appropriate for a second stage in religious education after God in history and nature has been fully recognized. It is the stage when man now speaks and gives the result of his own experience. His own inner life is revealed; the result of his observations is recorded. In this, of which I must speak most briefly, we find two main contributions for religious education. One is that which is given in the book of Proverbs, where prudence is especially inculcated. This is inferior; yet even this is not to be neglected or despised, because wisdom may well be a forerunner of love. Certainly obedience, industry, integrity, temperance, modesty, and similar virtues have a large place in a truly religious character. And the warnings written for young men in ancient Jerusalem are equally applicable for those dwelling in modern cities.

In this connection may be mentioned also the moral precepts

of the Pentateuch, and especially the ten commandments, which have always had such a large place in the religious education of Christian communities. These are akin to the wisdom literature, because they present universal truths applicable not simply to Israel but to all mankind.

The higher contributions of the poetical books are a stimulus to faith. The souls of believers speak in these writings, and in their utterance we find an experience akin to ours. This is the charm of the Psalter and of the book of Job. Something is furnished for every mood: a thanksgiving for an hour of joy, a supplication for one of distress, a confession for one of penitence, a doubt akin to our own in facing the mysteries of life. The sympathetic thus is everywhere expressed, but always in such a way as to increase our faith, to give that inward peace and furnish that word of consolation which is so important for others. This is the great work of the poetical books and of the wisdom literature, in a religious education, and properly crowns and completes that furnished by the Old Testament as a whole.

Thus the Old Testament remains indispensable as furnishing the material for spiritual nutrition, and occupies a place that nothing else can supply. Well, indeed, was written of it in the New Testament that it is "profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for instruction which is in righteousness: that the man of God may be complete, furnished completely unto every good work" (2 Tim. 3:16).