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THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF 1917.

BY A COMMISSIONER.

This was the fifty-seventh General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States. Fifty-six years have passed since the first General Assembly met in Augusta, Ga. This covers almost two generations. Years they have been of blended sunshine and shadow; of war and of peace; of defeat and victory. And through them all the pillar of cloud and of fire has led us. And our church came to this Assembly this year stronger, we believe, than it has ever been; stronger in numbers and stronger in wealth; stronger in evangelistic zeal and stronger in family religion; stronger in love for souls and stronger in its loyalty to its Lord.

For we are not of those who place its golden days behind us. Our Atlantis has not sunk beneath the waves of materialism and commercialism. Our look is forward and outward; forward to other heights to scale and outward to the lands yet to be won for Christ.

The Assembly met in one of our new cities; Birmingham, our great iron center; Birmingham with its mountain chains of iron and coal over against each other; Birmingham with its mines, its furnaces, its forges, its massive mills; Birmingham that today fixes the price of iron for the world and tomorrow must rank as one of the world's great cities. The Assembly met in the South Highlands church, a church that has a splendid location, that has had some gifted pastors, but that has had a sad and checkered career. It is a church that our whole

*THE HOMILETIC VALUE OF THE OLD TESTAMENT.

BY THE REV. PROFESSOR EDWARD MACK, D. D.,

McCormick Professor of Hebrew and the Interpretation of the Old Testament in Union Theological Seminary in Virginia.

The Christian's Bible includes the Old Testament—"The Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are the only rule given to direct us how we may glorify and enjoy God." The New Testament cannot be understood without the Old, just as the Old cannot be interpreted or believed without the New; a fact clearly illustrated in the spiritual blindness of the modern Jew. The phraseology of the New Testament and its doctrines in large measure are loan-values from the Old. How else can we understand the kingdom which John and Jesus came preaching? What appreciation could men ever have of such phrases as Son of man, Messiah, Immanuel, Justification, Righteousness, Holiness, Grace, without the Old Testament history and definition? The New Testament doctrines were not new or strange; they were the old fundamentals illuminated and manifested in Christ. What surprised Paul most was, not that the Jews rejected Jesus when they saw his miracles, but that at every reading of the Old Testament a veil remained over their faces, it not being revealed to them that it was done away in Christ. It was Paul's custom, whenever he preached, to reason from the Scriptures, "opening and alleging that it behooved Christ to suffer, and to rise again from the dead; and that Jesus is the Christ." Then, we may confidently affirm that the Old Testament is a necessary part of the divine revelation. How highly we should value it; and how extensively we ought to use it in preaching Christ!

*This paper was delivered by Dr. Mack as his inaugural address in the Union Seminary Chapel, May 8, 1917.

LITERARY EXCELLENCE OF THE OLD TESTAMENT.

1. The language, in which its messages were spoken and written, deserves consideration. It was admirably adapted to its purpose. Being designed for daily, practical life, it was not encumbered with the technicalities of the schools, but seems to have been drawn and formed directly from nature. It has caught out of the physical world the song of the brook, the roll of thunder, the weird hum of the desert, the twitter of birds, the laughter of children, and transformed them into the music of human speech. The Hebrew word for "psalm" suggests the hum of the insect's wing, or the vibration of a chord; the word for a babe is the melody of its own prattle.

There is facility of expression and mobility of thought through an inflection which is rich in art and symmetry. A single dot is often sufficient to convey a paragraph of meaning; a single added consonant may raise a word of indefinite and irresponsible happening into a realm of intelligent causation. There is no shade of thought nor stretch of time which can escape the quick reach and flexible fitness of the Hebrew verb. Not, for example, does the Son say merely, "I will declare the decree," but "I will recount," or "I will tell over and over again the decree of Jehovah"—David said, not "I shall dwell," but "my dwelling (now and always) is in the house of the Lord."

The psychology of the Hebrew language also shows its fine adaptation to the ends of divine revelation. The organs of the human body are regarded as the seats, or at least the symbols, of the functions of mind, soul and spirit. In the loins strength is located. The reins or kidneys, which give way first under nervous overstrain, are the seat of the will. A mother's bowels, which protected her child in the first and most critical period of its existence, yearn tenderly toward it; and there compassion is located. The heart is the home of the mind, and of the higher and moral nature. The spirit is the token and agency of power, and so takes its name and meaning from the might and majesty of the wind, than which nature has no mightier

element; for in both Old and New Testaments the word for wind and spirit is the same.

The language of the Old Testament is not doomed to oblivion. Every great revival age of the Church has revived the study of Hebrew; necessarily, since in it nearly three-fourths of the divine revelation are contained. There may be days of indifference; but I look for the time, when not only ministers, but teachers also of the word, will seek the helpful knowledge of that artistic and adequate language, which the wisdom of God provided as the vehicle of divine thought. It is not the technical speech of schools and of rabbis. It is not the coarse jargon of the alleys. It is the simple, direct speech of pure homes and of gentle comradeship. Like our own English, it grew with the growing life of its people; it became vocal of their contact with nature and their understanding of her beauties. This may be the reason that the Hebrew is more easily poured into English than into any other language, and that the English Old Testament is a great classic, like unto its original.

2. We cannot do justice to the great service which the Old Testament language renders the preacher, without some reference to those countless graphic and picturesque passages, standing highest among the admirable classics of all human speech. The chapters of Exodus narrating Israel's triumphant crossing of the Red Sea and the burial of Pharaoh's pride in a watery grave; the battlefield of Carmel, where the hosts of carnal Baal and sensual Venus were overwhelmed by the one heroic prophet of the spiritual Jehovah; the vivid picture of that Babylonian banquet, at which Daniel appeared late in the evening as an emergency guest; these and many others need only to be read in order to win the regard and stir the consciences of men. It is unfortunate that these great literary and moral masterpieces are not oftener read with understanding and feeling from the pulpit, that they may have their own power in the hearts of men.

Jeremiah's description, in his second chapter, of Israel's ungrateful desertion of Jehovah cannot be forgotten: where now is the love of the honeymoon in the wilderness? What can be

more worthless than a leaky cistern? Yet, "My people," says Jehovah, "have forsaken me, the living fountain of waters, and hewed them out cisterns, broken cisterns, which can hold no water." Sinful pride and religious indolence are seen, never to be forgotten, when Amos, the shepherd poet, denounces those who are at ease in Zion and lie upon beds of ivory, and sing idle songs to the sound of viols, and drink wine in bowls—but are not grieved for the sore affliction of their land. Who has seen or sung the hand of God in nature more eloquently than Isaiah, as he calls nature to rejoice in redemption: "Ye shall go out with joy and be led forth with peace; the mountains and the hills shall break forth before you into singing; and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands. Instead of the thorn shall come up the fir tree; and instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle tree." David bands together orchard, field, hill-slope and valley, sunrise and sunset, dew and rain, into orchestra and chorus to render an oratorio of harvest joy: "Thou makest the outgoings of the morning and the evening to rejoice. Thou visitest the earth and waterest it; thou greatly enrichest it. Thou makest it soft with showers. Thou crownest the year with thy goodness; and thy paths drop fatness. They drop upon the pastures of the wilderness, and the hills are girded with joy. The pastures are clothed with flocks; the valleys are covered over with grain. They shout for joy, they also sing."

There, too, are the proverbs and epigrams of Solomon, of Job and of the psalm-singers; the experiences of a lifetime of ages, crystallized into gems of truth and beauty to shine forever. These, and many other jewels of thought and expression, have won for the Bible its supreme position in the literature of the world. Here the preacher has a mine of treasures, to give his message the moral grandeur of a Cromwell's, the sound candor of a Carlyle's, and the radiant beauty of a Ruskin's.

THE GREAT PROBLEMS OF THE AGES.

The questions, which have claimed the interest and concern of all the ages, have been wrought out in the Old Testament. The origin and early history of man are matters of com-

mon interest to-day. Such questions are under the consideration of serious, as well as curious, minds; and no field of information is so rich in this line as the early books of the Bible. The Genesis narrative of the beginning of our world has maintained its authority when cosmologies and cosmognies of the wise ancients were forgotten, not merely because it is the Bible, but because intelligent men have recognized in it the most dependable account of the beginnings of men and things.

The problem of evil, which no philosophy nor theology nor individual reason can evade, is best set forth in our Old Testament. It contains no nonsense about falling upwards toward God through the evolution of conscience; but tells how into a heart made pure by God, and in happy fellowship with Him as He walks in His garden, sin entered by selfish unbelief; as also contrariwise by loving belief in God's Son sin will be overcome, and banished from the heart.

Every one is interested in the origin and organization of human society; how the individual became a family, and the family a tribal group, and the tribe a nation; and how the nation enlarges in the conception of grace into a kingdom of brothers in God the Father. This entire process lies unfolded in the Bible, with all the fundamental principles and experiences of this human society, or family of God. Here the modern preacher has firm ground under his feet, for the Old Testament is a volume of sound and practical knowledge. For all the great questions which vex the minds of all ages he has rich treasures of information in the book of God's dealings with His people.

THE SOCIAL MESSAGE.

In our day we hear much and often of the "social message of the Bible," until we fear the theme has been worked well beyond the eight-hour limit. But the Old Testament is never weary of this element in life, and never allows it to fall into the commonplace. The laws of Moses have to do with the making of a social order. The prophets are the world's greatest preachers of moral conduct and social righteousness. The first,

second and third chapters of Isaiah, and the entire book of Amos are eloquent in their call for justice and rightness. Oppression of the poor is the great civil crime of the Old Testament. God's ear is never heavy that He cannot hear; His arm is never shortened; but "your sins have separated between you and your God." The stately ceremonial of the Hebrews, in the prophets' view, was in vain without a moral heart. Says Jehovah: "I am sated with offerings; I hate your solemn feasts; your hands are full of blood; wash you, make you clean; put away the evil of your doings from before mine eyes; cease to do evil; learn to do good; seek justice; set oppression right; give justice to the fatherless; be attorney for the widow." Not tithes every three *days*; not lambs of a year; not the son of your body for the sin of your soul; but what has God required of you? To seek justice; to love mercy, and to humble yourself to walk with God.

The book of Deuteronomy is preeminent as the divine message to the social order. Those who are the children of God are brothers to each other, and must live in brotherly love. The spiritual background of the Old Testament, the central truth of the kingdom of heaven, is the double commandment, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart; and thy neighbor as thyself"; and this is the heart of Deuteronomy. The preacher to-day must have a moral message. He must declare the judgment of John the Forerunner, which is, "Repent, repent," before he speaks the evangel of Jesus. Conviction runs before penitence and forgiveness; and the Old Testament brings this moral message right to his hand.

THE PERSONAL ELEMENT.

The individuality which appears in the Old Testament is one of its impressive phenomena. The ever present "I" is on nearly every page. Behind and beyond the national, the collective, the social in this book is always the conscious and insistent person. It is passing strange how anyone can ever question the fact of immortality in the Old Testament; surely this persistent soul can never be destroyed, nor this "I" annihilated. This

conscious individualism must utter the victory-cry of faith: "Thou wilt not leave my soul to Sheol. Thou wilt guide me by Thy counsel, and afterward receive me to glory." An enterprising German has written a book on "*Das Ich*" ("The I") of the Old Testament; and one volume cannot exhaust the theme. The occurrences of the pronoun of the first person are so many, that concordances do not attempt to specify them. A distinctive feature of this book is the personal experience of the child of God. He is always telling through its pages the story of his soul. Men who hungered for God, or who personally knew God, are proclaiming their experiences, which in the very nature of the person are your experiences and mine. I repeat, that such individualism, such insistent personality is the premise, of which immortality is the necessary conclusion. It has also made the Old Testament the book of free men; and those who hold its teachings have claimed the institutions of liberty for them and theirs.

This intense personal element, while found all through the books of the Bible, abounds particularly in the Psalms, and the other emotional literature. It is a ringing note in the book of Job, which is the incomparable epic of literature. This book is also like a majestic oratorio. Through it there runs the major motive, the meaning of suffering or the problem of righteousness. But there are other and minor motives, which are insistently blending with plaintive, appealing notes into the greater harmony. One of these is the soul's desire for fellowship with God: "Oh, that I knew where I might find Him. I would come even into His presence." Another motive is the yearning for immortality: "If a man die, shall he live again?" "I know that my Redeemer liveth; and though after my skin worms destroy this body, yet *without* my flesh shall I see God."

But this soul-consciousness, this insistence on the individual is preeminently true of the Psalms; every great psalm is a transcript from the heart of a seeker after God; men who wrote the Psalms seemed to have God just before them. Said one of them: "Because He is at my right hand, I shall not be moved"; "Jehovah is nigh unto all them that call upon Him"; "The

friendship of Jehovah is with them that fear Him"; "Keep me as the apple of Thine eye; hide me under the shadow of Thy wings"; "Even though I walk through the valley of the dark shadow, I will fear no ill, for Thou art with me"; "I love the Lord, because He heard my voice and my supplications"; "The Lord is my light and my salvation; the Lord is the strength of my life; one thing have I asked of the Lord; that will I seek after; that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life." These messages of strange grace and sweetness bring us face to face with the divine one; these Psalms seem to be the expression, by some man, in some age, of that which is common to every religious nature, as though the speaker in the Psalms were the "I" in each of us. It is not strange that this book of Psalms has been held in grateful appreciation in all the generations of the Church. Such material is a means of grace to our souls; as well as an inexhaustible quarry for the preacher's homiletic mining. The old Bible is far from exhausted; it has virgin forests for sermon timber, and fallow fields which give quickly and richly to those who plow and sow and reap.

THE DRAMATIC ELEMENT IN THE OLD TESTAMENT.

In the Middle Ages, when learning was the prerogative of the few and reading was possible to one in hundreds, the masses of people were taught Bible history and doctrine through the dramatization of the Bible, commonly known as the miracle-play. Until comparatively recent times the squares in front of and around the old cathedrals were used to stage these Bible plays for days at a time, particularly at the Easter season. The Passion Play of Ober-Ammergau is a survivor of this old school of instruction. No book lends itself so easily to dramatization. In the varied literature within its pages there are notable specimens of the drama, such as the dramatic dialogue of Job; the Song of Solomon, and such psalms as the Second and Forty-fifth. But in a degree, most of the Old Testament has dramatic elements. The use of the verb is phenomenal; every brief sentence has its verbs; present tenses present a vivid

and actual picture; vigor, motion, freshness are on every page. The romance of Joseph's life; the serious comedy of Micah, the idolater; the noble, lovely domestic setting of Ruth; the stirring march of David's life, bring ancient life and its truth before us with rush and sparkle. It is not a book of the dead, but of the living. It is a noble book for reading; it lends itself easily to enthusiastic teaching; it always seems to move and live. The use of the imagination, so necessary a part of every preacher's success, is kindled and fed by the vivid, living message of the Old Testament.

THE MESSIANIC HEART.

The life which envelops and makes visible to us the beauty of the Old Testament is the shining presence of the Son of God. Not only in Nebuchadnezzar's furnace, but everywhere one is appearing in the Old Testament like unto the Son of God. The Messianic message is constant and unmistakable. There is a divine name, which with every use is reminding us of the promise: "Jehovah"; "He will be." The first dark shadow of sin served as a proper perspective for the clear vision of the Redeemer.

We cannot mistake the assurance with which Christ and his apostles used the Old Testament as the revelation aforetime to the fathers of the coming of the divine Son to live among men, and to suffer for them. When Peter had spoken of the first-hand knowledge which he and his fellow-apostles had of the Christ, because they had been with him in the Holy Mount, had seen his transfiguration, and had heard the voice saying: "This is my beloved Son," he added those unexpected words: "But we have a more sure word of prophecy." The Lord himself said to the two bewildered disciples, while they were walking to Emmaus: "O fools, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken; ought not Christ to have suffered these things, and to enter into his glory?" At Thessalonica Paul, as was his custom, went into the synagogue and "reasoned with the Jews out of the Scriptures, opening and alleging that the Christ must needs have suffered, and risen

again from the dead." Throughout the Old Testament the Messianic hope appears as the child of woman, scepter, star, sun, king, righteousness, atoning redeemer.

In Isaiah the vision is clearest, and the revelation is at its fullest. We ourselves have limited vision of the King and his kingdom; our views are limited by the horizon of our community, and of our need. But Isaiah beheld the unity and the immortality of the Messianic hope. His reign should be universal, world-wide, and everlasting peace would come with his righteous and gentle reign; the ills of life would be healed; nature and humanity would alike be transformed; the whole world would be involved in the blessings and the glory of his coming. It is good to go to the Old Testament for this unifying and cheering vision of the Christ.

I have heard somewhere of the bells of Moscow; how the various bells of individual towers and steeples ring out their separate, and often minor and plaintive, tones each in its time. But there is one great, central, massive bell, with tone so mellow, and yet so vibrant and pervading, that when its glorious notes roll through the air, the responsive metal of all the various bells catches the vibration, and all ring forth together in one grand harmony of sounding joy. It is so where we read the gospel of the New Testament; the vibrations of that glad gospel stir all the prophetic tones of the Old Testament from Moses to Malachi and to Ecclesiastes; and the melodies of all the Bible ages blend together into that rolling, ringing harmony of praise: "Alleluia, for the Lord God Omnipotent reigns." "And He shall reign King of kings and Lord of lords."