

...THE...

Union Seminary Magazine

VOL. XXI.

OCTOBER—NOVEMBER, 1909

No. 1

THE SIN OF STRANGE FIRE

JAMES I. VANCE.

Text: "And Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, took either of them his censer, and put fire therein, and put incense thereon, and offered strange fire before the Lord, which he commanded them not."—Lev. 10: 1.

Here is a weird and unique incident in the story of the chosen people. The text records a religious tragedy. It transpired during Israel's wilderness wanderings. It followed hard upon one of the sublimest hours in the nation's history.

The descent of the holy fire had just taken place. The tabernacle, that temple-tent of a pilgrim people, had been finished. The altars were complete and the sacrifices had been laid thereon. Around this shrine of their faith gather an expectant people in the solemn act of worship. There stands Moses, the man of God, who had led the nation out of slavery. And there is Aaron, the high priest, whose function is to mediate between the people and eternal mysteries. These two have just lifted their hands in benediction upon the great congregation.

Now will God answer? Every heart is intense. Will Jehovah indicate, by some outward sign, His presence and assure them that the cry of a nation's soul has entered into the heart of the Infinite?

Suddenly, as they wait, a flame of miraculous fire parts from the Shekinah in the holy place, leaps upon the altar, and

AN IDEAL COURSE IN THE ENGLISH BIBLE.*

THERON H. RICE.

Fathers and Brethren:—In answer to your commitment to my hands of this solemn trust, let me offer you this morning a sort of professional "Confession of Faith"—the ideal I cherish of the English Bible course in Union Seminary.

What I shall say will be distributed under four topics: the scope, the method, the spirit, and the practical results of such a course.

I.

The Scope of the Course. This should be the study of the English Bible entire and alone. During the three Seminary Sessions it is proposed to cover, not selected books, not certain groups of books, but the whole volume. Every paragraph, every line, every word of the Sacred Canon is to pass under the student's eye and have a thoughtful reading. Moreover, it is contemplated that his copy of the English Scriptures shall be the only text-book in the student's hands. On that alone is he to be engaged.

This scope is determined both as to its extent and its limits by very practical considerations. In the first place we undertake the entire Bible because such a comprehensive survey is necessary to the minister's adequate equipment.

Some acquaintance with every part of divine revelation is no more than is to be expected of every Christian who has been a Christian long enough to have read his Bible through. Believing what he does about this book and its relation to his salvation it is in the highest degree absurd that he should not feel the liveliest interest in its contents and spend all reasonable

* The Inaugural Address of Theron H. Rice, D. D., Stuart Robinson Professor of the English Bible and Pastoral Theology.

diligence upon its study. But the minister of the word, besides the reasons which actuate all Christians, is moved by additional constraints. He is to be a teacher of this very book. He must be a leader of the people of God into its divine mysteries. If they ought to have at least some acquaintance with its contents, he ought to have a respectable proficiency in all its parts.

Now the great majority of students do not possess this comprehensive knowledge of the Scriptures when they enter the seminary. They may have read the Bible through again and again in their devotional hours, they may have studied it in Sunday-school, they may have taught Bible classes, and even enjoyed attendance on Bible courses in college. It remains a matter of fact, however, that most candidates for the ministry come to the commencement of their theological studies extensively deficient in that kind of Bible knowledge which the gospel minister should take with him into the work of his life.

Nor do other departments of his seminary course fully supply the lack. It is true, there are two chairs devoted to the exegesis of the Scriptures, one employed in the study of the Hebrew text, the other in the study of the New Testament Greek. But all who are acquainted with the work of these chairs know that only select parts of the Bible can be covered here. The work of reading the Word in the original tongues is a slow process. The minute examination to which the text is subjected in this study does not permit the covering of the whole contents of either Testament. If the entire volume is to be traversed it must be done in the vernacular version, where the reading can be more rapid.

One other question may be fairly raised. Seeing that considerable portions of the sacred text are studied in the Hebrew and the Greek is it wise to include them in the English Bible Course, thus at certain places carrying the student twice over the same ground? Why not leave out of the work of the English chair the books expounded in the courses of Old and New Testament exegesis and devote the time of this department to

the study of those books only which are not included in other courses?

With the utmost deference to this plan, which is preferred by some, we submit the following reasons for preferring the study of the English Bible entire.

First, the courses on any given Biblical book as given by the Hebrew or Greek chairs on the one hand and the English chair on the other need not be, and will not be, identical or in any great degree repetitious. The methods of handling the materials in the two departments are quite different.

And in the second place to omit any book from the English Bible course, as it is here planned, would seriously interfere with a proper development of that course, one purpose of which is precisely this—to exhibit the organic unity of Sacred Scripture from Genesis to Revelation. This will be plainer as we proceed.

So much as to the study of the Bible entire. We confine ourselves to the Bible alone for reasons just as practical.

In setting ourselves the task of which we have just been speaking we have virtually determined certain inevitable limitations. It is clear that if we are to cover the whole Bible in three sessions there are some things we cannot do—they are simply out of the question.

1. We cannot allow ourselves to be detained by very much about the Bible. The vital thing is to master the Bible itself. Interesting and fascinating as many things in Biblical archaeology and Biblical introduction are, they must not be permitted to steal our precious time from the Biblical contents.

2. It is equally evident that we cannot pause to discuss questions of literary or historical criticism. These, exceedingly important in their places, we relegate to the exegetical chairs where they can be better handled in connection with the original languages, and a more adequate critical apparatus.

In view of all that has thus far been said, we believe that the scope of an ideal English Bible Course is the Bible, the whole Bible and nothing but the Bible.

II.

The Method of the Course. In the prosecution of such a course as we are outlining will be controlled by certain guiding principles.

1. Our method will be telescopic, not microscopic. In the first place, passing by, as has been said, much which may be learned about the Bible (of fascinating interest) we shall come straight up to the Book itself with eager interest and open minds to look it earnestly in the face. In the second place, taking for granted that all the battles over problems of criticism have been fairly won for us on other fields, we shall receive into our hands the English Scriptures as being what the great mass of English Christians take them to be, the word of God, the inspired and infallible rules of faith and practice. The Bible we are handling throughout this course is the Bible of God's plain people, the Bible of the rank and file of English speaking Christendom, the Bible of our mothers' faith, the Bible of the pastor, who speaks the English tongue, in the sick room, at the funeral among the sorrowing, the Bible of the preacher in the pulpit, the everyday working Bible, our chief tool and weapon as God's ministers to the Anglo-Saxon race. And in the third place assuming the results of orthodox exegesis, as represented in the standard expositors, as in the main satisfactory and for our purpose sufficient, we shall not pause for the microscopic examination of words and sentences (the function of the exegetical chairs), but shall try to take in large areas at one survey, attempt to master the Bible in its broad, general outlines. To discover the drift of revelation from its beginning to the close, to see the scope of the entire volume and the relation of the grand divisions to each other and to the whole, to learn the distinct message of each book of the Bible and the contribution each makes to the gradually unfolding thought of God.

2. We shall proceed on the understanding that the Bible is one book. Although its various parts were written by men of

many generations and differing characters, callings and kinds of culture; although the sixty-six books emerged from widely separated centuries of civilizations, yet, on coming together, in God's providence, between one pair of covers they are found to contribute a wonderful unity, through which one increasing purpose runs. The Bible is thus evinced to be the product of one mind and that mind God's.

3. As the product of mind, or intelligence, the book must reveal a purpose. This purpose is stated very fully in certain utterances of our standards. The scope of the whole Scriptures, they declare to be "to give all glory to God." This they do by teaching us how we may glorify God and enjoy him forever, by showing us what man is to believe concerning God and what duty God requires of man, by revealing to us the will of God for our salvation. In our study of the book we shall keep its self-declared purpose steadily in view.

4. The purpose of the Divine Mind which produced the Scriptures is carried out in a plan which is discernable in the structure of the Bible. According to this plan first things come. Simpler things precede more complex. Elements are first taught and then we are advanced to more mature revelations. The best way to study this volume is as the text-book which God has provided for all those who enter as disciples his school; take up the first chapter to learn that, master the next chapter next and so on through to the end, following the order God has arranged for us. This is at once simplest and most satisfying.

We have not space to give reasons for it here, but we believe that the order which the books of the Bible have assumed in our English version is a providential and significant order, the most favorable order, on the whole, for the clearest presentation of the Bible message. We shall not dislocate books, therefore, as is done in some methods, and not without profit. We shall not, for instance, take up a prophetic book at the point in the history where his ministry was exercised. We shall wait till we reach his book in its place in the English

grouping. So in the New Testament we shall not attempt to make a harmony out of the four gospels, but study each as a complete work with its own aspect to reveal of the person of Jesus Christ.

We propose to cover the Biblical material in three stadia: first, from Genesis to Esther inclusive—its Law and the History; second, from Job to Malachi inclusive—the Poets and the Prophets; third, Matthew to Revelation inclusive—the New Testament of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ.

III.

The Spirit of the Course. The spirit in which such a course should be prosecuted ought to be:

1. The spirit of scholarly thoroughness. The fact that we are handling a translation gives some the impression that scholarly ideals are not demanded here. But they are. The same scrupulous love of the exact truth, the same eagerness to get at facts at first hand and to compass all that can be known of the subject in hand ought to obtain in the study of the English Bible as much as in the investigation of any other department of noble knowledge.

2. And we ought here to cultivate, moreover, the spirit of devotion, the spirit of prayer and obedience. It may be possible to attain truth in some other lines without this, but not so the truth we seek. "Access to the innermost sanctuary of Holy Scripture is granted only to those who come to worship." (Beet).

In short let us maintain the highest standard of scholarship and cultivate the deepest spirituality.

IV.

The Practical Results of the Course. We will only specify three, which it seems to me reasonable to expect.

1. Such a course, so prosecuted, ought to make our students better Christians. It ought to minister to edification. It is quite easy to understand how the slow and laborious study of

God's word in the original tongues, dependent as it is on the aid of lexicon and grammar, should be largely destitute of spiritual profit. It is so eminently a scientific and intellectual process that there is only indirectly any effect produced on the spiritual man. It is a vastly important work and fundamental to the most satisfactory knowledge of God's mind and will. But we speak now of its immediate and direct effects only.

But the Bible studied in our mother tongue, and coming home to the heart in the homely idioms of daily speech ought to kindle the affections, make the spirit glow and refresh and invigorate the spiritual life.

2. This course ought to make men better expository preachers. The expository method is all but universally acknowledged to be the noblest and most serviceable type of preaching. Confessedly the great difficulty in doing it well is the lack of familiarity with the truths of Scripture, in their larger connection, their broader context. Our method is the very remedy necessary for this deficiency.

3. This course ought to make better qualified pastors. When the man of God comes face to face with the seeker of salvation, the tempted, the discouraged, the sorrowing, the sick, the dying, what he needs is a mind richly stored with the word of God—"the tongue of the learned able to speak the word in season to them that are weary." That man is best equipped for rightly dividing the word of truth who knows each great passage in its connection, who can speak to any given case of need today, a word which was given originally to meet a similar situation centuries ago. And to be able to select promptly just the passage which in its original import was intended for the very need he is now dealing with, the pastor must have a comprehensive acquaintance not with the text only, but with texts in their setting. And, oh! when he kneels to pray with a suffering soul to have words of God's book spring to his lips out of situations just like the one he is dealing with, is to have the Spirit's own help in framing his cry to the throne of grace!

Such, fathers and brethren, is our ideal of the Seminary Bible Course. No one knows better than he who has tried for a year to teach it, that it is an ideal, as yet far from being realized. I beseech you to follow your solemn charge with an earnest prayer that that Master, who on the way to Emmaus opened unto two disciples the Scriptures until their hearts burned within them, may be an abiding Presence in their classroom, transforming what constantly tends to become mere routine drudgery into the constant joy of sitting at his feet and learning of him.