

CHAPTER XXIII

Hebrew Literature

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Hints to Bible Study
The Colorado College of Divine Science
Denver, 1920.

Besides the historic and prophetic portions of the Old Testament, there is a varied literature of allegories, love, patriotic and satirical romances, essays, dramas and poems. The poetic mind of the Hebrew has long been recognized. To our western and sometimes prosaic minds the symbols at times seem fulsome and exaggerated, yet in the main we see that by the beauty of their expression a graciousness is placed upon ordinary incidents and that there are no commonplaces to the soul that sees life through the glory of spiritual interpretation. When we can elevate and glorify all the natural duties and varied relationships of life, we are getting most out of it and are transmuting material dross to spiritual beauty by a divine alchemy.

The Hebrew, denied the outlet of the stage, utilizes his intense dramatic power in spiritualized dramas impossible to stage. The modern arrangement of the Bible enables us to get his effects in a manner impossible to gain from the authorized versions. "The true form of the literary work must be presented to the eye. At present the effusion of the poetmaster in a corner of a provincial Journal is printed with more discrimination of poetic form than the masterpieces of the Bible." (Moulton.) The stage of the Hebrew dramatist is Heaven and earth; the *dramatis-personae*, God, Man, Satan, Wisdom and Voices of mystical import; the accessories, the elements and natural phenomena, not simulated but real.

The "Psalms" are poems in which the soul of man stands revealed. They are the history of the soul piqued to one object, that of finding God. They are the expression of the soul in all its moods "from pompous ritual and national paean down to the cry of the solitary soul in the dark." They are the march of the soul from the isolation of sense oversight to the unity of the soul insight; in them we find its unrest when out of touch, its supreme faith and joy when on the mountain top of spiritual vision where it feels underneath it the Everlasting Arms.

The first romance of length enough to be a book in itself is "*Ruth*," an idyl of the time of the Judges, but written much later, possibly after Ezra had prohibited foreign marriages. It is a charming story of the love of a foreign woman, a Moabitess, for her mother-in-law. In it we have a series of pictures of the customs of that day. It is through love for each other, of woman for woman, of man for man, and of man and woman that we feel most directly the rays of the Over Love that unites us in one human family. Simplicity, sincerity and love are the characteristics of the book of Ruth; it deserves its place in our sacred books, for it casts its spell over us and makes us feel that the spring-time of life will never wane.

"*Esther*" is a story of the exile told with dramatic power. It is the one book in the Bible in which the word God does not appear. It must have some historic basis, though scholars have been unable to trace it. It was held in great regard by the Jews, called "the Roll" and read annually at the feast of Purim. It is a story of patriotism, in which a woman matches triumphantly her resources, her wit, beauty and charm against the villain who would annihilate her race.

"*Jonah*," called by Lyman Abbott "A Satirical Romance," brings to us a lesson we may all well heed. It is a story of Nineveh, written several centuries after its fall. There is no historic basis for either the character of Jonah, or the conversion of the Ninevites. What this writer endeavors to convey is that God cares for our enemies just as much as he cares for us. The Hebrew felt that the Ninevites who had overthrown the Northern kingdom were outside of the pale of Jehovah's love; but the horizon of the Hebrew mind is broadening, this writer sees God as the God of the whole earth, and all peoples as God's people.

The unknown author of "Jonah" did for the nation's narrow concept of God what Cervantes did with the ridiculous excesses of Spanish chivalry, laughs it away. Jonah, a prophet, is commanded by Jehovah to go to Nineveh and save that pagan City. Jonah is a loyal Hebrew, the Ninevites are the enemies of his nation, so he determines that he will not save them. He takes a ship which sails west, the opposite direction to Nineveh, but sailing in an opposite direction cannot thwart the purposes of Jehovah who owns the sea as well as the land. He sends a storm which well nigh wrecks the ship and Jonah must confess that it is he that is remiss. The heathen mariners are most reluctant to throw him overboard, a lesson wholesome for a man of Jonah's type, the *heathen are merciful*.

Jonah arrives at his destination; it matters not how, this author merely wishes to assert a truth given in our Text Book, "Man is either driven or drawn to his final destiny." Jonah preaches to the Ninevites and they repent. He sulks over it, angry because God is merciful. Jehovah does not condemn Jonah for that, but with the patient love of a father for a wayward child endeavors to make him see the larger love. He makes a gourd to grow and under its shade Jonah finds shelter from the blazing rays of the sun. Jonah loved the gourd, but Jehovah prepared a worm which destroyed it during the night. "And it came to pass, when the sun arose, that God prepared a sultry east wind; and the sun beat upon the head of Jonah, that he fainted, and requested for himself that he might die, and said, It is better for me to die than to live. And God said to Jonah, Doest thou well to be angry for the gourd? And he said, I do well to be angry even unto death. And the Lord said, Thou hast had pity on the gourd, for the which thou hast not labored, neither madest it grow; which came up in a night, and perished in a night; and shouldst not I have pity on Nineveh, that great city; wherein are more than six-score thousand persons that cannot discern between their right hand and their left hand; and also much cattle?"

God receives no answer from Jonah; he is the type of mind at which this author aimed his shaft, the orthodox Jew. God has no favorite nation nor individuals; all are his children. A wonderful lesson and artistically told, the universality of the Infinite Love.

The [Song of Songs](#) is a love drama, but one into which a real spiritual meaning can be read. In each individual choice there is a larger side of universal significance. A Shulamite maiden is loved by a man of her own class, a peasant. King Solomon (chosen as the hero because he represented the apex of worldly power to the Hebrew) sees the maiden and would add this beautiful brunette ("I am black--but comely") to his harem. He woos her and his court women assist as the chorus. All the intrigue of worldliness, all the lure of sensuousness, all the blandishments of wealth are used to decoy her. It all falls on ears, eyes and heart filled with love that cannot be deflected from its object, therefore she is immune from temptation.

She is carried to Jerusalem into the royal palace and shown all of its grandeur and wealth. But in her dreams she wanders away through the streets seeking him whom her soul loves. Then comes the climax, she finds and is reunited to her lover. The steadfast love of a true woman is the best symbol of the soul whose mind is stayed on God. The soul stands between the true lover, God, and the false seducer, worldliness; when the love is so fixed on God that it can *hear* no other voice it is established and therefore free.

The Wisdom Literature differs from the prophetic; one is based on Divine revelation, the other arriving at essentially the same conclusion is based on observation. Wisdom literature is the philosophy of the Hebrew, a philosophy based on God and the inevitable judgments of God not in some future life but here and now. Wisdom literature includes Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Ecclesiasticus and the Wisdom of Solomon. The latter two books are Apochryphal, therefore not found in the authorized version. "The principle underlying Wisdom literature and giving it its unity may be described by a single word, Observation. The prophet rests his message on an immediate Divine revelation; the wise men claimed only to have observed life. Modern Science is not more faithful to its root idea of examining details and grouping results than is the wisdom of the Bible to its principle of analytical observation." (Moulton.)

[Job](#) is the most stupendous drama that has ever been written. "The masterpiece of the human mind," Victor Hugo calls it. It answers the query which every student asks, as soon as he hears the principle of Omnipresence enunciated. "If God be all, where then did evil come from?" And the answer is that in the process of life's unfoldment in consciousness, man must stand in unwavering faith, clinging steadfastly to his principle until all the shafts of mortality are exhausted and the soul can stand in undisturbed serenity and not be deflected by any outward appearance.

No evil is evil to the soul that overcomes it, it is only evil as it overcomes us. Otherwise it has been a beneficent development of consciousness and power. The Book of Job contradicts the conception that trials are punishment for sin, but enunciates them as opportunities for spiritual initiation. Satan tells us his origin, and to know the origin of

anything is to have the mastery of it. God does not know him, therefore he is not of God's Creation. "Now, there was a day when the sons of God came to present themselves before the Lord, and the Adversary came also among them. And the Lord said unto the Adversary, Whence comest thou? Then the Adversary answered the Lord and said, From going to and fro in the earth, and from walking up and down in it." The Adversary is something that exists only in human belief; it actually is nothing but what we have not worked out. A great modern prophet says, "All the good the human mind knows is negative." Job's early possessions of health, wealth and friends were negative; that is, they were based on external beliefs in what he possessed. Possession is never an external hold of anything; it is an interior consciousness of eternal Reality. Evil then in any guise is only a vacuum in thought to be filled with the eternal idea of substance.

Outside of the historic prophets we must place Joel; he belongs to no time, but, like Revelation, gives us the eternal irreconcilability of good and evil. It is a continuous dramatic presentation of the mystic forces of destruction and the power to stay these forces as we arrive at the Valley of Decision (Valley of Jehosaphat). This great poem, under the symbol of the Locust Plague, reveals the destructive power of sin, and sin is *indecision*. Power is a definite stand in God's judgments. What truer picture can be drawn of a soul or a nation who is overcome by sin than this:

"The land is a Garden of Eden before them,
And behind them a desolate wilderness."

The soul that has yielded to temptation, instead of overcoming it, is a desolate wilderness, for the fair flowers of spiritual accomplishment cannot grow in it.

Of this work Professor Moulton says, "The movement of the poem is the beautiful movement of a regular arch, with the turning point in the center, while every stage in the rise of the action has its counterpoint in the fall." First, Desolation and Mourning; second, Judgment Advancing; third, Repentance; then the top and the turn, Relief and Restoration; fifth, Israel Repentant; sixth, Valley of Decision; seventh, The Holy Mountain of Eternal Peace. Thus we trace the steps the soul takes as it turns from mortal beliefs (Locust Plague) and comes to God's judgments, spiritual Reality. And the gracious promise abides, "I will restore to you the years that the locust hath eaten." To the repentant soul who turns to God's judgment there is no loss, all is restored.

The later books of Jewish literature show a decidedly Grecian influence. This is most pronounced in the Apochryphal Wisdom books. The Wisdom of Solomon is so largely Grecian that it uses the phraseology of Greek philosophy and it enumerates the four cardinal virtues of Plato specifically. The contribution of the East is the infinite nature of God; that of the West unconquerable man, God's own son. Emerson claims that the East and the West met in the mind of Plato; if this is true of the Grecian philosopher it is still more true of the universal consciousness of Jesus. He saw the infinite God and man's infinite capacity to comprehend Him.

"Daniel" was written at a crucial point of Jewish history. The nation since the time of Alexander the Great had been under Grecian kings. In the reign of Antiochus Epiphanes (176-164 B.C.), this monarch persecuted the Jews with great severity because of their resistance to the introduction of Grecian gods. The heroic Maccabees successfully resisted him, and the Jews gained eighty years of independence; then they came under the Roman Empire.

During the persecution of Antiochus, the Jews needed a stimulus and this was given in the historic romance of Daniel. "The Abomination of Desolation" refers to the erection of the Greek god Zeus in the temple of Jerusalem and the order given the Jews by the king to worship it. Many suffered martyrdom for their faith and the book of Daniel, with a hero absolutely true to Jehovah when in exile and under a foreign king, must have been a powerful encouragement to an oppressed people.

It is interesting and inspiring to see that this writer believed in the ability of man to read all mysteries; also his perception that men true to the highest could not be burned in fire and that the lions could be subdued by a power which they recognized as God. A spiritualized body would be immune in the fire and to one filled with love all nature would be subservient.

Jesus, foreseeing the fall of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. and an inner experience which befalls every soul as it turns from the concept of a material life to the spiritual, quotes from the book of Daniel, "But when ye see the Abomination of Desolation, spoken by Daniel the prophet, standing where it ought not (let him that readeth understand), then let them that be in Judea flee to the mountains." Judaism and its temple were destroyed because with the advent of Christianity they were outgrown and the old form could not contain the new wine whose fermentation changed the history of the world.