

THE OLD TESTAMENT AS A TEXT-BOOK.

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WE have now reached a stage of religious development analogous to that attained by ancient Greece in the days of Plato. It was during the lifetime of this philosopher that the discovery was made that the old myths and stories about the gods were unsuited to the people's advanced philosophical and religious conceptions. It was Plato who declaimed against the old teachings of the priests and the poets, with their immoral stories about Jupiter and the other gods. "How can we," cried the venerable old sage, "how can we expect our present generation, our youth, to be virtuous, when the old myths they hear recounted tell of the immoral deeds of the gods, the unmentionable escapades of Jupiter! They not only corrupt the virtues of the people, but set for them a low standard, an immoral example to follow." We to-day are confronted with the same difficulty in regard to the Bible. The old religious books that were our inspiration, the standard of our conduct, have become antiquated. We have outgrown their teachings; we have developed while they have remained stationary. Unconsciously, we have not only surpassed the teachings of the Bible, but have outgrown its very conception of God. And yet our religious leaders, our educators, insist upon the sanctity and preservation of the Bible as a book from which we should draw sustenance of spirit and inspiration of faith. This Bible is read in our schools, it is the textbook of our Sunday-schools, it is perused in our homes by old and young. In times of trouble we turn to it for advice and guidance; in days of sorrow we seek in it comfort and hope; in moments of perplexity we look into the pages of this vademecum for wisdom and understanding.

But though the Bible has lofty and noble thoughts, it is also full of unethical, immoral, and corrupt ideas, and hence its influence is not always for the best. Its conception of God as a cruel and

unjust despot; its stories, often lewd and unwholesome; and finally its very teachings and laws harsh and unethical in the extreme: what stimulus can these offer toward the realization of the high ideals we would hold out before our children? That Satan has a chance to quote the Bible shows that the Holy Book is not without Satanic passages. Indeed this should not surprise us when we review the history of the Book, and recall that it was written in an age when humanity was savage, ignorant, and licentious; at a time when the moral standard was very low. In order to understand how completely we have outgrown the Biblical ideas, let us enter upon a detailed examination of the Old Testament, its ethical teachings, its moral laws, and its God-idea.

A study of the Old-Testament God-idea will show how far this is beneath our present-day standard. From the beginning of the Old Testament to its end, God is represented as a jealous,¹ revengeful,² and severe tyrant, who punishes his enemies with a fury unbecoming a supreme being. He covets honor and praise, he objects to the other gods' depriving him of one jot of the glory due to himself. He is even cruel and barbarous, for he commands the Children of Israel to slay every one of the Canaanites, men, women, and children,—not a soul must be allowed to live.³ He is wroth with them for having spared some of the Midianite women. "You should have killed them all," is the cry of his prophet, Moses.⁴ King Saul is denounced as an enemy of Yahawe,⁵ because he had pity on the Amalekites, and suffered their king to live.⁶ God slew Uzzah, we are told, because that luckless man, in his anxiety to prevent the Ark from falling, stretched forth his hand to support it.⁷ King Ahab, too, is censured by Yahawe's prophet for allowing the King of Aram to escape.⁸

God is truth, we hold. And yet we read unblinkingly how he bids Moses tell Pharaoh that the Children of Israel are to leave Egypt for a three days' journey only, when in reality he is planning their entire freedom,—they should never return.⁹ He likewise commands Moses to order the Israelites to borrow gold and silver vessels, ornaments and jewelry, from the Egyptians under false pretences,

¹ Ex. xx, 5: "I am a jealous god, visiting the iniquities of the fathers upon the children."

² Ps. xciv. 1.

³ Deut. xx. 16.

⁴ Num. xxxi. 14-16.

⁵ The spelling "Yahawe" indicates the pronunciation used at the Jewish Theological Seminary of New York.

⁶ I Sam. xv. 9, 11.

⁷ 2 Sam. vi. 6-7.

⁸ I Kings xx. 42.

⁹ Ex. iii. 18.

promising to return them later, although the intention was otherwise.¹⁰ In this connection he shows himself hardly less vainglorious than untruthful, for he says to Moses: Tell Pharaoh to send the People of Israel out of Egypt, but (as I am anxious to become known in the world as a powerful god) I will harden his heart, so that he will not suffer them to depart. This will give me the opportunity to show my arm and my strength to the Children of Israel.¹¹ Thus, for a mere whim, to prove his strength, to show off, as it were,—God is willing to pervert Pharaoh's heart not to do his bidding.

Again, Yahawe is depicted in the Old Testament as ignorant of the future, for we read how God repented in his heart of having made man, after he found out that man was iniquitous. He seems to have learned his mistake too late; and therefore, because man was not so docile as his Maker expected him to be, God sent a flood to exterminate him from the face of the earth.¹² In like manner, on learning that King Saul was not so amenable to his harsh commands as he had anticipated, he repented of having anointed him as ruler over Israel.¹³ As for his dread of man's acquiring wisdom, it is almost pusillanimous. Thus he first places a temptation before the innocent Adam and Eve, forbidding them to eat of the tree of knowledge for no cause whatever, and then punishes them harshly for disobeying, as if he had not known the result beforehand.¹⁴ The reason given for this prohibition is: lest man become as wise as God, knowing good from evil.¹⁵ Are we to infer then that God objects to man's endeavors to acquire knowledge; that he wishes his creatures to remain ignorant and stupid? The same fear of man's ingenuity is apparent in the story of the Tower of Babel. When the people gathered in the valley of Shinar and determined to build a tower whose head should reach heaven, Yahawe was terrified. "Let us go down," he cried, "and confuse their tongue, lest they carry out their intentions."¹⁶

Leaving these illustrations of the Biblical God-idea and turning to the examples set by the heroes of the Bible for our guidance and emulation, we are again disillusioned. We find the heroes, too, ignoble and anything but ideal. We find Abraham deceiving Pharaoh in regard to his wife, for instance. Because he fears the ruler of Egypt will kill him in order to possess himself of his wife,

¹⁰ Ex. iii. 21, 22; also xii. 35-36.

¹¹ Ex. vii. 3-5; and x. 1-2.

¹² Gen. vi. 5-7.

¹³ 1 Sam. xv. 11.

¹⁴ Gen. iii. 16-19.

¹⁵ Gen. ii. 16.

¹⁶ Gen. xi. 1-9.

he proclaims Sarah to be his sister, and thus saves his own life at the expense of her honor.¹⁷ (Later he plays the same trick on Abimelech, King of the Philistines.¹⁸) Indeed it would seem that, with the example of Yahawe before him, Abraham does not hesitate to falsify whenever occasion presents itself; for again, when about to sacrifice his son, notwithstanding he believes Isaac will never return he says to the two servants who accompany him, "Stay ye here with the ass, while I and my lad shall go up there, bow, *and return to you here.*"¹⁹ Nor has Sarah, with the example of her husband before her, any scruples against contradicting God and telling an untruth to Abraham.²⁰ Or, what effect if not a pernicious one, are the deceptions of Jacob bound to have upon the young child who is taught to look upon the Bible as an inspired book,—Jacob, who when his brother Esau is at the point of starvation, forces him to sell his birthright.²¹ Desirous of securing for himself the blessing of his aged father, he disguises himself and changes his voice so that the blind old man does not recognize him and, mistaking him for the eldest-born, blesses him.²² Later, in his dealings with Laban, he stoops to tricks which would be held criminal in our modern commercial world.²³ Yet all these men are extolled as heroes, men of God, from whom our youth should gain inspiration!

Even Moses, the great lawgiver, what acts does he not perpetrate in the name of his sovereign Yahawe! To quell a righteous revolt and maintain his power and that of his brother Aaron, he orders the death of hundreds of people.²⁴ Because the Israelites ignorantly made a calf of gold to represent the old god Elohim, many thousand men were slain by the command of Moses.²⁵ Samson's dealings with the Philistines, too, when he *devised* pretences for slaying them,²⁶ would be considered heinous at this day; nor is Samuel's treatment of the unfortunate Saul less outrageous from our modern point of view, for the latter had been kind and humane. In spite of this fact, or rather because of it, the Prophet deemed him unfit to be king of Israel "after the heart of Yahawe."²⁷ King David above all others is held up to us as an inspired, noble hero, whose psalms we sing, whose example we should follow; but what cruelties and bloodshed were committed by him! His deceitful prac-

¹⁷ Gen. xii. 11-16.¹⁸ Gen. xx. 2.¹⁹ Gen. xxii. 5.²⁰ Gen. xviii. 15.²¹ Gen. vi. 29-34.²² Gen. xxvii. 2-29.²³ Gen. xxx. 37-42.²⁴ Num. xvi. 1-35.²⁵ Num. xxxii. 27-29.²⁶ Judg. xiv. 4.²⁷ 1 Sam. xv. 26-28.

tices toward his generous host Achish, King of Gath, are absolutely beneath contempt.²⁸ In cold blood he murdered the people of Moab by throwing them down on the ground, measuring two lines to put to death and one to keep alive.²⁹ The descendants of Saul he delivered over to the cruel Gibeonites, to pander to their craving for vengeance,³⁰ and at the same time disgrace the name of his predecessor. He lusted after the wife of one of his soldiers, committed rape, and then, to conceal his crime, coolly sent her rightful husband to his death.³¹ As for the licentiousness of King Solomon's conduct,³² so gross is it, that it almost defies the most decadent example of modern literature for a parallel.

Elijah's unmerciful murders do not mark him for us as a prophet of God. When the priests of Baal were outwitted by him, he ordered their massacre as a matter of course,³³ and when King Jehoram bade the captain and his fifty men summon Elijah before him, the same prophet unhesitatingly cursed: "If I am a man of Elohim, let a fire come down and consume you and your fifty men." The fire came and consumed them; and he repeated this imprecation when the second summons came from the king.³⁴ With equal cruelty, Elisha, when he was provoked because innocent little children called him names, called bears from the forest to devour them; and thus caused them to perish for a trivial, childish offense.³⁵

The Biblical stories in their whole conception are positively immoral, and therefore unfit reading for our children. The lurid story of Cain and Abel with its picture of hatred terminating in fratricide³⁶ is strange juvenile literature. The episode of Lot and his daughters is obnoxious.³⁷ The account of Sarah's cruelty toward Hagar,³⁸ and the selling into slavery of Joseph by his brethren,³⁹ are hardly elevating. And the story of Joseph and Potiphar's wife,⁴⁰ were it the topic of a modern novel, would not fail to elicit the sharpest condemnation of the preacher and the moralist. No less unwholesome is the account of the rape of the Benjaminites, with all its cruelties and consequent bloodshed.⁴¹ Even the narrative of Ruth, so poetic and idyllic on the surface, is not devoid of objectionable features, in its realistic description of her entrance to the

²⁸ 1 Sam. xxvii. 8-11.

²⁹ 2 Sam. xxi. 1-10.

³⁰ 1 Kings xi. 1-3.

³¹ 2 Kings i. 9-13.

³² Gen. iv. 4-8.

³³ Gen. xxi. 9-14.

³⁴ Gen. xxxix. 7-12.

²⁹ 2 Sam. viii. 2.

³¹ 2 Sam. xi. 2-17.

³³ 1 Kings xviii. 40.

³⁵ 2 Kings ii. 23-24.

³⁷ Gen. xix. 31-38.

³⁹ Gen. xxxvii. 3-8.

⁴¹ Judg. xix, xx.

threshing floor at night, where Boaz slept.⁴² The disgraceful act of Amnon, David's son, toward his sister,⁴³ and the incest of his other son, Absalom, who thus flaunted publicly his undying hatred toward his father,⁴⁴—all these incidents are baldly narrated in the book we are taught to describe as the Word of God, *Holy Writ!* We see then, how far we have advanced from the Biblical standard of morality and good taste, since there is scarcely a page of this book that will altogether escape the censor's pen. These stories were not held to be immoral at the time they were written, but to-day no mother would countenance their perusal by her children had they not the sanction of the Bible.

Perhaps some one will suggest the Psalms and songs of ancient Israel as an exception to this stricture on the moral tone of the Bible. True, we are charmed by their melody, uplifted by their religious fervor; but even these beautiful Psalms and songs are interspersed with cursing and reviling of the enemies of God, with hatred toward the unbeliever. The Psalmist exults in the wrath of God over his foes, prays for the death of the sinner; hurls maledictions upon his opponents; revels in the contemplation of bloodshed.⁴⁵

The very laws of the Old Testament are outrageous to our ethical standards. Polygamy has the sanction of God.⁴⁶ Slavery is recognized as a noble institution.⁴⁷ The hapless slave who, finding himself homeless at the expiration of his six-years' servitude, expresses a wish to remain a little longer with his master, must, according to the Law,⁴⁸ have his ears bored to the wall in punishment and be enslaved forever. Monarchical tyrants are exalted as executors of the divine will.⁴⁹ The cruel Law of "An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, a hand for a hand, a foot for a foot," is still proclaimed in the holy Book as the word of a God of love! God is still, according to the Old Testament, eager for sacrifice; he still desires lambs and rams brought upon his altars as burnt offerings; and while we have outgrown these ideas, nevertheless we revere with adulation and believe to be inspired these laws that fall woefully short of our own standards. This inconsistency of believing that every word of the Bible is inspired and yet not living up to it, proves

⁴² Ruth iii. 3-4; 7-8.

⁴³ 2 Sam. xiii. 1-20.

⁴⁴ 2 Sam. xvi. 22.

⁴⁵ See, for instance, Psalms, xviii, xxxv, lii, lviii, lxxxiii, xciv, ci, cxxxvii. "Praise be to the one who will take and dash thy little ones against the stones."

⁴⁶ 1 Sam. xii. 8.

⁴⁷ Josh. ix. 27.

⁴⁸ Ex. xxi. 5-6.

⁴⁹ 1 Sam. viii. 9-17.

in how far, despite our professions, we have outgrown the old teachings.

The reason we still cleave to the old Bible is, first because we cannot regard it otherwise than as the word of God; and yet we cannot do to-day as did the heroes it extols. We would not in our courts of law inflict the same inhuman punishments specified in the Book. We would brook no animal sacrifices. Besides we *know* that the Bible is not the word of God, because we find from observing natural phenomena that God's work grows and develops constantly, whereas that of man remains stationary. The trees put forth branches and leafage; but the pyramids remain as they were in the days of their erection. We find no vestige of growth or development in the Bible after it was once canonized by the late editors. As it was first put together by Ezra and his school, thus is it to-day.

Secondly, our reverence for and acceptance of the Bible is invoked on the ground that it is an old book. The Church exclaims: "Give honor to the hoary head and the grey head, for age hath wisdom." But the sole reason for which age has a claim on our reverence and obedience is because it has learned from experience, has gained knowledge from the vicissitudes of an ever-changing life. If the mind of a man were stunted and its growth checked in youth through some accident, though he lived to a hoary age he would have no claim on our reverence and respect, for his knowledge and wisdom would still be those of the youth. The same is true of the Bible. Its growth and development were thwarted by its canonization; its wisdom is that of the wild ignorant people whose horizon was bounded by the Euphrates on the one side and the Mediterranean on the other. Why then, should this expression of the infancy of the human race command our respect and obedience? We call the Bible an old book, but in reality it is a young book, written when the race was young, crude, inexperienced; its God-idea is low, its code of morals primitive, its ideals are obnoxious. With all our reverence and admiration for those who outgrew their horrible paganism and made such an heroic effort to break away from their barbarous past and immoral surroundings, we must not forget that it was an absolute impossibility for them to emancipate themselves entirely from their conditions and environment. We may revere them for their efforts, but must not forget their shortcomings. Our sentiment must not darken our reason. We may feel a certain sentimental affection for the garments we wore in our infancy, yet how ridiculous it were in us,

did we keep on patching them and wearing them after we have grown up. The time has come when, just as the myths of Greece were an outgrown garment for the contemporaries of Plato, our old ideas of God must yield to newer and higher ones: the old myths must recede, and a new Bible be adopted by the rising generation, a new code of ethics evolved, that will be in keeping with our modern laws, our modern ideas of God, and our modern state of knowledge.

EDITORIAL COMMENT.

Times have changed indeed! Twenty years ago who would have expected a member of the Conference of American Rabbis and the Rabbinical Association of Chicago to write on the Bible in the way that Mr. Drucker discusses it here? The statements he makes cannot be gainsaid; the remarkable feature consists in this that he boldly says what has otherwise been tacitly admitted.

It may appear to some readers that this view of the Bible seems to dispose finally of its importance and discredit it as a book to be read and studied, but this is not so. The Bible is and will after all remain the most important book not only of the past but of the present and future, though it is wrong to look upon it as dictated by the Holy Ghost. The Bible is a collection of religious documents which mark the path of progress. They contain not one but several conceptions of God which characterize successive stages, the highest of which is a product of the prophetic movement culminating in the Fourth Gospel where Jewish theology is quaintly blended with Greek philosophy as presented by neo-Platonism.

The Bible is truly sacred and it deserves careful study, but our study must be discriminating. Not all passages are of equal value and sometimes the passages expressing morally low conceptions are of greatest interest to the historian and the student of folk-psychology.

While the Bible is sacred we must not forget that there are more religious books than those of our own tradition. They are the sacred books of the Parsis, of the Brahmans, of the Buddhists, of the Chinese, and all of them possess the claim of sacredness; all of these books, each in its own way, are revelations which characterize the development of man's comprehension of the divinity that shapes our ends.