

LECTURE XV.¹

THE STUDY OF THE SCRIPTURES AS LITERARY CLASSICS.

(9) ONE remaining principle, by which other principles of selection in our study of books should be qualified, is that we should study the Scriptures as literary models. It furnishes a cheering solution, in part, to the problem of the practicability of scholarly culture to a pastor, that a very vital portion of that culture may be derived from the one volume which is central to his professional labors. No other profession finds in its most necessary and vital work such a stimulus to intellectual depth and breadth as that which the pulpit finds in the study of the Scriptures. Good cheer is this to an overburdened pastor.

Allusion was made to some of the biblical writers, in speaking of the choice of authors who have been controlling powers in history. I have purposely reserved the consideration of the study of the Bible as a whole, because its study as a collection of literary productions may be advocated by reasons peculiar to itself.

Let me ask you to note first—without comment,

¹ Portions of the lectures on the Study of the Scriptures have been already published in a sermon preached before the government of Massachusetts.

for the point is so obvious—the distinction between the study of the Bible as a religious revelation and the study of it as a literary classic.

This suggests immediately the singular neglect of the Bible by modern literary taste. It is one of the subtle collateral evidences of human depravity, that the republic of letters has so generally ignored the Scriptures as a literary production. Such is the habit of the scholarly thought of our times, that, when the idea of a model of such thought is first suggested to us, it is in connection wholly with uninspired names. If a stranger at a university were to ask one, on the spur of the moment, to give the names of ten models of the first class in the history of the press, the reply would doubtless be entirely oblivious of the writers of the Bible.

As purely literary labor, and for scholarly purposes alone, where is criticism of the Bible ever taught, outside of theological schools? By the common consent of scholars, commentaries on the Scriptures are relegated to the curriculum of professional study. Even there they are often regarded as provincial, not to say unscholarly. Would the literary study of the Bible, think you, be welcomed at Harvard College with the same respectful enthusiasm with which a course of lectures on Shakspeare, by an expert in Shakspearean literature, would be received? Could a biblical club for the literary criticism of the Pentateuch be sustained at Yale College as vigorously as the Chaucer Club was sustained at Andover a few years ago? This is one of the developments of what I have elsewhere denominated the cant of literature. The secret and unconscious antipathy of the human mind to the moral aim

of the Scriptures betrays itself in that vanity of scholarship which affects to despise or ignore their literary claims.

Or put the case in another way. One can easily imagine what a stir in the learned world would be created, if certain portions of the Bible were recent antiquarian discoveries, claiming no inspired authority. Suppose that the first chapter of Genesis had been exhumed, during the last insurrection in India, from the ruins of an old temple of Vishnu. Conceive that the Fifty-first Psalm had been just deciphered from a hieroglyph in the Pyramids. Picture to yourself the latest importation of a slab from Nineveh as containing the first known inscription of one of the closing chapters of the Book of Job. Imagine that the Sermon on the Mount had just come to light from a lost and recovered book of Seneca, or had been found among the meditations of Aurelius Antoninus. What an ecstasy would rouse the dignity of the scholastic world! What an inundation we should have of literary astonishment! What exultant monographs from Westminster Reviews. What eager quotations from the revered authors, as the peers of Confucius and Plato! Our universities would resound for a decade with eulogiums upon the resurrection of a noble antiquity.

But because the Scriptures are the word of God, because they claim authority in morals, because they press close upon the conscience, the literary mind of the race has silently turned away from them as models of literary culture, and has expended itself on gods and goddesses of its own creation.

Our current systems of education are founded in part on this perversion of scholarly taste. They assume that

the study of the Bible is not a necessity to a liberal education. It ranks with the study of anatomy or of the law of mortmain. So far as I know, the only exceptions to this view are found in the German gymnasias, where the Old and New Testaments are, or were a few years ago, criticised and taught by the side of Xenophon and Virgil. The study of the Bible in our American colleges — what shall I say of it? Do I wrong it in saying that it is an expedient of collegiate police? Is it not sometimes required mainly because the authorities do not know what else to do with Monday morning? Such at least was the usage in my time. ✓

The fact is a singular one, that in the German schools, where the inspiration of the Bible is often discarded, and where Ezekiel and St. Paul are criticised precisely as criticism deals with Aristophanes and Juvenal, the literature of the Bible is restored to respectable appreciation. It is recognized as a model of scholarly culture. The moment the weight of inspiration is taken off, and a scholar can approach the Scriptures with no response of conscience to them as a religious authority, then respect returns for them as literary classics.

It is worthy of notice, that in this country a positive retrograde has taken place on this subject in the collegiate curriculum. During the first century of the existence of Harvard College, the Greek New Testament was the only Greek text-book put into the hands of its students. The time was, when Hebrew was taught there as an undergraduate study. The professors could some of them converse in Hebrew. How much do the undergraduates of the venerable university know of Hebrew now? How often do its learned faculty regale themselves in Hebrew colloquy?

To appreciate the Bible ourselves, then, as a literary classic, we need to emancipate ourselves from the current opinion of educated men on the subject. We have probably grown into that opinion unconsciously. Uneducated Christians, in their indiscriminate reverence for the Scriptures, may be nearer the truth than we are in our scholarly judgment. We may have a process of self-discipline, more severe than we anticipate, to go through in restoring the Bible to its true place in our literary estimate. It will not do to approach it with prepossessions against it as a literary model.

✓ But, approaching it in an appreciative, scholarly spirit, we find incitement to the literary study of it in the fact that the Bible contains the oldest literature in the world. Interest in antiquity for its own sake is legitimate. That interest is a normal fruit of education, as well as a natural instinct of the human mind. Every mind has roots in the past. A thing is presumptively true, if it is old; and an old truth men *will* revere. We all have historic feelers, which reach out for something to lay hold of, and to steady our faith, amidst the rush of events. He is not a bold man who can tear himself loose from the underground of former ages. It would be an irreparable loss to the educating forces of Christendom, if the faith of the Christian world *could* be destroyed in the descent of the existing races of men from one pair; so ennobling, and so stimulating to culture, is this instinct of reverence for a long-lived unity. The human instinct of reverence for the old story of a paradise, with its halo of the golden beginning of things, is quickening to high culture.

Much of the disciplinary power of the Greek literature comes to us through our intuitive reverence for the

long-lived. So long as Macpherson's imposture was undiscovered, and his works were received as the veritable productions of Ossian, they exerted a perceptible influence upon the men of letters in England through the magnifying power of their reverence for ancient genius. The literary firmament was ablaze with enthusiasm for the great Northern poet. It was like the northern-lights, as transient, indeed, but, while it lasted, as enchanting. Had the poems of Ossian been other than an imposture, it is by no means certain that they would not have perpetuated their first renown till this day, so sensitive is the vision of literary taste to any gleam of genius from a bygone age.

With all the abuses to which this susceptibility of our nature is liable, it is in our nature, and for wise purposes. Within its normal limits, and kept in balance by the spirit of inquiry, its operation is healthful. No grand elevation of society, and no finished culture of the individual, is ever attained without its aid. We have, then, a very obvious ground of literary interest in the Scriptures, which is altogether independent of their inspiration and of their moral uses, in the fact that they contain the earliest known thoughts of our race in literary forms. To give definiteness to this fact, let several specifications be observed in illustration of it.

It is, for instance, a fact, the significance of which infidelity appreciates if we do not, that the only authentic *history* of the world before the deluge is found in the sacred books of Christianity. The world of the future never can know any thing of the antediluvians except from the Jewish historian. It would be worth centuries of toil to the socialism of Europe, if it could blot out this one fact in the relations of

the world to the Pentateuch. The late Professor B. B. Edwards thought it probable that we have also in the books of Moses, what no other literature can show, a fragment of poetry which was actually composed in the antediluvian infancy of the race. Does it not help us to some conception of the venerableness of these volumes to recall, that, by the commonly received chronology, they were written eleven hundred years before Herodotus, whom the world has consented to honor as the father of history?

The Hebrew jurisprudence is by the same chronology seven hundred years older than that of Lycurgus, and two thousand years older than that of Justinian. You have heard that Thomas Jefferson was indebted, for his conception of our American government, to the polity of an obscure church in Virginia. But republicanism was foreshadowed in the Hebrew commonwealth nearly three thousand years before the settlement of Jamestown. The principle of the New-England town-meeting, in which De Tocqueville found the corner-stone of our free institutions, was originated by Jethro, the venerable father-in-law of Moses.

The lyric poetry of the Hebrews was in its golden age nearly a thousand years before the birth of Horace. Deborah sang a model of a triumphal song full five hundred years before Sappho was born. The author of Ecclesiastes discussed the problem of evil five hundred years before Socrates in the Dialogues of Plato. The Epithalamium of the Canticles is nearly a thousand years older than Ovid's "Art of Love." The Book of Esther was a venerable fragment of biography, more strange than fiction, at least twelve hundred years old, at the dawn of the romantic literature of Europe. The

Proverbs of Solomon are by eight hundred years more ancient than the Treatises of Seneca.

Dr. Johnson once read a manuscript copy of a pastoral story to a group of friends in London. They begged of him to inform them where he obtained it, and who was the writer. Imagine their amazement, if he had told them that it was an ancient treasure, written, in a language now dead, nine hundred years before the Georgics of Virgil, seven hundred years before the Idyls of Theocritus, and twenty-five hundred years before the discovery of America, and that it had been remarkably preserved among the archives of the Hebrews; for it was no other than the Book of Ruth.

Jeremiah is as properly pronounced the founder of the elegiac school of poetry as Mimnermus, to whom its origin is commonly ascribed; for they were, probably, for a short time, contemporaries, the Hebrew prophet being by half a century the senior.

The entire bulk of the prophetic literature of the Hebrews; a literature extraordinary; one which has laws of its own, to which there is and can be no parallel in any uninspired workings of the human mind — this mysterious, often unfathomable compendium of the world's future, which the wisdom of twenty centuries has not exhausted, was, the whole of it, anterior to the Augustan age of Rome. Even the writers of the New Testament are all of them of more venerable antiquity than Tacitus and Plutarch, and Pliny the Younger.

What shall be said of the Book of Job? Biblical scholars only conjecture its age; but the argument for its great antiquity appears to me, though not by any means conclusive, at least as strong as that for its later

✓ origin. If the first hypothesis be true, this is the oldest volume now existing, at least eight hundred years older than Homer. It was already an ancient poem when Cecrops is conjectured to have founded Athens. When Britain was invaded by the Romans, it was more time-worn than the name of Julius Cæsar to-day is to us. Natural philosophers now turn to its allusions as the only recorded evidence we have of the state of the arts and sciences from three to four thousand years ago. A modern commentator on the book has collated from it hints of the then existing state of knowledge respecting astronomy, geography, cosmology, meteorology, mining, precious stones, coining, writing, engraving, medicine, music, hunting, husbandry, modes of travel, the military art, and zoölogy. Any work, surely, which should be so fortunate as to be of uninspired authority, and should give to the world the obscurest authentic hints of the state of these sciences and arts forty centuries back, would be hailed as a treasure worthy of a nation's purchase. In the study of such a volume we may legitimately feel the same enthusiasm which Napoleon, in the campaign of Egypt, sought to arouse in his soldiers, when he exclaimed to them, "Forty centuries look down upon you."

Whatever is becoming to a scholarly spirit, then, in a love of ancient literature, for the sake of the stimulating and ennobling effect of its antiquity, we have reason to cherish for the Scriptures, considered merely as literary classics.

We find another inducement to the literary study of the Scriptures, in the fact that they sustain a regenerative connection with Oriental civilization. Two things comprise the points essential to this aspect of the subject.

One is, that the Oriental mind is giving no signs of having finished its work in history. What is the law of Providence respecting nations and races which have finished their work as powers in the world's destiny? It is a law of doom. Such nations and races die. Christianity, which is the flower and fruitage of Providence, has always been prophetic in its instincts. It has never bound itself to the soil anywhere. The law of its being is, that it shall pass away from superannuated to youthful races, from decadent to germinant nations, from expiring to nascent languages, from senile to virile literatures. Then those races, nations, languages, and literatures which represent its abandoned conquests die, if they have in them no recuperative power to fit them for future use. Under this law of divine operation the entire Oriental stock of mind, if it has no Christian future, ought now to be evincing signs of dissolution. But this is by no means true of it. The nations which represent it are not, as a whole, dying out. They are not visibly approximating their end. More than one of the Asiatic races seem to be as full-blooded, and as virile in their physical make, and as likely to endure for thirty generations, as they did a thousand years ago. They seem to be waiting in grand reserve, as the beds of anthracite have waited with latent fires, for future use. That ancient development of man which began on the plains of Shinar bids fair to live by the side of its Occidental rival, even if it does not outlive this by reason of its calmer flow of life.

If it does thus live, all analogy would lead us to believe that there is something in it which deserves to live. There is something in it which Providence

has a use for in the future. It has energy; it has resources; it has faculty; it has manly tastes and proclivities; it has something or other, which, under divine regeneration, will be a cause of growth, if infused into the life-blood of the Western races. The circle of Occidental development may be enlarged by it. The channel in which our civilization is moving may be thus widened and deepened.

The other fact bearing upon the topic before us is, that, if new systems of thought *are* to grow up among the Asiatics, with any function of control in the world, they must be the creations of the Bible. Nothing else represents the Oriental mind in any form which can ever rouse it to its utmost of capacity. Nothing else, therefore, can ever make it a power in the future civilization. None but a visionary can look for a rejuvenescence of Asia in coming ages from any internal forces now acting there independently of the Scriptures. The history of the East contains nothing which can ever be to the world, for instance, what the revived literatures of Greece and Rome were to the middle ages of Europe. Explorers find nothing there out of which great libraries can grow. They find nothing that calls for or promises to the future great universities, or new systems of philosophy, or advanced scientific researches. The East is the land of pyramids and sphinxes. Whatever that immense territory has to contribute to the civilization of the future must come from the germination of biblical thought. It must be the working of biblical inspiration in the spiritual renewal of Oriental character, which nothing but the religion of the Scriptures can produce.

Why should it be deemed visionary to look for this

as one of the results of the infusion of European mind now going on in Western and Central Asia? Already the germs of Christian universities and libraries exist there which may one day allure literary travel from the West, as those of England and Germany do to-day. Inspired prophecy aside, it is no more visionary to predict the re-creation of Oriental mind in forms of new literatures superior to any the world has yet known, through the plastic influence of the Scriptures, than it was to anticipate the birth of the three great literatures of Europe as the fruit of the modern revival of the literatures of Greece and Rome. The minds of nations move in just such immense waves of revolution. Reasoning *à priori*, they seem impossible: so do geologic cataclysms to a race which lives in quiet over slumbering volcanoes. But, reasoning *à posteriori*, they are only the natural effect of a great force generating great forces. They seem as gravitation does to a race which has no conception of what it would be to exist without it. The diurnal revolutions of the earth are not more normal or more sure.

The Asiatic races have, indeed, a fairer intellectual prospect than Europe had at the time of the revival of letters; and this for the reason that they are to receive their higher culture in Christian instead of Pagan forms. Conceive what a difference would have been created in the destinies of Europe, what centuries of conflict with barbarism would to human view have been saved, if the Greek and Roman literatures could have come into the possession of the modern European mind freighted with Christian instead of Pagan thought, and if, thus Christianized, they could have been wrought into European culture!

Yet this, to a very large extent, appears likely to be the process of intellectual awakening to which the immense forces of Asiatic mind are to be subjected. Asiatic literatures of the future are to be the direct product of centuries of Christian culture in other lands. They are to have no Paganism to exorcise, as European civilization had, from the very models which are to inspire them. In Asia, Paganism is to represent in the future, not only dead institutions, oppressive governments, degrading traditions, and popular wretchedness, but a puerile literature as well. It can never there, as it did in Europe, go into solution with Christianity through the force of a Pagan culture so beautiful and so lofty as to command the reverence of all scholarly minds.

With this view of the future of the Oriental world, it is certainly a remarkable feature of the divine plan that Revelation should be for ever stereotyped, as it is so largely, in an Oriental mold. It looks, does it not, as if the Oriental type of the race were yet to be a power in the world through the Scriptures, as the only vital nexus between its future and its past.

Napoleon used to say that the only theater fit for great exploits was the East. Europe, he said, was contracted: it was provincial. The great races were beyond the Mediterranean. They were in the ancient seats of empire, because the numbers were there. There may be more of truth in this than he meant to utter. The grandest intellectual and moral conquests of the world may yet follow the track of Alexander.

From this train of suggestion, the inference is obvious, that the time can not be distant when enterprising

scholarship will not be content to omit the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures from its resources of culture. A mind which is imbued with biblical learning has a home in the future of literature, and among the majorities of cultivated races, which no mind can have without it.