

The Preaching and Teaching of the Old Testament.

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THE subject of my paper concerns one of the most difficult and thorny questions of the day. The views of very many amongst us about the Old Testament are in such a fluid state, to begin with, that it is difficult to see how we can be preachers and teachers of that whereof we feel competent to affirm so little.

In the first place, however, I would say, Let us try to know the Old Testament itself. We cannot use and teach and preach concerning any book unless we study it, and I am afraid we do not all do this. This is partly due to no fault of our own in the case of some of us. The Bible, and especially the Old Testament, has not been taught of late years as it ought to have been, and as it was some forty or fifty years ago. Then it was taught more thoroughly than it is now, because more time was allotted to its study. What is the case now in the schools from which, for the most part, the greater number of our clergy are drawn? An attempt is made in some to give a short outline of the main facts of Scripture history, but in most some single historical book is taken up as the subject for a whole year's study, with one eye fixed all the time upon the examination in it at the end of the year. And in the selection of the book to be read a certain timidity exhibits itself. In our higher-grade schools the Book of Genesis is rarely made the subject of study.

Further still, what is got up too frequently for examination is not so much the Bible as books on the Bible. A little while ago I had to read a set of papers on Deuteronomy. The writers could write glibly about the assignment of various portions of the Pentateuch to various editors and compilers, but when questions were asked about the actual contents of the book, they most of them broke down hopelessly.

Well, then, the moral I would draw from all this, to

begin with, is that if you are to use the Old Testament as preachers and teachers, you must know it at first hand, by the study of the Word of God itself. Granted for the moment that you may hold the extremest views of the Higher Critics with reference to the composition of many of the books of the Bible, what you have in your hands to teach from, and what you put into the hands of others to learn from, is the Bible as it is, not the Bible in such fractions as you, or those whose teaching you follow, believe it can be dissected into. Your people have their Bible; they have their Old Testament, a collection, it is true, of books of various dates, and showing, therefore, various standards of life and morality; but what they want you to tell them is what they are to learn for the good of their souls from the volume *as it is*, which you put into their hands. And so I would say, Never make what we popularly call "criticism" the main or leading point of your teaching about the Old Testament. If you do, you may run the risk, especially if you at all rhetorically exaggerate or are over-emphatic in what you say, of overthrowing the faith of some. Many a "man in the street" and not a few boys at school have come to the conclusion that, as they have been told there is much of "myth" in the Old Testament and much that is historically idealized or untrue, what is, after all, the largest part of the Bible is a negligible quantity, and does not deserve their attention or regard, and is, in fact, more or less a work of fiction.

And whilst I say this, I do not mean that we are to ignore the existence of what is for convenience' sake called the "Higher Criticism." It is there, and it has, perhaps, some of it, come to stay; but it is not at present sufficiently clear and definite in its *modus operandi* and in its results for us to treat, I think I may venture to say, any of its results as certain and established. Discuss it as much as you like privately or in conference with others, but do not dogmatize about it in your pulpit utterances. For one who will, perhaps, accept your teaching and take pleasure in it, there will be three or four whom you will alienate,

and some whose tender faith you will upset. I know of cases where this has occurred.

And as for established results, let this be a caution to us. A few months ago I suppose it would have been said that one of the most securely established results of Higher Criticism was that the Book of Deuteronomy was of a date some little time anterior to the reign of Josiah. Now the Professor of Hebrew at Cambridge swoops down upon us, and tells us that it is nothing of the kind, but that the book is exilic, and he brings very cogent arguments against its pre-exilic date—at any rate, so far as the later years of the kingdom of Judah are concerned.

Let us be careful, then, how we make the Higher Criticism the subject of our sermons. Let us not be afraid to say we do not know whether many of its conclusions are true or not, instead of following the fashion of the moment, and let us advise people to keep their minds in judicious suspense, at the same time feeling grateful for one result that is the outcome of all our present Biblical discussions—that the Bible is coming to be more carefully studied than it ever has been before.

It will naturally occur to the minds of my readers that at present I have been simply giving them my opinion as to what we ought not to do; and I may reasonably be asked what we are to teach and preach from the Old Testament.

The answer seems to me an obvious one, which comes to us with Divine authority: Teach and preach Christ.

For first, we may say, this was the highest use to which the pious Jew, on his adhesion to our Lord's teaching and person, put it. As soon as ever St. Philip had become upon his call a follower of Christ, what did he do? He went off to find Nathanael, and said to him: "We have found Him of whom Moses in the law, and the prophets, did write" (St. John i. 45). The times were times of keen expectancy amongst many of the Jewish people. Simeon and Anna the aged prophetess, were instances of this, and they were such because of the teaching of the Old Testament. They were looking for the appearance of a great One, who was to be the Christ. And, to go still higher,

to our Lord and His own teaching, His claims to His position as "the Christ" were based by Him upon the elder Scriptures: "O foolish men, and slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets have spoken! Behoved it not the Christ to suffer these things, and to enter into His glory? And beginning from Moses and from all the prophets, He interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself" (St. Luke xxiv. 25-27).

See how universal the statement is—"all the prophets," "all the Scriptures."

And this is not an isolated occasion. Later we read again—and here the reference is made to His human life before the Resurrection: "These are My words which I spake unto you, while I was yet with you, how that all things must needs be fulfilled, which are written in the law of Moses, and the prophets, and the psalms, concerning Me. Then opened He their mind, that they might understand the scriptures; and He said unto them, Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer, and rise again from the dead the third day; and that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His Name unto all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem" (St. Luke xxiv. 44-47). Of all this they were to be witnesses, and therefore it became their duty to open the minds of others to such an understanding of the Old Testament Scriptures. Each generation in its turn must take up the same duty to teach the same lesson, which a saying ascribed to St. Augustine expresses in the concise statement: "In vetere Testamento novum latet."

How strong is the claim our Lord makes upon the Old Testament as a teacher about Himself! "If ye believed Moses, ye would believe Me: for he wrote of Me. But if ye believe not his writings, how shall ye believe My words?" (St. John v. 46, 47)—words that need surely to be weighed very carefully by those who are inclined to speak lightly or imprudently of the authority and authenticity of the Pentateuch. This appeal to the Old Testament was a constant habit with our Lord. Take just one chapter, St. Matt. xxvi. Ver. 24: "The Son of man goeth, even as it is written of Him." Ver. 54: "How then

should the scriptures be fulfilled, that thus it must be?" Ver. 56: "All this is come to pass that the scriptures of the prophets might be fulfilled." The nearer the Passion came, the more did our Lord seem to speak as if He were being increasingly impressed with this great truth.

To go a step further, it might be said the great force of all this was that it was an appeal to the Jews. But what do we find in the early Church? Jews and Gentiles alike were taught by reference to the history of God's chosen people as described in the Old Testament. They were instructed in the continuity of God's dealings with the world after Christ, and that of His dealings with the Jewish people before Christ. They were taught how God's providence was always pointing forwards to the Christ of the future. We cannot do wrong, then, if we use the Old Testament, perhaps a great deal more than we have done, to preach Christ. We need not necessarily follow the fanciful surmisings of many holy men in their mystical interpretations of such statements as the number of Abraham's servants and others of a like character. At the same time, we must be careful not to run into the other extreme of minimizing or denying the Messianic character of much of the Old Testament. How often the inspired writers of the New Testament speak of the fulfilment of passages of the Old Testament! The word "fulfilment" we must be careful about; it is a little misleading, especially if we take it as if it meant "here we have the *only* true application of the passage we may be considering." It means, rather, the full realization of the meaning of the passage. No doubt there was a primary meaning for the prophet's more immediate times, but beyond this there was the ultimate completion of its meaning, if we may so call it, in Christ. And it is this which Christ Himself must have pointed out, as we are told in the Gospels that He did.

And when we speak of teaching and preaching Christ from the Old Testament, we must, of course, include all that it implies—His teaching, His kingdom, and so on. The Christian minister will not fail to remember that the Master Himself said

that He came not to destroy, but to fulfil, and here, again, we may say that the word "fulfil" implies to give its full content to the old teaching. Previous ages had not understood, and our Lord's contemporaries, with very few exceptions, did not realize, the full teaching latent in the instruction given in the sacred books of the old dispensation. Will not our being able to point this out enable us also to show that even the Gospel dispensation has had a more extended fulfilment in each age through which it has persisted, and that, as it was in old times, so now, there is a still fuller and more widely embracing fulfilment of the perfect laws of the perfect Teacher awaiting the world, just in proportion as it is able to comprehend and assimilate it? If Christ, as Man, grew up into perfect Manhood, upon the teaching of the Jewish Scriptures, and based His claims upon them, we must not ignore the claims of those Scriptures upon us. They have been felt by all sorts of people in all ages who have professed and called themselves Christians. The extremest ceremonialist and the extremest Puritan have alike appealed to the Law and to the Testimony of the First Dispensation, and we, whatever our opinions may be, cannot afford to put our Old Testament on the shelf, as if it only contained the history of a worn-out creed.

To-day we spend a great deal of our time in the discussion of social ethics and the morality of the body corporate—quite as much as in the enforcement of individual morality. To the Old Testament we look for warning and for instruction. We see how many of the social evils of to-day find their counterpart in those of the civilizations of old time—not only in Assyria, Babylonia, and Egypt, but also in Jerusalem itself, the headquarters of the specially appointed guardians of the faith in the one true God, and in the neighbouring kingdom of Israel. Such a prophet as Amos has led the way to show us how to denounce the luxury and selfishness of the age, the oppression of the poor by the rich, and how to aim at purity and temperance. The Old Testament points out to us, besides, how the develop-

ment of a nation can take place, and how, in its best times, the people took their part in the control of affairs. But it also, and here we may use it as a source for warnings, points to lost opportunities, and the stern judgments—results, perhaps, the world would call them—that followed upon the loss or misuse of such opportunities. All this, owing to the circumstances of the case, the New Testament cannot give us. It has well been said in a book which has materially helped the writer of this paper, George Adam Smith's "Preaching of the Old Testament to the Age" (p. 24): "In this one province of religion the Hebrew prophets have been felt by the moderns to stand nearer to them than the Apostles do. The Apostles were sojourners and pilgrims; the prophets were citizens and patriots" (Hodder and Stoughton, 1893).

Once again, where can we better go than to the Old Testament for specimens of human character which may give us warning and encouragement? There are differences—the differences due to various stages of civilization and moral development—but these do but help us to draw our lessons. We must not pride ourselves on the higher plane of life to which some have attained in Christian times and in consequence of their Christian education; rather, we must remember how often it is still true that the infection of our nature doth remain—yea, in them that are regenerated—and only waits its opportunity, as in Old Testament times, to disclose itself with equally full force.

Much might be said—a whole paper might be written—upon how to teach and preach one book of the Old Testament—the Book of Psalms. Just consider the multitudinous subjects which rise up in our minds as we think of those 150 poems, some national, some personal. Think of the Christology we can draw from them. Think of the place they have held all through the ages as a book of devotion for God's people; and yet how seldom do you hear sermons pointing out the teaching of those Psalms to the men and women of our own day.

Or, again—and this may be a humbling thought for ourselves—take any one of the shortest of the utterances of the prophets. Read it out slowly to yourself, as if you were preaching it, and then ask yourself, “Do I, in my sermon of twenty minutes or more, get as much grit into my words as there are in those which I have just read? Do I speak as straight? do I speak, if need be, as sternly; and yet, withal, do I speak as tenderly and sympathetically?”

We have been bidden to think imperially. But the thought of our worldly empire brings home to us the duty of spreading an empire which ought to extend far more widely than any earthly empire—the empire of Christ. To do this is our bounden duty as disciples of Him who said, “Go and make disciples of all the nations.” But to encourage us to do this we may go back centuries before the coming of Christ, to the Old Testament, to be cheered in our endeavours and to encourage others by the inspiring and inspired words of promise uttered by the evangelical prophet of old, and repeated almost verbatim by Habakkuk: “The earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea” (Isa. xi. 9).

So long as the Old Testament forms a part of our liturgical services and is read in our churches—so long as it (and the Apocrypha, too, by the way) forms part of our greatest service (and God forbid that it should be otherwise), so long will it be the bounden duty of God’s minister to teach and to preach it, so long must he point out what guidance the Old Testament gives. Beginning from these Scriptures, he must preach Jesus. He must show that he meant what he professed when he declared his assent to the statement that in the Old Testament, as well as in the New, everlasting life is offered to mankind by Christ, and he must be ready to base his ethical teaching upon the commandments which are called Moral, given from Sinai of old by God Himself, and reasserted with a fuller and wider application by the Saviour of mankind.

If he does this in all its breadth and fullness, he will find that questions such as those about J and E and D and P in the Pentateuch, about pre-exilic and post-exilic Psalms, about one Isaiah or thirty Isaiahs, about the date of the Book of Daniel, will then take a far less prominent position than they do now. He will trouble himself less about them ; they will be seen in their due proportion. The main backbone of his teaching and preaching will be that it was God the Holy Ghost who spoke by the prophets, though the individual character of the writer is still to be seen in his writings, and that "Every scripture inspired of God is also profitable for teaching, for reproof, for instruction which is in righteousness : that the man of God may be complete, furnished completely unto every good work" (2 Tim. iii. 16).



Parish Life in Medieval England.

By G. G. COULTON, M.A.

ABBOT GASQUET'S recent book on this subject is assured of a wide circulation by the general excellence of the series in which it appears, the author's own reputation as an apologist of the Middle Ages, and the indiscriminate praise lavished on it, even by such journals as the *Guardian* and the *Athenæum*. The *Church Times* alone, as far as I know, has seen through its weakness, even on points of mere antiquarian detail ; but nobody as yet has taken the course—always far the most instructive in Abbot Gasquet's case—of verifying his references. Critics might, indeed, plead the difficulty of the task, since there is only one unhappy footnote in all the 273 8vo. pages, while chapter and verse references are frequently denied, even where the reader needs them most and they would have given no extra trouble to the printer ; indeed, I have counted fifteen cases in which the Abbot withholds the very title of the book from which he is professedly quoting ! The