

## SERMON OF THE MONTH.

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"In the beginning God."—GEN. I. 1.

ONE rarely hears the Pentateuch mentioned in these days without thinking at once of questions of historical and literary criticism: Are the narratives true? Did Moses write them? How far have they any obligation upon us? For our present purpose I am going to sweep questions of that kind aside, and not discuss at all the vexed question of authorship; I shall say very little about the historical character of the books. I shall not ask you to consider whether one passage is later or one passage earlier in their character than another. We will just take the books as they stand, and see what the books as a whole have to teach us, remembering that as we treat them in that way we are regarding them as our Lord regarded them, and as all those who loved the Lord in those days regarded them, for they were the most precious portion of the Bible of the Jews, they were kept jealously from all danger of corruption of text, and read earnestly Sabbath by Sabbath in the synagogue, till every Jew who was worthy of the name knew the books thoroughly in his heart.

And, after all, these questions of historical and literary criticisms are very subsidiary. Those who had new theories to propound were forced, I suppose, to regard them as the most important part of the study of the books from their point of view, and those who had to defend the traditional view were compelled to pay most attention to history and to the literary criticism, in order to reply to the men who had new views to put forward; but it would be a sad thing for us if we were to lose our hold upon the spiritual beauty of the books because other men were forced by circumstances to fight a battle about their history or their literary history.

One thing should be always urged, however, and it is that we are not justified in taking a violent position on either side, and saying that he who refuses to accept new views must necessarily be wrongly interpreting the books, or that he who does accept new views of the authorship of them is acting unworthily of inspiration and of belief in the Holy Ghost, for we can tell from experience that the men who have adopted new views and have taught them, have not lost their appreciation of, or their belief in, the Old Testament ; rather it is not too much to say that in the great majority of cases, in England at least, it has proved to them and those to whom they taught their views, an enlightenment, so that the Old Testament became to them more precious and more valuable ; for these views have exhibited, even more wonderfully than was seen before, the gradual leading of the people of God by the guidance of God into their peculiar position as the Chosen People, and the chosen witnesses of Himself to the world. And these new views have certainly appeared to many to bring God's methods of dealing in revelation into line with His known methods of dealing in history, so that we feel that the God who led Israel, the God of Bethel, is indeed our God to-day.

But, on the other hand, there is a great value to be attached to the tradition of the Mosaic authorship ; whether we accept it as historical or not, we must not forget its great value—namely, that these five books do represent the mature teaching of Moses. They stand for all that Moses stood for, and the work of Moses is for ever enshrined in them. I would almost say that the pivot of the Pentateuch is the story of the Burning Bush, where Moses received his call to go back into Egypt and tell the other people that the Lord is Israel's God, the God of their fathers and their Father, the Friend of their fathers, and their Friend, a God who is alive and makes alive, a God who is full of love for His people, and is coming to redeem them. And while Moses is to give that message of consolation to the Israelites in Egypt, he is to give them another message, that Israel belongs to God, and Israel is to be faithful to Him,

and to be His witness to the nations, witness alike of His love and of His power. The mediator is to be Moses : Moses is to stand for God to the people, and for the people before God. The vision thus is from Moses to the people, and from the people outwards to the world.

The Book of Genesis comes first in these five books that enshrine that vision, naturally and appropriately ; for it tells at its very start that the purpose of God is a universal, world-wide purpose of love. The theme of Genesis is the universality of God's plan, God's power, God's process, of loving revelation. This is the message of the earlier chapters. In the development of it the story is first occupied with the history of the Patriarchs, as the work is seen to be assuming an apparently narrower scope in the special preparation of a chosen people who are to be God's witnesses of these loving purposes ; Exodus then comes second as the book of the calling into being that nation which is to be the chosen witness. Third comes Leviticus, to give the terms of the consecration of this people. Then the Book of Numbers tells the history of their training ; and last, Deuteronomy contains an exhortation to the people to maintain their faithfulness to this high calling.

To come back to Genesis, it is the book that proclaims the universal theme, and it does so in two main divisions, chapters i. to xi. being concerned with the origin of mankind, chapters xii. to l. with special instances of God's loving plan, power, and process, as shown in the lives of the Patriarchs.

The first chapter states the theme—God's loving plan, God's almighty power, God's system of process. For we are told that God created the world : He created it by the power of His almighty will out of nothing ; He created it in an orderly fashion ; He created it with a loving purpose, for He saw that all things that He had made were good ; and He peopled it with mankind, to whom He gave His blessing, that they should multiply and increase upon the earth. There is, then, the theme started, the theme of plan, the theme of power, the theme of process.

But soon a conflicting element appears, for from the third

to the eleventh chapters we have a sad story of the way in which men could thwart the plan, could hinder the power, and could prove rebellious and impatient of the process.

As we come to the third chapter, we find ourselves asking even more than in the first chapter: Is the thing true? Is this story of the fall of Adam and Eve history?

Does it matter to any single one of us whether it is history or not? When we read that story, is the thing that really matters, whether one man in the remotest ages sinned that sin, or is the thing that really matters to us this, that as we read the story we say, "That exactly illustrates my case?" Do we not feel the sinful power of curiosity, do we not suffer from the effects of sinful companionship, and the temptation that is brought by our desire to experience what others have experienced? We, too, find that the fruit that was to be so sweet brings only the knowledge of shame. We, too, hide ourselves from God. And good will it be for us, too, if we learn that God, in the cool of the day, misses His human companionship and calls to know where we are.

The teaching of this chapter of Genesis is absolutely independent of historical fact; I am not saying the story is not true, but I am saying that the real truth of that story is that it describes the universal experience of mankind, and as it describes it in terms so easy to be understood, it warns us for the future, and it wins us to new penitence as we read of God's love unquenched even by our sin.

Similarly through all those chapters down to the call of Abraham, we read in the narratives of Noah and the Tower of Babel expressions of our own experience, and so learn from them where we must be on our guard, and wherein we must put our trust.

Then from the twelfth chapter to the fiftieth, the story is resumed again, the theme is reannounced and worked out in that wonderful series of stories in the lives of the Patriarchs. God resumes His plan though man had failed, for He calls Abraham from a far country, and brings him to the Holy Land

and settles him there, and promises His blessing ; yea, though Jacob has to travel far from home, God prepares him also, to be the father of the chosen flock, and trains him in that awful night of wrestling in prayer, till he who was Jacob has his name changed to Israel. Not less plain is the plan in the story of Joseph, scorned by his brethren, cast in the pit, tempted in Egypt, forgotten in prison, raised to the princship, till he could be the saviour of his people.

God not only resumes His plan in these great chapters, but He vindicates His power : even the man who believed and staggered not at the promises of God, and was counted faithful and righteous because of his faith, even Abraham cannot imagine *how* God can raise him up a seed in whom all the nations should bless themselves. And when Jacob went out an outcast from his home, did Jacob foresee the wondrous experiences that would bring him home a wealthy man to be the father of the Twelve Tribes ? Or when Joseph was cast in the pit did not the brethren think the story had ended there ? But no, as God's is the plan, so is the power God's. Men may try to thwart, but they cannot in the end annul the purposes of God. As He is determined how He will save the world, so He will show His power in its redemption.

Again, there is shown in these chapters xii. to l. a very remarkable method of process. It was natural for people to think that once a line was founded, the process might go on. Abraham himself had that idea, for he prayed when God promised a son, that Ishmael might live before Him ; then there was Esau, and then all the elder sons of Jacob, and finally there were the two sons of Joseph ; and yet in all these cases it was not the elder, but the younger what was chosen, as though God would say to Israel, " It is not your idea of progress and process that is going to save the world, but Mine ; I will choose whom I will for My purposes, and for the purpose of the winning of the world I have chosen and loved Jacob, and Esau I have discarded and hated." For all through this book there throbs not only the idea of the ultimate salvation of Israel, but the

ultimate winning of the world. The Gospel of Genesis is the Gospel of the third chapter, that the Seed of the woman shall fight the seed of the serpent, and the serpent shall bruise the heel of the Seed of the woman, but the Seed of the woman shall bruise the serpent's head ; and in that early warning of a conflict there lies the promise of a victory. And so Genesis, no less than all the other books of the Bible, is a book of missionary import to all the world.

There remain in the last place a few special points to notice about this book :

First, its remarkable frankness ; it makes no attempt to glose over the sins of the Patriarchs, but frankly tells us of their failure, how even Abraham, the saint of God, the man of faith, disbelieved, and how Jacob and Isaac and Joseph all failed inasmuch as they were human ; the Bible is not squeamish, but the Bible takes sin as a fact that must be faced.

So far is it from being squeamish, that there have been people who have not scorned to say of the Bible that it contains passages which are not fit to be read. But that accusation superficially true is fundamentally false ; as we study this book we find it to be instinct with the spirit of consecration to God, a book of absolute stainless purity of tone, and as we compare its early stories with the early stories of other nations, we find the wonder growing stronger—there are no wicked gods in Genesis, but only the one, true, faithful, loving All-Creator. And it is there that we shall find the inspiration of the Bible, for it is the one Book of all ancient books that is absolutely consecrated to the highest end : the glory of God, and the winning of men back to God. And as we feel its consecration, we shall realize more truly its reliability ; and as we feel its reliability we shall hear in ourselves the call to place our trust on the revelation that is contained in it, and we shall find ourselves called to accept God's plan, to acknowledge, to welcome, and to submit to His power, and in the end to accelerate His process of redemption by co-operating with Him, as He gives us power, in making known to all mankind the Truth that He has shown to ourselves.