

THE PROBLEM OF WAR AND THE OLD TESTAMENT.

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WHAT is God really like? How often has that question been asked since the dawn of history! The savage and the scientist both raise the question, and the answer which each gives is generally that which reflects his own mentality. To the one He is a tyrant; to the other, sometimes little more than a nonentity or a mathematical problem.

The book of Nature cannot help us, for its language is hard to interpret and there is much that is "red in tooth and claw."

It is then to revealed religion that we must turn for our guide; and in Christ we have the perfect likeness. "We beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth."¹ But the Book of revealed religion has many chapters in it and we are apt to be dull scholars. There are chapters which we find difficult to understand; and there are parts which seem to give us an unsatisfactory picture of God. For instance, what are we to say of the Old Testament with its God of vengeance and its wars of religion? To most of us, that God bears little likeness to the Father of Whom the Lord Jesus spake. The teaching of Christ in regard to war seems to conflict with the practice of the chosen people.

What shall we say to these things? That is now the question before us: the problem of war and the Old Testament. That the sword of vengeance played an important part in the theocracy of Israel cannot be denied.

Moses in his battle song claims that "the Lord is a man of war."² Later we are told that God commanded the ruthless slaughter, not only of the men of war, but even of women and innocent children.³ The command to exterminate the Canaanites is represented as coming from God; and the Israelites are reproofed for not executing it with sufficient thoroughness.⁴

David, or whoever was the writer, invokes curses on his enemies and prays for their destruction. In the Psalms⁵ we have imprecations upon enemies which cannot be made to harmonise with the teaching of Christ; and the slaughter of Baal's prophets⁶ could not be accepted as a Christian principle of Missionary enterprise. But enough has surely been said concerning the warlike spirit of the old dispensation. The only problem of war to the early generations of Israel was not a moral one, but that of ways and means, and the mystery of God's power when they were unsuccessful.

¹ 1 John 14.

⁴ Judges ii.

² Exod. xv. 3.

³ Ps. cxxxvii.

⁵ Num. xxxi., 1 Samuel xv.

⁶ 1 Kings xviii.

This conception of God was felt in a marked degree in the revival of Bible study in the sixteenth century after Christ. Luther, Calvin, Beza, Knox and a host of others, from the Anabaptists to the Huguenots, continually turned to the words of the Old Testament to express their hatred of their enemies and find support for their slaughter. The Roman Church, although claiming an infallibility which subordinated the Scriptures, did not disdain to quote that authority in a similar way. The Wars of Religion in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were supported on the Protestant side mainly by reference to the same words; and there are those to-day who still follow that line of argument, in spite of the fact that to support the brutality and stupidity of war by the teaching of the Old Testament involves the support of the principles of polygamy and slavery on the same ground. It was on the authority of the Book of Deuteronomy that Calvin condemned Servetus to death.

What are we to say, then, of the Old Testament as the revelation of God, when we view its teaching in the light of warfare? Did not our Lord contradict it? "Ye have heard that it hath been said . . . but I say unto you, love your enemies."¹

It is not possible here to enter into a detailed discussion of our Lord's attitude to war, but most people to-day feel that His message will not harmonise with the teaching and practice of the early days of Israel.

There are some who will say that only parts of the Old Testament are inspired: those chapters or verses which reveal God as we know Him in the light of Christ; but this puts inspiration in a difficult position and the Old Testament on a shaky foundation. There are others who will accept its warlike spirit and seek to blend it with that of the New Testament, simply because they hold that the whole of the Bible is inspired. But the difficulty will cease if the Old Testament be regarded in the light of *progressive revelation*.

One cannot play a Brahms Symphony on a penny tin whistle; not because the master composer was at fault, but because the instrument lacks the ability to express it. So, too, we must not expect to find a complete revelation of God in those far-off days when the world was in its infancy; but "when the fulness of the time came, God sent forth His Son."²

So much, then, for the value of the Old Testament in its relation to war. But before we dismiss its teaching as archaic and incomplete, let us see what its contribution really is. The spirit of vengeance, the spirit of war and treachery, and even infant slaughter is all there, but that is not the whole story. The condemnation of war as inimical to the highest character of God; the implication that force is futile; and the bold and lofty prophecy of world peace, find a most important place.

David, the man after God's own heart, is forbidden to build the Temple, because his hands were stained with the blood of

¹ Matt. v.

² Gal. iv.

battle. Elijah, after the slaughter of the priests of Baal,¹ is taught in a graphic way by God that the divine power is not in the great forces of nature, but in the still small voice; and Isaiah, one of the most spiritual of the prophets, has the vision of the coming Christ when "all nations . . . shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruninghooks: nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more."² The devilry of war will give place to the beauty and usefulness of agriculture; and the earth will yield its sustenance of life instead of gathering the blood of the slain. Micah's vision is in the same words.³ What peace plan could be more inspiring than this? What greater aim could any League of Nations possess than this? Yet it is in the Old Testament.

In this progressive revelation we see the world moving from the days of vengeance and slaughter to the days of universal peace, which the Prince of Peace will usher in with His rule. In the light of this progressive theory our problem ceases to exist; but it raises another far more embarrassing than the last. Christ came with the message of peace and goodwill to all men. With Him is the power to turn vision into accomplished fact; and yet, nineteen centuries after Calvary, His professing disciples have taught the heathen a scientific warfare far more fiendish than anything the chosen people or the barbarians ever knew. There lies the shame and the problem: not the harmonising of the teaching of the Old Testament with the New, but the fact of the disloyalty of Christian nations among themselves.

The mind of Christ has been banished from so much of our international life. The problem is not theological, but moral. It is not so much a question of policy or treaties for the Christian nations of the world, but rather one of practical obedience to our Lord.

¹ 1 Chron. xxii. 8.

² Isa. ii.

³ Mic. iv.

THE FORTY DAYS. By Franz Werfel. *Jarrolds.* 10s. 6d.

The theme of this book is the extirpation of the Armenian nation by the Turks in 1915 and 1916, and the story centres round the defence of the Musa Dagh (Mountain of Moses) by a few thousand Armenian men, women and children—under their leader, Gabriel Bagradian—who were determined to fight rather than go into captivity in the deserts of Mesopotamia, which was equivalent to a lingering and horrible death.

The book was first published in German and is one of the most instructive accounts of the torture and persecution to which the Armenian nation was subjected by the Turks. The characters of the hero and his family are depicted skilfully, and the whole narrative is dramatically worked out in a brisk and realistic style.

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