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A table of contents for *The Expositor* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expositor-series-1.php

*THE USES OF THE OLD TESTAMENT FOR
EDIFICATION.*¹

DURING the short time that I am to occupy your attention I daresay I shall be expected to speak on some topic connected with the Old Testament. There is a subject which at present has a great interest for many minds, the subject of archæology, in particular the archæology of Egypt and Babylon, considered as casting light on Biblical questions, and as corroborative of Bible history. Perhaps archæologists attach an exaggerated importance to their favourite study. The antiquities of Egypt offer little help to the Biblical student. There are some things, however, in Babylonian thought which show interesting coincidences with the thought of Israel. These coincidences appear chiefly in two departments of thought—that relating to the beginning of things, and that relating to the end of things; in other words, to creation and to the state after death. The Bible narratives of the creation and the flood have their counterparts in the Babylonian literature. The general cosmology is common to the two literatures, and the popular conceptions of death and the state of the dead found in the Old Testament are similar to those prevalent in Babylon. These facts warrant an immediate conclusion, and perhaps a remoter inference. The conclusion is, that the creation and flood narratives are not the inventions or imaginations of Hebrew writers; neither are they what might be called immediate revelations to the minds of the writers. They are reproductions of traditions and modes

¹ Parts of an address at the opening of the New College, October, 1899.

of thought common to a large division of the human race. They are part of the heritage of thought which Israel brought with it from its cradle in the East, and which, lying in its mind, was afterwards modified by the religion of Jehovah, not obliterated, but shot through and illuminated with the rays of true religious light. And it is not for their own sakes that these old-world traditions are reproduced by the writers of Scripture; they are introduced, modified by the principles of the religion of Jehovah, in order that those who read them may take up a right religious attitude towards the world, find their true bearings, as it were, when contemplating creation and nature and the beginnings of human history. And the remoter inference might be, that as these narratives are not pure creations of the Hebrew mind but reflections of ideas common to a large division of the human race, so the strange traditions of early humanity recorded in the first ten chapters of Genesis, and much more the stories of the Patriarchs from the twelfth chapter onwards, have all a real historical basis, and are not mere ideal inventions.

In other ways the antiquities of Babylon and Assyria corroborate the historical narratives of the Bible, and particularly help us to understand the chronology. But the light which archæology sheds on the Bible is mostly superficial. The time has long gone by when it could be said that religion was the invention of interested priests. The time has also gone by when it could be pretended that the histories of the Old Testament were fictions or fables. Archæology may confirm these histories, but in our day its confirmation is scarcely needed. Other and more fundamental questions have now arisen: the question, whether there be a living God, and whether He has come down into the history of mankind to purify them and lift them up into fellowship with Himself, and whether there be an eternal hope for the individual and for the race; and on

these questions archæology has little to say, unless, indeed, its limits be so extended as to include the history and contents of the ancient religions.

For a period now of about 150 years what is called criticism has occupied itself with the Old Testament, and results have been reached which, though not universally, are generally acquiesced in, particularly in regard to what might be called the history of the ritual worship of Jehovah in Israel. And it might be supposed that the time had come to make an estimate of these results, to sum up the profit and the loss, for we may assume that no general and earnest movement of the human mind can be without its profit, real and permanent, and that the loss, if there be any, will be but partial and temporary. But obviously such an estimate is too large a subject for an occasion like this. Further, the right person to make such an estimate is not easy to find. The ideal person ought to be one with all the modes of thought of fifty years ago suddenly confronted with all the conclusions of the new learning in their completeness. Such a mind would be sensible at once of the differences, the antitheses would stand out vividly before him, and the general bearing on religious faith of the two different views would be apparent. But one who has lived during the process, and who has successively accommodated himself step by step to each new conclusion as it arose, is not in a position to contrast the new and the old with anything like the same sharpness. Such a person may remember his own early perplexities and the efforts required to assimilate each new discovery, and to effect a readjustment of his mental state; but knowing that the history of his mind was the history of hundreds of other minds, and not supposing that a record of his successive mental movements would be of any use or interest to the world, he would not keep any record of them. All that he would be able to say, after a readjustment had been effected and he had attained

to equilibrium, would be that so far as the doctrines of the faith are concerned criticism has not touched them, cannot touch them, and they remain as they were. This conclusion was stated many years ago by Prof. Robertson Smith, in these words: "Of this I am sure, that the Bible does speak to the heart of man in words that can only come from God—that no historical research can deprive me of this conviction, or make less precious the Divine utterances that speak to the heart. For the language of these words is so clear that no readjustment of their historical setting can conceivably change the substance of them. Historical study may throw a new light on the circumstances in which they were first heard or written. In that there can only be gain. But the plain, central, heartfelt truths, that speak for themselves and rest on their own indefeasible worth, will assuredly remain with us."

Starting from the irrefragable testimony of experience that the Bible was the word of God, the Church has in all ages theorized upon the general conception "the word of God," and hazarded *a priori* judgments regarding what must be found in it or what must certainly be absent from it. But how few of these theoretical opinions formed beforehand have stood the test of experience, and how many of them have disappeared before historical and scientific investigation! and while one generation has trembled for the Scriptures, thinking the loss of something which was threatened involved the loss of all, the following generation has acquiesced in the loss with perfect composure. At one time, for example, it was contended that the Hebrew punctuation or vocalization must be considered an integral part of the Old Testament, and must be as ancient as the autographs of the Scripture writers. From the point of view of a perfect word of God absolutely complete in meaning this was anything but a foolish opinion. And yet historical investigation showed con-

clusively that such a word of God had not been given to men, and that the vowel signs in our Bibles, so far from being as old as Moses, were not so old as Jerome and the Talmud, four or five hundred years after the Christian era. At a later time it was contended that the Greek of the New Testament must be classical and free from all grammatical solecism. This was a far less sensible contention, for thoughts may be as accurately expressed in an impure or nonliterary dialect as in a classical one, and I daresay there are few of us here who have not heard our Scotch dialect used by good men in prayer with a power and pathos, which to us at least was more touching and impressive than the purest English would have been. At another time the strict conception of the word of God was held to imply that everything in Scripture which seemed to be historical representation must be regarded as a record of actual facts. A distinguished German theologian said of the events narrated in the first two chapters of Job, and of the speeches in that book, *nisi historia sit, fraus scriptoris*. But this rigid conception of "the word of God" has been greatly relaxed by a better acquaintance with the actual Scriptures. It is now recognised that there may be dramatic representation in Scripture; that speeches may be put into the mouths of persons which were never actually spoken, and that even a situation may be idealized or created so as to present the conditions of a moral problem more vividly to the mind; in a word, that the kinds of literary composition usual among men may be expected in Scripture. This general principle is at least recognised, though some may still be unwilling to carry it very far; for example, to apply it in any degree to a prose composition like Deuteronomy, though they may acquiesce in its application to poetical books like Job or semipoetical books like Ecclesiastes. The conception of the word of God strictly taken continues in many quarters

to be held in regard to Scripture statements about nature, and many are loath to part with the idea that when Scripture speaks of the earth or the heavens, it will speak in a way not to conflict with the sciences of geology or astronomy. Being the word of God, and nature being the work of God, it is thought that the two cannot but be in harmony, and that whatever ancient Scripture writers themselves thought of the world, and however ignorant they might be of science, they must have been so guided as at least to say nothing that could conflict with the certain results of science reached in our day.

There is, perhaps, left in the general mind a certain vague feeling or dread that in consequence of recent historical investigations the Old Testament cannot now be used as it has been used in all generations in the Church for edification, that it cannot be handled with the same firmness and assurance in public teaching as was formerly the case. Were this fear justified, it would be a serious misfortune. For there is in the Old Testament such a singular graphicness, such a variety of human situation and experience, so much pathos and joy and sorrow all irradiated with the hues of religion, such a powerful sense of God, such a practical assurance of His presence and power and sympathy and enlightenment, and such a broad hope in Him as having a gracious purpose towards the world and men, which amidst all present confusions He is working out and will yet make clearly to appear and realize,—in a word, such a religious reality, touching the life and mind of men on all sides, that the Church, especially the great common mass of believers, who are less moved by abstract principles, have at all times found in it great quickening to their faith and sustenance to their religious life. The loss would be very great if this meaning of the Old Testament for Christian minds should be imperilled or even in any way impaired. But the fear

of this has little foundation. Whatever changes in the historical disposition of some parts of the Old Testament have taken place their religious substance remains unimpaired and untouched. The prophets and Psalms cannot be lost because their truth is self-evidencing; they awaken and find their response in the religious mind of men, and so long as this mind remains—and it will always remain—the witness to their truth will remain.

There are perhaps two points in which there may be a fear that the use of the Old Testament has been impaired for the purposes of edification; first, its morality, which has been impeached; and second, the historical character of its early portions, which, it is feared, has been undermined. And there are two classes which these fears or suspicions may affect—those who hear it preached from, and those who preach from it. The latter class, those who use it in public ministrations, may have a latent feeling that what they are reading to men as history is really not so, and they may have great conflicts in their own minds, and feel themselves hampered or even paralyzed.

i. Now with respect to the first point, there are some considerations which we might keep before us in regard to the Old Testament. (1) The great use of Scripture in our day, and for many ages, as a means of moral and religious instruction has tended to make us forget how Scripture originated, and to regard it as a direct revelation given to us and in our circumstances. Now the word of God was spoken to us, but not immediately. It is ours, because we are part of God's historical Church which He founded long ago, and still guides by His Spirit in us, and by His word spoken to His Church in past ages—"God spake of old time in many parts and in many ways unto the fathers by the prophets" (Heb. i. 1). Being spoken to men long ago, it was spoken to them in their circumstances and conditions of mind, which in many things may have been

unlike ours. The colour, the circumstances, in a word the relativity, of the Old Testament belongs to the Church of the past, and the relativity includes the *amount* or *degree* of truth spoken on any given occasion—for “God spake in many parts.”

But now what does this word of God appear to be when regarded thus as spoken to men of the past? Can we suppose that as written it has other or higher qualities than it had when spoken? Less lofty qualities it cannot have; but must we not form our opinion of the written word from the spoken word? Indeed, we plainly perceive that they are identical. Such a prophet as Amos or Isaiah used writing precisely as he used speech, his writing was but a condensation or an expansion, as the case might be, of his speech. To what objects, then, did he direct his speech? His objects were to enable men to live unto God in their day, and to show them from God how to live. The word of God was at all times practical, and at all times relating to life and conduct. If we go back to any one of the religious teachers from God, do we see him pursuing any other end than religious ones? Does he seek to correct men's notions of nature or history, or any other subject on which they had the opinions of their day? Does it not rather appear that the men to whom he spoke were left by him to think on every subject as they thought before, except in regard to God and living unto God? If such a teacher refer to nature, it will be to say that nature is the work of God and is in His hand, just as mankind, men, or nations are in His hand; if he refer to history, it will be to show how God's moral providence is visible in it.

But to come closer to Old Testament morality. It is manifest that the work of God in Israel took the people as it found them. It did not revolutionize their ideas. Certain practical things, such as the worship of Jehovah alone and morality, it insisted upon—morality at least so far.

Especially it put morality under the shield of Jehovah. Morality was part of religion, it had Divine sanction—moral duties were the commands of Jehovah. But this was all. The people were begun with on these lines just as they were found, precisely as an individual is begun with now, who has been impressed by religion. Their modes of thought on all things except God and duty were left; their superstitions, their credulities, their hereditary customs—their general views of things—these were not interfered with except when they might embody false thoughts of God or life. When taken in hand, the people, judged by modern standards, might be in a backward condition. Practices prevailed which Christianity has abolished, such as polygamy and others. Now the dispensation was one of redemption, and for that end one of education. But education cannot be given by the enunciation of abstract principles at one time; men must be trained. Now such practices as polygamy and slavery were treated in two ways: their use was mildened and circumscribed; and secondly, they were then left to come under the influence of other principles directly taught, which acted upon them and gradually resolved them. This problem of polygamy is one which faces missionaries at the present day, and different courses are recommended by different men, practical men, in regard to it. In the Old Testament, monogamy was left to be introduced by a gradual rise of moral tone. To whatever it was due, it was certainly the case that in Israel monogamy came to prevail without any express enactment. All the prophets, Hosea, Isaiah, Ezekiel, are represented as the husband of one wife; and so saints like Job; and the general higher teaching of revelation had led by the time of the Christian era, or long before it, to what was virtually a universal practice. That monogamy is the ideal of the relation of man and woman is suggested by both the creation narratives, Genesis i. and ii.; and so our Lord interprets them (Matt. xix. 8). In dealing with

nations a certain opportunism is inevitable. Revolutionary changes cannot be imposed on a people at once. Even the New Testament does not legislate on slavery, it leaves it to be acted on by the general principles of Christianity,—the idea that in Christ there is neither bond nor free, that all alike are children of God and brethren, and the worth of each individual soul,—and these principles have wrought out the emancipation of the slave. Even our Lord felt the necessity of conceding something to the condition of men's minds—"I have many things to say unto you, but ye cannot bear them now"; and He recognises that certain things in the Old Testament, such as the law of divorce, were a concession to the hardness of men's hearts.

There is a difference between the moral idea and the details of morality, as there is between religion or devotion and the compass of one's creed. Judged by our more extended creed, even David or Isaiah would come short. Their faith, for example, in the Trinity, if they had it at all, would be very far from explicit. Yet we never think of blaming them. But we are slower to apply the same reasoning to morals. But these ancient saints had also the moral idea, and their life corresponded to their idea, at least revelation enjoined that it should. That which they felt to be right they strove to fulfil; and if the details of right doing were less explicit than now, and particularly if it was conduct rather than a state of the mind that was considered, we should hardly on that account call them immoral men.

(2) And this suggests another important consideration. The legislation of the Old Testament was a code made for a state; it was civil and social law. In other words, it was a legislation regulating conduct primarily, and not a law of the mind or the thought. The fact, however, that all law civil and moral was regarded as the command of Jehovah, brought conduct under the religious feeling, and thus made

the law more and more inward, more and more a law of the mind. And in later books, such as Job and many of the Psalms, this is clearly apparent. In the 31st chapter, which shows the high-water mark of Old Testament morality, Job repudiates not only wrong external actions, but also those inordinate motions of the mind and heart which Christianity condemns. But in the New Testament the state idea disappears, and the idea of the individual takes its place. The Sermon on the Mount is not a law of conduct, but a law of the mind, and its principle is love to all around. What might be called justice is sublimed into something higher. What might be called personal rights are abrogated, at least the individual is invited to hold them in abeyance. God is his example, who makes His sun to shine on the evil and the good. But such a principle as this is only for the individual who can rule himself by it; such a principle could not be made the law of a state or civil organism. No Christian state has attempted to embody such a principle in its legal code. The principle indeed is the antithesis and the abrogation of law. It is a rule for the individual, free to renounce what might be called personal rights, and rule himself by the principle of love—"I say unto you, that ye resist not evil."

Now this national, state character of Hebrew law is often forgotten, and the Old Testament is contrasted with the teaching of our Lord, to the detriment of the former, and His authority is even invoked for making the contrast—"Ye have heard that it has been said to them of old time, an eye for an eye; but I say unto you." It is not quite clear who it is that He refers to in the words *it has been said*—who it is that said it. Considering our Lord's habitual deference to the Old Testament, one may be pardoned for doubting any reference to Moses, as if He opposed His own authority to his. It is probably not to Mosaic law that He opposes His own, it is to the interpreta-

tions of Mosaic law current among the doctors of His day. It is the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, to which He opposes a righteousness which exceeds it. These teachers made the law a mere rule of external conduct, He showed it to be a law of the mind. However this be, the law an eye for an eye is part of the state law of Israel, administered by the judicature. It was not a law giving sanction to private revenge. In Deuteronomy xix. 17 it is said, when one man has a complaint against another: "Both the men shall stand before the priests and judges, and they shall make diligent inquiry, and thine eye shall not spare: life shall go for life, eye for eye." Such a law is but the simplest expression of justice, and it is common to all primitive peoples; it may be rude, but unjust or immoral it cannot be called. And the principle that law in the Old Testament was, under one aspect, state law has a hundred ramifications. The whole of the Old Testament is coloured by nationality. Even in later times, though Israel was no more an autonomous state, it continued to be a distinct people or nation, and this consciousness had always great influence upon the thoughts and words even of pious minds. The person or personality who imprecates God's judgments in the Psalms is the community, and the personality on whom they are imprecated is often heathen persecuting powers or apostate parties, traitors both to God and His people. It is doubtful if anywhere there be imprecation by an individual against another individual. The introduction of the idea of nationality complicates the question of conduct, as Christians whose country is at war with another country feel. Is it wrong to pray for victory to their country's arms seeing victory implies the defeat and destruction of the enemy? At any rate Old Testament morality must be taken as a whole. One may not be able to open the page anywhere that happens to find a perfect morality any more than a perfect religion. But in both

respects, along with things said, along with the degree reached, there must always be observed the *tendency* manifested to move forward to what is more perfect.

ii. On the other point, the historical character of the early narratives, there is room to say but little. It is to be observed how small a part of the Old Testament is involved in the question. But here the plain fact, which it did not need criticism to reveal, is that the early history was not written by contemporaries of the events recorded, but by writers living many hundred years later. Apart, therefore, from theories about Scripture, what view of these narratives does the nature of the case suggest?

Now we may ask, Who were the writers of the primitive history? on what principles did they write? and with what aims? The writers of the history were prophetic men, who wrote with the same principles that animated the prophets, and for the same ends as they pursued. All Hebrew history, not only the primitive, but the later, is written from one point of view, the two presuppositions being that God is in all history of mankind, that He is the one Causality, and His communication of Himself to men the source of all good in them; and that He has from the beginning a purpose to found a perfect kingdom of God upon the earth. God rules the history; it is He that makes history; and this is at once the explanation of it, and the reason for recording it. It is not written for the sake of the mere events, but for the sake of their meaning. History is written in order to display the religious philosophy of the history.

Now this being the view of history, the prophet's eye might see more and other things in it than the ordinary eye. He always saw God in it, and His redemptive movement on from more to more, and he might see the end in the beginning in a way not understood even by the original actors. For how differently do the events of the life and

the history of a person look to him when he places them in the light of God's special providence with him, and judges them from some advanced point in his experience. In so judging he does not import anything into the past, he merely interprets it. No doubt such a person, looking back over his life, might colour its early part with some hues from his riper experience; and the prophetic writer may have reflected back on the early history something of the light amidst which he himself stood. This is a possibility which must be admitted in every case. Still one must assume a continuity even in the individual life, and much more in the religious life of Israel, and the principles of the prophetic age were the fruit of the seed sown in the age of the patriarchs and the time of the Exodus.

The tendency of Hebrew writers to throw back the development attained in their own day into the most distant past is greatly insisted on by modern scholars, and to a certain degree justly. The writers are thus in some measure false to history. But, on the other hand, they are true to the purpose of God and His operation. He is the first and the last; He inaugurates and He consummates. From the beginning He sees the end, and His thought embraces it. The first movement contains in it the perfect issue; the crescent by necessity broadens into the full orb. The Priests' Code contains one of the most conspicuous of these retrojections. In this writing there are some laws whose written form is probably almost as old as anything in Scripture. Other laws were committed to writing all down the history, and some may have been written only after the exile, when the whole was codified. But the writer who codified the laws has thrown a general conception over the whole. In his day the *sacra* of Israel had reached the end of their historical development. The idea of the sacred institutions was Jehovah dwelling among His people and sanctifying them by His presence. This idea was realized

in His house, and the institutions connected with it. In the author's day the idea had received perfect embodiment; and this perfect embodiment, though historically all the ages of Israel's life had been contributing to its growth, he throws back to the day of its birth in the wilderness. The acorn sown by Moses had become a great tree, and the tree is transplanted back to the time of sowing the seed.

But this tendency to see the end in the beginning, to overlook actual history, and to locate all in the mind of God, is not peculiar to the Old Testament. It dominates the New Testament also. St. Paul discovers Christ and Christianity in the Abrahamic covenant, and beyond the side institution of Law there is in principle nothing else in all the religious history of Israel. The author of the Hebrews says that Moses endured "the reproach of Christ," that the patriarchs sought the heavenly country, and that the saints' everlasting rest was offered to Israel in the wilderness. More than that: he says that Christianity is eternal, just as it shall be everlasting, and that all else is only this, that the true heavenly things of which it consists thrust themselves forward on to this bank and shoal of time, and took cosmical embodiment in order to suggest their coming everlasting manifestation. The whole apostolic exegesis of the Old Testament is but an application of the principle of finding the end in the beginning. The end was Christ and Christianity. He who spoke in the Old Testament was God, and from the first that which He spoke about was the consummation which filled His thought.

The tendency to retroject is greatly the result of a religious idea, the idea that revelation and redemptive history is but the clothing of Divine thoughts; the true arena of it all is the Divine mind, and it is this arena into which the writer delights to ascend. A most instructive passage in this view is the 11th chapter of Romans. But though the tendency to throw back the present into the past be

a peculiarity of Hebrew writers, there is risk of misusing the principle in exegesis. The promise to Abraham that his seed should inherit the land need not be a reflection back into Abraham's time of the fact that Israel did possess the land and that it owed the possession to God, for undoubtedly the Hebrews were in Canaan, and particularly in its southern region, before their migration to Egypt, and Canaan seemed to them their natural goal immediately on their deliverance. And much else of the same kind might be cited.

With regard to the early history, what has been said has to be remembered, viz., the religious use which the oldest writers make of it. The early history is their Bible, in which they find the texts for their homilies. The early history was current long before it was written. The oldest writers did not invent the stories the moral of which they point. The stories came to them in the form of traditions living among the people. They transcribe a national history, long written on the consciousness of the people. And it is not one writer who does so, but many, both in the north and in the south. Scholars have been able to trace out certain early documents in the Pentateuch, but these documents probably embrace many earlier efforts. Just as many took in hand to set forth the sayings and miracles of Christ, so many all over the nation of Israel set forth the *magnalia Dei* in its history. A nation does not forget. But neither does it remember accurately. The events are remembered for their significance. The conception of what the history meant is born, and the *idea* is creative, and instinctively fashions a perfect body for itself. That the early history of Israel is a perfectly accurate record of bare facts need not be supposed. The body is more than the raiment, and the *idea* more than the fact. Nevertheless it was the fact or event that suggested the *idea*, though the *idea*, once born, with vital energy transformed details in

order perfectly to express itself. But whatever may be the case with details of the history, its great significant turning-points may be regarded as certain. Yet it is strange how ignorant the Bible leaves us of the early history of mankind; we sometimes feel like orphans, hardly knowing anything of our birth or parentage. It is of God, not of men, that the Bible speaks. It begins by showing us His hand in the creation of all things. From creation to the Exodus it gives us a few signal illustrations of His moral rule of the world. But what a broad world of mankind is hardly referred to! What a human vitality and energy during four or five millenniums is passed over in the valleys of the Euphrates and the Nile, as if it deserved no mention! Only one thing it tells us—that God has been in the history of mankind from the beginning.

Attempts to give a definition of Scripture may be regarded as futile. Our Catechism asks, What do the Scriptures *teach*? The systematic theologian regards revelation as “the delivery of doctrine”—revelation meaning the communication from an intellectual Divine mind to an intellectual and otherwise empty human mind of some abstract and universally valid religious idea. Such catechetical and systematic uses of the Old Testament may be quite legitimate, but they fail to correspond to its idea. They omit the historical, which is of the essence of the Old Testament. They omit also the personally religious in the writers, which is also of its essence. In a word, they omit this, that the Old Testament was religious experience before it became Scripture. And it is this experience, or the human mind with this experience, not merely intellectual, but as broad as the mind itself, which is the thing we should like to see, because it is in each instance an example of that ineffable coalescence of the Divine mind with the human all through history, which is the only thing of importance, whether in past ages or at the present time. We cannot

get this, but Scripture is more than a record of it; it is a reflection of it, an expression of it. It is precarious even to draw a distinction between its thoughts and its words, for the Oriental thought in words. Now the aim of historical exegesis is to read the Old Testament in its various parts in the historical circumstances and conditions of men's minds in which it originated, just that we may trace God's historical fellowship with mankind. Criticism is part of historical exegesis. Criticism is the effort of exegesis to be historical. The effort can never be more than partially successful. But though there may be many failures, the idea of historical exegesis is valuable, because it gives us the right idea of Scripture, which is the reflection of the presence of the living God in human history. Historical exegesis strives to unite all the lights emanating from this presence: Abraham in his call, Jacob at Bethel, Moses at the bush, the vision of Isaiah, the piety of Jeremiah and the Psalmists—to dispose all these points of light in one great line of light running down all history, the track of the presence of the living God in the life of mankind.

A. B. DAVIDSON.