

Theology of the Old Testament
Ch. Piepenbring
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The most attractive feature of this book is lucidity of statement; and it is natural to ascribe somewhat of this virtue to its French origin. We have not met with a single obscure or ambiguous sentence in its pages. It is a cause for regret that this clearness of form is not equaled by depth of treatment. The discussion is almost throughout confined to the bare phenomena of the Old Testament in a positivistic not to say in a superficial manner. Undoubtedly it is of the greatest importance to acquaint the reader with the data on which every attempted solution of the problems must rest, but, after all, this is merely preparatory to the real task of Biblical Theology, which consists in pointing out the leading principles and the historic nexus between the facts. In many cases the author contributes but little to this part of the work. For example, the discussion of the contents of Prophetism opens with a paragraph on the unity of God. The author follows Baudissin in describing the various stages through which the religious belief of Israel passed in regard to this question. Next he examines the various documents belonging to the prophetic period on the subject. Finally he states as his conclusion that from the time of Amos and Hosea, perhaps an earlier date, certain minds had risen to the idea that Jehovah alone is truly God. But not a word is said in explanation of the manner in which the Israelites came to pass from one of these stages into the other. Again, treating of the attribute of holiness, in another passage, the author tries to show that this word almost invariably conveys the idea of majesty, greatness, matchlessness, and then goes on to remark that holiness in the sense of the English word, the opposite of moral evil, is seldom expressed by the Hebrew term. On the next page we are told that the holiness of God bears a close relation to His jealousy, His wrath and His vengeance. Now we certainly are justified in expecting some explanation of the interdependence of these various modifications of the one idea of holiness. But we look for it in vain. On p. 82, such a fundamental and far-reaching fact as the distinction between true prophecy and false prophecy is disposed of in a few passing remarks. And it would be easy to quote other examples of a similar nature.

After all, however, these are objections made from a more or less formal point of view, and, for this reason, they are of less weight than others that bear directly against the contents. As his division into the periods of Mosaism, Prophetism and Levitism shows, Piepenbring is an adherent of the views of Wellhausen and Kuenen in regard to the religious development of Israel. On one of the very first pages we read, that to derive the Pentateuchal legislation from Moses may be compared to the fond belief of the Protestant Churches that their dogmas are a faithful expression of the teaching of Jesus and the Apostles. After this we are prepared for very frank and outspoken statements concerning the difference between the Church Theology and the Bible Theology. On p. 173, Traditional Theology is referred to in the following words: "The principal fault of this Theology is that it has found in the Bible precisely what it does not contain, and has not been able to discover what is clearly taught therein." This is not so much to the discredit of the Church as it might at first seem, since Piepenbring finds among the Biblical teachings such things as the following: "In all the books of the Old Testament there are references to oaths of God, to repentance on his part, to his jealousy, to his anger, to his vengeance. But moral imperfections even more shocking were attributed to him. It is related that he incited Moses and the Israelites to cheat and rob the Egyptians, and that he assisted them in this attempt" (p. 28). The Israelites "certainly gave God a body, and did not regard

him as a pure Spirit” (p. 172). “The original ground for sacrifices—is the thought that the Deity takes nourishment” (p. 62). “It is only necessary to read a few pages of the Prophets or the Psalms to be convinced that God is regarded as possessing all the members and functions of the human body. He is even said to hiss, to cry, to laugh, to sleep and awake.” Although the author grants that in the Prophets and Psalms these expressions belong to the poetic style, he maintains that in the mouth of the people they were not merely rhetorical (p. 26).

The subject of revelation especially receives very unsatisfactory and inadequate treatment. We have already noticed that the distinction between true and false prophecy is not appreciated in its high importance. But on p. 327 we find the remarkable statement, that “in Israel no distinction was made as there is among us, between natural and supernatural revelation . . . between the products of an unassisted and inspired reason; they thought that everything in the world depended absolutely and directly upon God.” On p. 87, on the other hand, we learn that in ancient times God was conceived of as speaking to men in the most literal sense of the word. But the prophets, the author hastens to add, did not understand the matter in this sense; for them the divine word was an internal word. Some references in proof of this assertion would not have been out of place, the more so as the same sentence contains the admission that the prophets continued “to use the language that had been adopted, when it was believed that God spoke after the manner of men.” If this be so, either the prophets meant what this language expresses, and then the modern theory of the internal word is contradicted by the prophetic consciousness, or the prophets used language which they could not use with truthfulness, and in this case the critical opinion about their high moral standing will need modification. From Piepenbring’s standpoint we cannot but admit the truth of a recent remark of Oort’s to the effect that the formula “Thus saith the Lord” had from the beginning, even with the greatest prophets, the taint of unverity, and that of this taint, wherewith it was born, prophetism died in the end.

Most disappointing of all is the concluding paragraph of the book. After having completed his task as historian, the author adds some remarks “in response to the religious interests, the interests of faith.” Once the Bible was studied exclusively from the dogmatic standpoint. There is now danger of going to the opposite extreme, i.e., of studying it only from the historical and critical standpoint, losing sight of its religious value. But will not this historical study of the Bible, by showing divergencies and errors, unsettle faith? This is the momentous question, which the conclusion of the book tries to answer. And the answer amounts to this, that faith as “the product of Jewish Rabbinism and Christian dogmatism” is shaken indeed, but not faith in the Biblical sense, true faith. By true faith in the Biblical sense is meant faith in the manifestation of God in history, faith in the interference of God in the world for the salvation of humanity, faith in the living word of the prophets. This, we are told, is the unalterable element in the Bible, which historical study cannot shake. Is it really so? It would seem to us that the whole tenor of Piepenbring’s book is remarkably well adapted to drive out this last remnant of supernaturalism, diluted as it is. The only thing on which the author bases his right to retain it, is that in the elite of the Israelitish nation we meet with a superior ethical life. “Behind these writings we feel the beat of the hearts that inspired them, and behind these hearts we feel a higher power, a divine, regenerating, sanctifying influence” (p. 349). But this, it seems to us, is utterly inadequate to support the structure that Piepenbring would raise on it. We might ask the author how high a degree of ethical life he thinks the natural development of humanity sufficient to produce, and where is the exact point where the supernatural must be called in to explain the ethical

phenomena. The old supernaturalism of the Church, of which the author speaks so deprecatingly, had at least something more tangible and convincing to offer in the line of evidence, for miracles are facts which no process of natural development will account for. It is not so with the ethical life of a class of men, who on the author's own premises, can perhaps not be entirely acquitted of the charge of untruthfulness.