

METHODS OF BIBLE STUDY

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CHAPTER SEVEN

OLD TESTAMENT DOCTRINE

WE have already considered the proper methods of studying the historical facts and the literary structure which lie at the foundation of the Old Testament. These facts, as we have seen, carry their own particular lessons.

It is necessary, however, to go further, and consider the spiritual teaching of the Old Testament in its entirety. The historical unity amid the diversity which we studied in our first chapter has its counterpart in the spiritual truths found from Genesis to Malachi, and it is at once our duty and privilege to discover what the Old Testament has to say on the great spiritual realities which concern the life of man.

It is only possible to suggest heads under which to study the particular doctrines. The student should arrange under each division or subdivision the results of his reading.

One great principle of immense importance must be grasped and ever kept in view in the doctrinal study of the Old Testament. It is that of the

PROGRESSIVENESS OF REVELATION

GOD revealed Himself, not only at "sundry times" but also in "divers manners," to the fathers (Hebrews 1:1). He taught men as they were able to bear it. He led them step by step from the dawn of revelation up to the meridian of fullness and splendor of His manifestation "**in these last days by His Son**" (Hebrews 1:1).

We are to remember, therefore, that while each stage of the revelation was perfect, it was perfect for that time, and not necessarily perfect with reference to succeeding stages.

A knowledge of this principle of progress in GOD's revelation of Himself enables us to avoid a twofold error:

- It prevents us, on the one hand, from undervaluing the Old Testament by reason of our fuller light from the New Testament;
- It prevents us, on the other hand, it prevents us from using the Old Testament in any of its stages without guidance from the complete revelation in CHRIST.

We shall thus be enabled, in a word, to obtain the correct spiritual perspective from which to study the Old Testament, and to derive from it the wealth of spiritual instruction it was intended to convey to all ages (Romans 15:4).

This principle of progress in GOD's revelation is also of great practical service in meeting certain current objections to the Old Testament.

There are those who reject it because of its alleged cruelties, such as the slaughter of the Canaanites, or because of certain manifestations in individual life and practice not consonant with New Testament principles. Now, while we are not to be guided to-day by many of the examples of the Old Testament, it is equally true that in so far as what they said and did was due to a revelation of GOD, that revelation was perfect for that time, whatever additional truth came afterwards for newer needs.

We say in so far as what they said and did was of GOD, because not even in the Old Testament are we to understand that GOD necessarily approved of all that His servants said and did, even when they thought they were doing Him service. If this were the place to do it, the instance of the Canaanites, already referred to, could be justified without much difficulty in the light of the awful depths of sin to which they had descended, and it is at least suggestive that those who are so much concerned about the Canaanites were quite jubilant over the dispersal of the Khalifa's power as a blow struck for civilization and human safety.

We have thus to distinguish carefully between what is called dispensational truth and permanent truth in the Old Testament - that is, between those elements of GOD's revelation intended solely for the immediate need and those which are of eternal validity.

To put it in yet another way, we have to remember the difference between what is written to us and for us. All Scripture was written for our learning, but not all was written to us directly. Much of it addressed to Jews was primarily and often exclusively for them, and is only for us to-day by way of application.

To give one example out of many: the first commandment is of permanent and eternal value and force, but the introductory words giving the motive for it (Exodus 20:2) are no longer applicable to us except by means of a process of spiritualizing.

This distinction between the dispensations will solve many an Old Testament difficulty. But we must not continue. Suffice it once more to say that the progress of doctrine is one of the master-keys of the Old Testament.

Let us now consider some of the main elements of the teaching.

THE DOCTRINE OF GOD

Take, first, the book of Genesis, and consider its fundamental ideas of GOD:

1. As Creator.
2. As Lawgiver.
3. As Judge.
4. As Provider or Ruler.
5. As Redeemer.

Notice how these come out of the early chapters.

In them we have the germ of all that follows, and everything else up to Malachi may be included in these ideas. The revelation of GOD concerning Himself takes various forms, according as the media are patriarchs, judges, kings, or prophets, and the ever-increasing fullness from patriarch up to prophet affords a most fruitful study.

In this connection a study of the names and titles of GOD is of great importance. For full and proper study here a knowledge of Hebrew is of course necessary; but there are many helps available in English which will be of real service.

The names of GOD (Elohim), Jehovah, GOD Almighty (El Shaddai), the Everlasting GOD (Genesis 21), and the various titles associated with Jehovah (Jireh, Shalom, etc.) are illustrations from this field. The "Name" of GOD is the revelation of His Nature, and the various names and titles are so many aspects of His Divine character. It is important to note carefully, as succeeding chapters and stages are studied, what addition is made in each to the doctrine of GOD.

THE DOCTRINE OF MAN

Look again at Genesis, and see there a summary of the whole Bible concerning man

1. His glory (in creation).
2. His humiliation (through sin).
3. His need (of redemption).
4. His longings (for GOD).
5. His endeavors (after righteousness).

Each of these can be traced right through the Old Testament, and illustrations almost innumerable found. Take, for example, under 4, man's yearnings after GOD, and read especially Job and the Psalms for these. Consider, too, under 5, man's efforts by his own works of sacrifice, etc., to merit GOD's favour; and then note the true idea of sacrifice, as taught in Psalms 1. and 51 and Micah 5:5-8.

Study well the Old Testament picture of man, and from it will come a deeper realization of what grace must and can do for him.

THE DOCTRINE OF RELIGION

This will show the Divine dealings with man, and how the doctrine concerning GOD comes in contact with the life of man. We find religion in the Old Testament under three successive and yet coexistent forms:-

1. The Theocracy or the direct government of GOD (from Creation to Samuel).
2. The Monarchy or Divine government through the kings (Saul to the Captivity).
3. The Hierarchy, or Divine government through priests and prophets (the Captivity and Restoration).

We have said successive, yet co-existent, because in the second as well as in the third period the prophets and priests were influential as media of Divine revelation, even though they were not actually in direct authority over the people.

In the whole course of these three forms there seems to be one main principle - Education.

GOD's people were being trained and led upwards and onward:

- From a religion of outward restraint to a religion of inward constraint
- From a system of outward precepts to a system of inward principles.

In other words, GOD was dealing with the world as we deal with children. We impose our will from without, and so train the child gradually until the power for right-doing is found in his own will from within. The Old Testament is the record of the world's moral childhood "**under governors until the time appointed of the Father**" - until the moral and spiritual manhood of the revelation in CHRIST (Galatians 4:1, ff.).

Traces of this gradual progress can be seen right through the Old Testament

- The growing subservience of the outward to the inward,
- The superiority of the spirit to the letter,
- The gradual progress and development of religion

leading up to the "**worship in spirit and truth**" of the New Testament.

There are other aspects of Old Testament teaching arising out of these, on which we cannot now enter. But perhaps the most important - certainly the most immediately important - aspect remains to be considered. As this will require fuller treatment we must reserve it for our next chapter.

~ end of chapter 7 ~

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