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The Significance of the Prophets (Part 1) (Feb 1957)

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According to Elihu, “God speaketh in one way, yea in two, though man regardeth it not” (Job 33:14 R.V.mg). Nevertheless, this He does with significant differences. God’s work of revealing Himself is summed up in two clauses in the Epistle to the Hebrews: “God, having of old time spoken unto the fathers in the prophets by divers portions and in divers manners.” This clause declares that in ancient times Jehovah spoke through the Hebrew prophets in a variety of ways. The second clause, “Hath at the end of these times spoken unto us in a Son,” discloses that oracles begun in the prophets were continued in Christ. The source was always the same, Jehovah, no matter how varied the means by which He made Himself known. Thus, in these concise words we have a doctrinal statement of the unity of the Scriptures. Whether delivered in the king’s chapel during the reign of Jeroboam 2, or centuries later in parabolic form by the Master Teacher beside Galilee’s shores, or dictated carefully and then signed by a manacled hand of the prisoner of Christ, they are a whole.

This truth of the unity of the Scriptures is occasionally overlooked by readers of the sacred writings. Curiously, the verse quoted is sometimes construed to mean that the prophets’ messages died with them, and having been superseded by something better, are no longer suitable for New Testament readers. This point of view, while relieving us of the work imposed by conscientious study

of 39 books, can only impoverish the soul by denying it nourishment essential to spiritual maturity.

A tireless contributor to the Canon of the New Testament defined the proper use of the former writings in his last word to a younger brother. “From a child thou hast known the sacred writings, which are able to make thee wise unto salvation.” “Every Scripture inspired of God is also profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for instruction… that the man of God may be compete” (2 Tim. 3:15-16). We cannot exaggerate the significance of this passage. As an analysis of their uses, it provides solid instruction in how we are to use the Old Testament writings. Here, in a parenthetical remark, it may be said that whether we prefer the Authorized Version or the Revised Version translation of the 16th. verse, the meaning is the same. According to scholars of unquestioned ability, such as W. E. Vine, either is grammatically permissible, and both are reverent in their treatment of the doctrine of the inspiration of the Holy Writings. The translation given here appeals, since. it appears to insist upon inclusion of the later writings (as, for example, those of Paul, some of which were in circulation at the time), and thus guards against a rigid “orothoxy” which then existed and which would have limited the Sacred Writings to those ending with the book of the prophet Malachi.

The Apostles appealed frequently to the Old Testament in confirmation of their messages. Examples may be found illustrating the uses mentioned by Paul. Below are a few, all taken from the Epistle to the Romans: to show how to be saved (Rom. 4:23-24), to teach (Rom. 9-11), to reprove (Rom. 3:10-18) (Gk. elegmos, conviction) to correct (Rom. 12:19) (Gk. empanorthosis, restoration to

upright state, resulting in improvement in character or life) and to instruct in righteousness (Rom. 13:8-9) Gk. paideia, training).

Clearly, the Old Testament cannot be dismissed as obsolete, suitable only for the Smithsonian Institute, or at best occasionally perused by students of curious things. Incomplete it is true, without the New Testament, nevertheless it forms a solid basis for intelligent reading of the later writings. In their witness to Christ, the pre-Christian writings show us how to be saved; they teach, convict, correct, and give training needed for spiritual maturity. In short, they are an essential part of the Sacred Library, and if we neglect them we can neither understand the New Testament nor develop fully as men of God.

Here we pause to consider an improper approach to the Old Testament. At great loss to ourselves we generally confine our reading to those passages which are patently “Messianic,” such as the moving Songs of the Suffering Servant in Isaiah, or the obviously “typical” passages, which illustrate by referring to the Passover Lamb of Exodus 12. As a result of this spotty reading, vast areas of the Old Testament are still uncharted for many believers. Probably all of us have groped wearily through the Old Testament once, but failing to find, as we determinedly pressed on, anything to compare with, say, Isaiah 53 for its power to thrill our souls, or with Exodus 12 for clearness, we made a mental note never to pass that way again.

Here, perhaps, is the root of the trouble: a misunderstanding of the commonly stated truth that the Old Testament bears witness to Christ. The whole of the

Sacred Writings bears witness to Christ in the sense that every line was written in preparation for His coming. In Him, Who is God seen and handled and heard, was completed the revelation that had been given piecemeal and progressively during the slow centuries of twilight knowledge. Christ was the long-range Object but not always the immediate Subject of the oracles. Much of the record is historical narrative, much is poetry setting down in measured sentences the perplexity of men like us as they grappled with ageless problems. Long passages in Job and Ecclesiastes utter sententious folly that was not right, and thus darkened counsel. God, of course, was not responsible for the nonsense. Inspiration, in these cases, was concerned with recording uninspired thinking, and every line of it, yes, even the genealogies that make our heads swim, was vital to an understanding of the character and will of God.

Take, for example, the historical narratives. The story of Creation was history, but not mere history; at the very least it is a revelation of God's almighty power and wisdom. The successive histories of the patriarchal characters, the bondage and the Exodus, the aimless wanderings of the ragged hordes that followed Moses, the conquest under Joshua of the Amoral tribes of Canaan, the rise and decadence of the monarchy, the Assyrian and Chaldean desolations; in all these God was speaking through His actions. How were the people to know that God was active at all? The answer is that He sent the Hebrew prophets to be interpreters of His deeds. In this we see the importance of the prophets. Their ministry was vital. All other nations were wallowing in the muck of idolatry, prostrated before

their fancied gods, but God had something better in store for Israel, a class of men whose mission in life was to interpret His deed and in this way to explain the principles upon which a holy God acted.

The Significance of the Prophets (Part 2) (Mar 1957)

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God sent the Hebrew prophets to interpret His deeds and to explain His holy principles. Here is the gist of their messages: God does not change. He is not a man that He should repent, that is, change His guiding principles. All the prophets build upon this premise. To put it in another way, God is predictable. When certain circumstances occur, He is bound in loyalty to Himself (His personal integrity is at stake) to act in judgment. Happily, adequate repentance on our part usually releases Him from His strange, distasteful work of judgment, and He acts in redemption. Therefore, we find two recurrent themes: Judgment and Redemption. The two are found typically as early as the first two verses of Genesis, illustrated powerfully in the story of the Exodus, and again and again in the subsequent history of Israel. In all these narratives, God's revelation of His character is consistent, and we who know His Son are immediately and repeatedly struck by the similarity of the Jehovah of the Old Testament to the Christ of the Gospels. Contrasts drawn by unbelievers between a harshly severe Hebrew deity and the Jesus of the Gospels are grossly exaggerated. It would be easy to demonstrate from the sayings of Christ, that in Him were combined the same dual characteristics of Judge and Redeemer.

But why is there so much failure recorded in the Old Testament? In Paul's words, they happened unto them "typically" (literal rendering of the Greek adverb), and

were recorded for our “admonishment.” Therefore, Paul urges, let the Christian “take heed.” We are quite capable of the same sins, and in the light of God’s revelation of Himself there is very good reason to fear swift punishment. It cannot be stated too often, or urged too strongly, that God has not changed. The old themes of the goodness and severity of God are stated repeatedly in the New Testament, and ought not to be brushed aside. Unhappily, in some extreme views of “dispensational truth,” the sting has been deftly removed from the warning passages in the New Testament by assigning them to the future peoples of the Tribulation or Millenium or other distant period. By compartmentalizing the Scriptures, they have fostered a smugness in some Christians that strongly recalls the pseudo-pious prattle of backsliding Israel in the days of Amos, or that of the Scripture-quoting Pharisees in the days of our Lord. Ananias and Sapphira, and not a few former members of the church at Corinth, can testify to their eternal loss that God has not changed from the days of Achan, or of Uzziah, King of Judah.

In a remarkable passage in his first letter to the Corinthians (chapter 10), Paul uses the narratives of the Old Testament as a deadly solemn warning that we should conduct ourselves with caution. God, he seems to say, is not to be trifled with. Paul reviews the wilderness experiences of the pilgrims to the Promised Land, and names five sins committed by them. The frightening aspect is that three times over, the stroke of judgment fell, and it is this that gives teeth to the passage. Paul would have had no sympathy with some modern psychologists who speak glibly about “guilt complexes” and who seek to convince patients that everything is all

right. On the contrary, according to Paul, writing as prompted by the Holy Spirit, twenty-three thousand fell in one day when Israel committed fornication; others perished by serpents when they tempted the Lord; others fell before the destroyer when they murmured. “Wherefore, let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall,” continues Paul. What is meant by this? A moral fall? A sin like that committed by the Israelites? If it were only that, the illustrations used were decidedly overdone. He is not here suggesting that we too retain the old nature and are therefore capable of sin; this important theme is handled elsewhere. Here Paul is dealing with the consequences of sin, and is urging the lessons of history on the Corinthians. There is good reason for us to fear a similar stroke of judgment. That this is the true meaning of the twelfth verse is confirmed by the following chapter, in which Paul tells them that because of irreverence at the Lord’s table, God had already executed some Corinthian believers, and others were wasting away at that very time. Here, then, is an important use of the Old Testament: to find instruction about conduct, in the light of God’s unchanging principles of judgment.

Now let us return to the prophets and their significance. In our Bibles, the books are arranged in a way that may tend to isolate the prophetic from the narrative portions. Actually, the books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings are included in the Book of the Prophets in the Hebrew Bible. These books must be studied together. Isaiah, for example, is largely unintelligible without constant reference to the historical books of Kings and Chronicles. The prophets cry for repentance and warn the people that unless Baal worship is repudiated finally

and in all its forms, God will act. The Assyrian and Chaldean powers are regarded in the historical books as enemies of Israel, and so they were. But in the prophets, they are seen to be the arm of the Lord, raised to strike down idolatrous, incorrigible Israel. The history itself is merely incidental. Of course, it must be recorded to serve as a framework for the revelation of His principles. But the viewpoint is unique, and matter that will not serve the immediate purpose is discarded. This explains the blank areas that madden secular historians and critics who approach the Bible as though it were just another textbook of ancient history. To use the sacred writings only as a source of information about Semitic peoples is like spending priceless golden coins for cheap candy bars. It can be done, but it is certainly a misuse of rare treasure.

Today, the prophets have special significance. Why? They were sent to Israel at a time of decline, when the attractions of Baal worship had successfully seduced and lured the nation dangerously near to the point of no return. The prophets held up a red warning flag. They warned that Jehovah who had acted in judgment in the past would be forced to do so again. No new disclosures about His character were given; rather, historical references to the nation's experiences were made. "Yet destroyed I the Amorites before them;" similar language is employed by all the prophets, and, yes, by the New Testament writers as well. By Divine aid, they read the signs of the times accurately, and reaching back into the past history of God's dealings with Israel, they came up with disturbing applications to the present time. Patterns of behaviour, they asserted time and time again, provoke consistent patterns of Divine action.

Because they were men of God, they grieved when Israel sinned against Him; patriots, they were alarmed at the unmistakable signs of approaching disaster. Clearly, the Old Testament prophets have much to contribute to our knowledge of godly conduct. And their mission today is the same as it was during the seventh and eighth centuries before Christ: to arrest, if possible, the decay that eats away the life of men and churches, and even nations. This is a neglected ministry. The great vital field of Christian ethics—how we ought to behave ourselves under every circumstance—is largely unexplored by many Christians.

Now we are ready to read the words of Amos. As we read, let us remember that God continues to speak through this herdsman of Tekoa, and that on every page, Christ is revealed to seeing eyes and hearing ears. Here, there is instruction of the greatest importance; instruction in conduct. In Amos' times, there was a meticulous observance of the ceremonial law, but the heart of the nation was rotten, and God detested their sacrifices and their empty obedience to a ritual that was meaningless when performed by men without genuine spirituality.

In Amos, we find no passages about the Suffering Servant, no promise of a Branch, as given through Jeremiah and confirmed by Zechariah. There is no reference to lowly Bethlehem, no sad prediction of the smiting of a Shepherd, no hope of a golden daybreak when the Sun of Righteousness will arise with healing in His wings. There is little that develops the idea of a Messianic hope.

What we do find, however, are vivid pictures of what God hates in man, and what He requires in them with whom He has made an agreement. And in every burning word of denunciation of sin, we are reminded of Him Who was holy, harmless, and undefiled. In the pronouncements of doom that will not be averted, we are caused to look forward to a final Day of the Lord, when in flaming fire, Christ shall return to have vengeance on them that know not God and believe not His gospel. In this expectation, it is impossible not to read Amos with profit.

* * *

In wisdom God marks out a path for our feet. His hand may seem heavy in His discipline or His governmental ways with us, but His heart is behind His hand and "God is love," love without alloy.

The tears of suffering saints are valued in Heaven. The Psalmist could say, "Put thou my tears into thy bottle: are they not in thy book?" (Ps. 56:8). They are measured and treasured by heaven, and recorded there, not to be forgotten—marvellous consideration! Divine Persons alone can fully understand the tears of saints; for they only know what is in the heart when it is too full for words.

Spiritism and African Christians (May 1958)

From Food for the Flock, Vol. 4 No. 5, May 1958.

The African church is witnessing a subtle drift back to the spiritism from which many were supposed to have been delivered. If the assemblies of believers now in central Africa were to be abandoned suddenly by missionaries, it is probable that many would quickly assume some or all of the following features: a blending of Old Testament legalism, social structure, and morality, with whatever New Testament propositions are congenial to the African temperament and definite concessions to the world of demonic spirits.

In one sense, these facts are not surprising. Long an animist, the African has no sense either of the holiness of God or of the true nature of sin. Sin is seldom more than an offense against propriety, and then only when found out.

To many African believers, God is a Supreme Being whose anger quickly cools in the face of an adequate confession.

In this, He is not much different from other deities who demand sacrifice and cash payment. The difference is mainly in the kind of payment required.

To us, it seems strange that a believer could contend for the Lordship of Christ (1 Cor. 12:3) and at the same time genuflect before demons. Still, when we think more about it, the letter to the Corinthian believers makes it quite clear that this was a real problem in the early

Church. To some, the question of their attitude towards demons and meats sacrificed to them was vexatious indeed (1 Cor. 8-10).

At the root of the African believer's trouble is the fear that Jesus does not concern Himself with every trial which the black man may face. How to determine the extent of His interest — that is the difficulty!

When the white man's sulpha pills or penicillin injections fail to cure, and when prayer to God goes unanswered (seemingly), the African experiences a powerful temptation to direct his appeal elsewhere. He fears that his particular trial lies in an area outside the sphere of God's normal activities. Death, for example, is thought to be controlled by the devil, as are certain illnesses such as lunacy and epilepsy.

The following examples illsutrate the power of spiritism over the African mind. These are actual cases, investigated personally during the past few months. In every case, at least one of the principals was a "believer". None appeared to feel that his recourse to spirits was a denial of the essential truths of Christianity since, in his judgment, the peculiar trial sprang from sources not within the scope of Christ's beneficent activity. It is this willingness to worship Jesus as Lord while making definite concessions to the power of the underworld that is increasingly characteristic of uninstructed and perhaps also unregenerate "believers".

Becoming a Headman

A man formerly in fellowship in a nearby assembly was named by the local chief to be headman in his village, with the responsibility to represent the villagers before

the authorities. Following his appointment, he built a miniature house for the spirits of his predecessors. Since they were not believers, he reasoned that their disembodied spirits were not subject to Jesus' power. Because they were not in heaven, the domain of "vakua-Yesu", they were of necessity haunting the scenes of their earthly existence.

Then he invited friends from surrounding villages to hunt for a deer. Failing to find one, they came up with a ram. This was sacrificed before the etambo (spirit house), and its blood was smeared on the door frame and four corner posts. The sacred meat was eaten, and by these acts, the man satisfied the spirits of his non-christian predecessor and qualified himself for the post of headman.

Treating an Illness

A middle-aged believer at Canguen-go suffered strangling sensations at night, and in his distress he saw, or imagined that he saw, "little black men" standing by. Aspirins and sulpha pills, the white man's cure-alls brought neither relief from the choking feeling nor deliverance from the horror of the visions of the little men.

One day, a "guest" arrived. This man's identity was never disclosed. Probably the sick man had sent for him, knowing him to be a witch-doctor.

Divining that a vengeful enemy had cast a spell upon his patient, the witch-doctor dug up the floor under the cooking pots. He carried the dirt outside and sifted it carefully. At last he found what he wanted — a human tooth. This, he said, had been taken from a recently

buried corpse in a distant graveyard, and was poisoning the victim's food.

Its discovery had a powerful psychological effect on the man, who sensed immediate relief. The "guest" left some medicines which I tasted and found to be harmless fibres from an unknown root. These are to be taken in the event that the "little black men" reappear.

Guidance by Vision

A young man bought a house formerly occupied by the village teacher, Soon after moving in with his wife and possessions, he began to waste physically and was troubled by perpetual weakness. Medicines were ineffectual.

At last, in a vision in the night, he discovered the truth—a neighbour had captured his soul and had put it to work in his fields at night. The sufferer woke up tired because he worked all night in his captor's fields.

In a way not explained, the secret of the capture of his soul was connected with his new home. Therefore he moved out, and when I saw him, he was living in a grass hut in unspeakable misery, waiting for courage to cut his throat at the door of his captor.

Dreaming of Death

Three months ago, we camped in a distant village. I had taken with me an intelligent Christian, Samuel, who was to assist me with translating of Bible courses. One night the assistant, a teacher in the mission school, dreamed that an unidentified person was crossing a broad river. The same night, our cook dreamed that rain had fallen.

Since it was the dry season, the rain in the dream could mean only tears. The deep, wide river was a symbol of death, and taken together, the meaning was unmistakable: a Chilonda person had died in the night.

In the morning, Samuel and I returned to Chilonda on the motorcycle. Half-way there, we were stopped by a man coming from the mission. He told us that an old woman had died shortly before dawn. It was then that Samuel told me the dream.

Menaced by Demons

A girl born at Chilonda and taught on our station, lost her hearing through an overdose of anti-malarial remedies, according to her report.

For months she has been stone deaf, but recently, she has begun to “hear” a cock crowing, a child moaning in pain, a man with a hacking cough, and the bleating of a goat.

At night, strange lights like the beam from a flashlight play up and down the walls of her house. One night her father saw them and spoke sharply, saying, “Satan, get out.” The light slid down to the ground and faded.

Believing herself to be menaced by demons, the girl called for the elders of the church and asked for prayer.

In League With Satan

An old man at Capeio was suffering the usual aches and pains of advancing age. Feeling however that his life force was slipping away too swiftly, he suspected mischief.

One night in his dreams, he saw an elder of the local assembly, and in the morning he levelled against this elder the terrifying charge of being an “onganga”; i.e., one who kills by demonic powers. The upshot of it all was that the accused had to leave the village, so great is the African’s fear of one whom they suspect to be in league with Satan, the lord of death and sickness.

Passages such as Heb. 2:14 confirm their belief that men in league with Satan share his power of death. It is not easy to convince them that men die by divine appointment (Heb. 9:27), and that the holding of the power of death does not necessarily imply the power to inflict it.

A Problem for Prayer

Here then, is the root of the trouble: the belief that in some spheres, Satan shares equal power with the Lord Jesus Christ, or at least has freedom to make mischief according to his perverted will. Instead of drawing the afflicted believer closer to the Lord, suffering sometimes drives the African back to his slavish abasement before demons.

Whether or not the professions of faith are really genuine in the cases of the persons mentioned above, we sincerely hope that these alarming facts will compel you to steadfast, intercessory prayer on behalf of the African Christian.

Angola! Why not Elsewhere? (Feb 1965)

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For years the Hualonda people had no dealings with us, not since that bitter day when the mission elders loudly denounced us missionaries. “We don’t need your visits,” they snapped. “We don’t want you or your sermons either,” So through the years we went our separate ways. Occasionally we met at funerals, and twice I preached in villages of Hualondo elders who privately deplored the breach. But for the most part relationships were cool, regulated with precision by the standard code of behaviour observed in these parts. There was nothing that would suggest a common life in Christ. Recently, however, after so long a time, a letter broke the silence, “Come let us reason together,” it said.

Veloso, our Chilonda church secretary rode with me to Sangongolo where we left the car. Other Chilonda men had pedalled their bikes to this half-way village, leaving them there to tramp the last 3 miles. We trudged up a steep, rocky hill, hurried down an avenue of coffee trees to the mission school building. Hualondo men were lounging on the concrete stoep chatting idly. Many were dressed in hand-me-downs taken from imported bales of Salvation Army clothing. In their patched pants and wrinkled, ill-fitting jackets they looked like hobos waiting for a cup of coffee at a rescue mission in New York. Yet some of God’s choicest saints were there. With exquisite courtesy they greeted us, inviting us to enter the school.

Arranged in a semi-circle were about 20 straight-backed chairs for the leading men, and behind these several rows of benches for younger men. They gave me a chair in front of the blackboard. Nearby sat Hama, venerable in his old age and full of dignity. Calungu, grey-headed, solid, highly respected, sat near the door. Beside him sat his understudy, Eurico, a tan-colored man with a voice like the crash of thunder. These were good men. But Chivava was there, too. Four years ago he was malevolently hostile in his braying opposition to the missionaries. Now he sat smirking in the corner, silent at last. And at my right sat Joshua, the man who had been the Hualondo church secretary for years. Grasping, unscrupulous, savagely ambitious and proud of his pure Umbundu blood, he wielded power in the church. Now he sat at a table where he affected to write in a huge ledger.

“Start,” he whispered to an old man seated in the semi-circle. Sanjoni stood up with dignity, his pirate eyes glaring though he spoke hesitantly. “We have sinned,” he said. “The Lord Jesus said, ‘Be at peace,’ and here we are avoiding each other like blood enemies.” He went on sadly, retelling the story of The Trouble, repeating often what Jesus had said about peace. He turned his fierce eyes on me. Sweating now, for he is a gentle man, notwithstanding his menacing looks, he spoke passionately. “Is there no peace, Nala Coley? Is there no peace?”

It was my turn to speak. As their eyes fastened on me I knew it was a great moment, and relished it. No newspaper would record it. No politician would take notice, even if he were to hear of it. Nevertheless, it was a great moment in the history of the beloved churches of

Bie. “Our hearts are unchanged,” I said. “We have always loved you. Are we not brothers? Have we not the same Lord? Are there two Christs?” I read in 1 Corinthians, then said, “Do I not love you? God is witness that I do. I will gladly spend and be spent for you!” I turned to my Chilonda brethren. “Do I lie, my brothers?” “No!!” they rumbled in unision. “God knows we all love them!” I went on to confess our part in the contention, asked forgiveness. It was immediately evident that the Holy Spirit of God was touching hearts. Half a dozen men sprang to their feet to praise God. Luiz Pedro, a Chilonda elder famed for his interminable prayers, said simply that in Christ there were neither Greeks nor Scythian much less Chilonda and Hualondo. “We are one people in the Lord,” he declared with feeling. Old Costa, respected for his tenacity in legal disputes but feared by many for his epilepsy, uttered his usual banalities and nearly spoiled the fellowship. But then the beloved Vitorino stood up to speak.

In his magnificent voice, he read about the tongue that sets the world on fire. Then he read Philippians 2, where the mind of Christ is explained. When he finished we sat meditating. Finally, Hama stood up to “lock up the word,” as they say in Umbundu. “I didn’t hear anything Nala Cole-ey said,” he observed. “His soft voice no longer reaches my deaf old ears. But I heard Vitorino. And I remember when the word of God came to this land. Oh, I remember, all right! God had his prophets then — black and white. I knew Nala Swana! There was a man! And there was Nala Lena and Nala Sande. All white men! But there was also Nala Mulena and Sanji and Vongula. They were black, and God laid his hands on them, too. And some were from Chilonda, and some

from Hualondo. Even Capango! But they were all brothers in Christ. And they loved each other. Ha! you young men don't know what love is! Well, God did a mighty work through those prophets. Now we're going back to those early days!" He paused. "Brethren!" He stood before us, a patriarchal figure, and again raised his quavering old voice, "Brethren, Jesus said, 'Love one another and have peace!' "

Later, we ate a ceremonial plate of corn meal mush and chicken. And for me they had something extra —hot milk with sugar in it.

"Behold, how good and pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity …" (Ps. 133).