

CHAPTER VI

OLD TESTAMENT SUBJECTS

SIDE by side with the study of the Bible by books, it is both possible and necessary to give ourselves to the study of the subjects or topics which are to be found in particular books, or spread over larger sections of the Scriptures.

The present chapter is intended to suggest a few of the many topics that arise from our reading of the Old Testament. It is a most fruitful method of study, fruitful to mind and heart, and will lead to a thorough knowledge of the contents of the Bible and of the order and proportion of its teaching.

LEADING IDEAS OF PARTICULAR BOOKS.

It is often practicable to find a prominent thought running through a book and variously illustrated in it. This is not possible with every book, but it certainly is with some, if not with many. The best method is to read a book through once, twice, thrice, and be on the look-out for one master-thought or idea. For example, Genesis, as we have already

seen, is a book of origins, or beginnings ; and the whole book illustrates this idea. Exodus seems to have for its keynote, Redemption. The need, the method, and the results of redemption form the substance of the book. In Leviticus the main idea is, perhaps, Worship. Test this in reading, and correct if necessary. We may take Joshua, and consider whether Conquest is not the thread running through it. Or Judges, and note the dismal Failure from first to last. In Job the main thought seems to be the Providence of God ; and in the Psalms, Communion with God. The burden of Isaiah appears to be Faith leading to Faithfulness, and this is pointed by the history of his relations to Kings Ahaz and Hezekiah.

The above are among the clearest illustrations of this method, but there are others available to careful thought. The results of this plan do not lie on the surface. They need discovery, and this means study.

BIOGRAPHIES.

Here we have one of the most interesting, most enjoyable, and most valuable subjects of study. God has been pleased to give us so much of His Word in biographical form, that a knowledge of the men and women is absolutely essential to a true understanding of the Bible and of God's revelation contained in it. We thereby see the revelation in its

progress, and at the same time are enabled to note the effects of the working of God on the souls of men.

With such a large field it is almost as impossible as it is unnecessary to particularise, but it may be well to call special attention to two points. The life of the particular person before us should be studied as minutely as possible, and also in the order of progress and development of events. For example, Moses' life is capable of three divisions—Early Life, Life in Midian, Life as Leader of Israel. In David's we notice five sections—David at Home, David at Court, David in Exile, David King of Judah, David King over all Israel. The other point is the extreme ~~spiritual interest and profit~~ of the lesser lives of the ~~Old Testament~~, such as Caleb, Aaron, Ruth, ~~Et. Mephibosheth~~, and many more. It is almost impossible to exaggerate the value of this biographical study.

HISTORICAL PERIODS.

There are certain periods of the history contained in the Old Testament which need to be studied carefully and thoroughly. They are pivots on which very much turns ; e.g. :—

1. The stages in the journeyings of Israel from Egypt to Canaan. Clear views are necessary of the events immediately after leaving Egypt, of those

subsequent to Sinai, and of those immediately preceding the death of Moses.

2. The steps in the conquest of Canaan. The knowledge of the three great battles by means of which the whole matter was practically settled.

3. The causes (not merely the occasion) of the separation of the kingdoms. A most fruitful study reaching from Solomon back to Joshua's time.

4. The rise of the Prophets. Starting with Samuel, they can be traced through David's and Solomon's reigns, until we find them occupying the most important place in the kingdom.

5. The Kingdom of Israel. At its height (Saul to Solomon). In separation (Rehoboam to Zedekiah). In Captivity.

6. The three stages of the Captivity of Judah. Under Jehoiakim (Daniel i. 1, and 2 Kings xxiv. 1). Under Jehoiachin (2 Kings xxiv. 10-16). Under Zedekiah (Jeremiah lii. 26). How many have grasped these and their details clearly?

7. The three stages of the Return from Captivity. Under Zerubbabel and Jeshua (Ezra iii. 2). Under Ezra (Ezra vii.). Under Nehemiah (Nehemiah i. and ii.).

THE MIRACLES.

Notice and study these under the four epochs in which they are gathered. It is noteworthy that

they do not appear at haphazard, but at special times :—

1. The Creation. This was itself a miracle. No others of any note appear afterwards until

2. The time of Moses. God was leading His people out of Egypt and appeared miraculously on their behalf. This was a special manifestation against the gods of Egypt. Then comes

3. The time of Elijah and Elisha. The people were sunk in idolatry and a new interposition of God was necessary. After this miracles are seen in

4. The time of Daniel. When God's people were in captivity and surrounded by heathenism and idolatry, once again He bore witness to Himself.

Study the particular miracles in each case, and note miracles of judgment, of power, of majesty and of blessing.

THE WORK OF THE PROPHET.

Moses was in some senses a prophet, for he calls himself one ; but Samuel was the virtual founder of the line. The work of a prophet was twofold :—

1. Witnessing for God to his own time. He was an "incarnate conscience" to the king and people. Like Isaiah with Hezekiah, the prophet was a statesman, politician and patriot, whose one object was to keep the king and people true to God.

2. Witnessing for God respecting future times.

This is the work usually called prediction, and with us a prophet is one who *foretells*. But in the Old Testament he is also, and often chiefly, one who *forth-tells*. Jonah was a witness to his own day only, a forth-teller. Isaiah was both forth-teller and fore-teller. The primary meaning of "prophet" is one who speaks on behalf of another, and this may or may not include prediction of the future. Sometimes it did, sometimes it did not. The key-text to this meaning is Exodus vii. 1, which should ever be kept in mind. Considered as interpreters of their own time, the prophets should be read in close connexion with the history they refer to, and when this is done, their fulness, variety, freshness, and power will be evident.

Up to the present we have been considering some of the more important historical topics—subjects dealing with facts and men. They contain their own spiritual teaching for all who dwell on them, and no one can expect to grasp the spiritual meaning without first mastering the facts on which it is based. But there is other and more direct spiritual teaching in the Old Testament, to which we shall refer in our next chapter.