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A Coptic Lectionary.

BY THE REV. A. SMYTHE PALMER, D.D.

A VOLUME of more than ordinary interest has lately been published by the authorities of the British Museum,¹ and has hardly received the attention which it deserves at the hands of Biblical students. It is a Coptic version of three books of Scripture, which has been edited by Dr. Budge, from a papyrus codex discovered and brought from Egypt only last year. This codex is believed to have been written not later than the middle of the fourth century, and the version itself was probably made a century earlier, in which case it is the oldest known copy of any translation of the Bible, and the oldest Coptic MS. in existence. This interesting relic of the Early Church, as might be expected, is much worn and worm-eaten, and at an early date was retouched in parts where it had become illegible. It seems to have been written for his own use by a private individual, who for some reason selected three out of the sixty-six books of which the Bible consists, and had them bound together for convenience under one cover. The Church to which he belonged was one of the earliest founded. Some devout Jews from Egypt were amongst St. Peter's converts on the day of Pentecost, and these, on their return to their own land, would become the nucleus of a native Church. Apollos was sojourning there about the year 70, and St. Mark preached the Gospel there before that date. The owner of this volume was a member of that ancient Church. Now the three books of the Bible, which on some account he especially valued and combined into a little lectionary for his own edification, were these—Deuteronomy, Jonah, and the Acts of the Apostles. Dr. Budge calls it an "extraordinary selection," and cannot suggest any probable reason for its being made. That there was *some* reason governing his choice, and that it was not an arbitrary collocation, or made at haphazard, we may be perfectly certain. Can we, then,

¹ "Coptic Biblical Texts," edited by Dr. E. A. W. Budge.

discover any principle which governed this curious selection and combination of two books from the Old Testament with one from the New? Have they anything in common? Is there any bond of connection, more than the material thread which binds them together, which caused them to be thus brought into conjunction? No doubt there is some such if we can discover it.

The point of connection, I would suggest, may be found in the subject-matter of the triad. The books are distinctively the three most Catholic or Universalistic books in the Bible. They have this in common, that they alike contemplate the universality of God's Church, as intended for all mankind, and as free to the Gentile as to the Jew. This early Christian, whoever he was, was a man of broad and catholic sympathies, who dwelt with peculiar satisfaction on those portions of the sacred records which spoke of the common salvation, and taught that the great All-Father will have all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of His truth. If we glance at these books of his choice we see that this was their characteristic teaching.

1. Deuteronomy is a book of large-hearted sympathy far in advance of the Mosaic teaching. It is animated by the broad humanitarian spirit of the prophets. It extends many of the rights and privileges, which were once held to belong exclusively to the Jews, to the stranger and the foreigner who came within their borders. Many of the charities and amenities of social and religious life are now thrown freely open to the Gentile without any distinction of race or creed (xxiv. 19-22); and the precept is laid down, "Because Jehovah loveth the stranger," Israel, after His example, should love him also (x. 18, 19). The laws of a ritual and ceremonial character which have to do with physical defilements and cleansings, so conspicuous in the Levitical ordinances, are here significantly absent. Even the initial rite of circumcision is only insisted upon in a spiritual sense. The religion it inculcates is a religion of the heart, and the service which Jehovah requires is a life of active love, because He is Himself the God of love (x. 12). Anticipating

our word. "humanity," the law of loving-kindness and tenderness is to embrace all mankind, not only the "neighbour," but the stranger, the bondman, the captive, even the dumb beast and the bird, because it is the outcome of love and gratitude to the one dear God "who made and loveth all," the Father whose loving-kindness is over all His works. Men are made to know that the service which He values consists not so much in outward conformity to cult and ordinances, as in the inward devotion of the heart, which is an oracle always at hand and always a true guide. "The word is very nigh unto thee, in thy mouth and in thy heart that thou mayest do it" (xxx. 11). It is in the highest degree significant that St. Paul, when he wished to draw a sharp contrast between the righteousness of the law and the righteousness of faith, singles out this verse in Deuteronomy as the typical expression of evangelic truth over against the legal requirements of the Levitical code (Lev. xviii. 5; Rom. x. 5, 6). In the words of St. Jerome, Deuteronomy is "a prefiguring of the Evangelical law" of the New Testament; it brings us to the very threshold of the Gospel. "It is the most spiritual book of the Old Testament," says Bishop Hicks, "and nearest to the teaching of the New; and this is why our Lord loved the book and used it so wonderfully."

While Israel, under this higher teaching as to its relation to its fellow-men, carried on something like a home-mission by gradually absorbing into itself many who had no right by birth and inheritance to be considered Jews, it did not feel called upon to spread its faith among the outside nations of heathendom. And yet an ideal, though latent, belief in the duty of Foreign Missions seems to have been implied in the great promise that in the seed of Abraham all the nations of the earth should be blessed. The obligation of this duty is the essential truth which the second book in this vade-mecum was written to unfold.

2. The Book of Jonah demonstrates how completely Israel had failed to realize its vocation to be the priestly nation of the world. As its typical representative, Jonah is shown as resist-

ing to the uttermost the Divine command to preach repentance to the Assyrian capital. Slowly, reluctantly, and by painful experience, he is compelled to learn that the heathen also are God's children and capable of salvation, for He willeth not the death of any sinner.

“ For the love of God is broader
Than the measure of man's mind ;
And the heart of the Eternal
Is most wonderfully kind.”

The whole of this beautiful prophetic tale inculcates a spirit of universal benevolence and unlimited humanity. The confession wrung from the unwilling lips of the prophet, when his narrow and exclusive particularism which would confine God's mercy to Israel is confronted, well expresses the inspiring idea of the book : “ Thou, Lord, art a merciful and gracious God, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and repentest Thee of the [threatened] evil.” Beyond all other Books of the Old Testament it is the evangelic pronouncement of the universality of the Divine Love.

3. Side by side with these Old Testament writings this good Coptic Christian sets the Acts of the Apostles, evidently regarded as their complement and fulfilment. And with good reason. For there we see fulfilled what was foreshadowed in the earlier books. It is the historic record of the spreading of the Gospel and planting of the Church Catholic in lands outside the Jewish territory. Israel is at last carrying out its world-wide mission “unto the uttermost parts of the earth.” From Jerusalem round about unto Illyricum is fully preached the Gospel of Christ. The proclamation is made that “God is no respecter of persons, but in every nation he that feareth Him is accepted with Him,” and that “to the Gentiles also God hath granted repentance unto life.”

Beginning with the Pentecostal effusion of the Spirit upon all flesh, on “men from every nation under heaven,” the book ends by leaving its chief missionary in the capital of the Roman empire preaching the Kingdom of God “without hindrance,”

with which suggestive word it breaks off. As to its correlation with the previous book, it is interesting to find Baumgarten drawing a parallel and a contrast between the Old Testament missionary and the New ; between Jonah, the unwilling herald sent with a message of mercy to Niniveh, the capital of heathenism, and Paul voyaging to Rome, the centre of the empire, and bearing the Gospel in which he gloried ; just as, quite similarly, Hommel traces a correspondence between Jonah preaching Jah intelligibly to the Ninevites, as worshippers of Ya, their chief deity, and Paul finding a common ground for his missionary address in the "Unknown God" of the Athenians.¹

The man who brought three such books as these together, to form a compendium for his own private reading, was evidently one of a broad and catholic spirit, who delighted in the universality of Redemption, and loved to dwell upon those Scriptures which proclaimed the all-embracing love of the One Father and the world-wide freeness of His salvation. The writings which most explicitly set forth those great truths appealed to him with a special force ; and these he selected as for him the most significant books in the Bible.

¹ Hommel, *Ancient Hebrew Tradition*, p. 145 ; Hilprecht, *Explorations in Bible Lands*, p. 745.

