

The Open Court

A MONTHLY MAGAZINE

Devoted to the Science of Religion, the Religion of Science, and the
Extension of the Religious Parliament Idea

Editor: DR. PAUL CARUS.

Associates: } E. C. HEGLER.
MARY CARUS.

VOL. XVII. (NO. 11) NOVEMBER, 1903.

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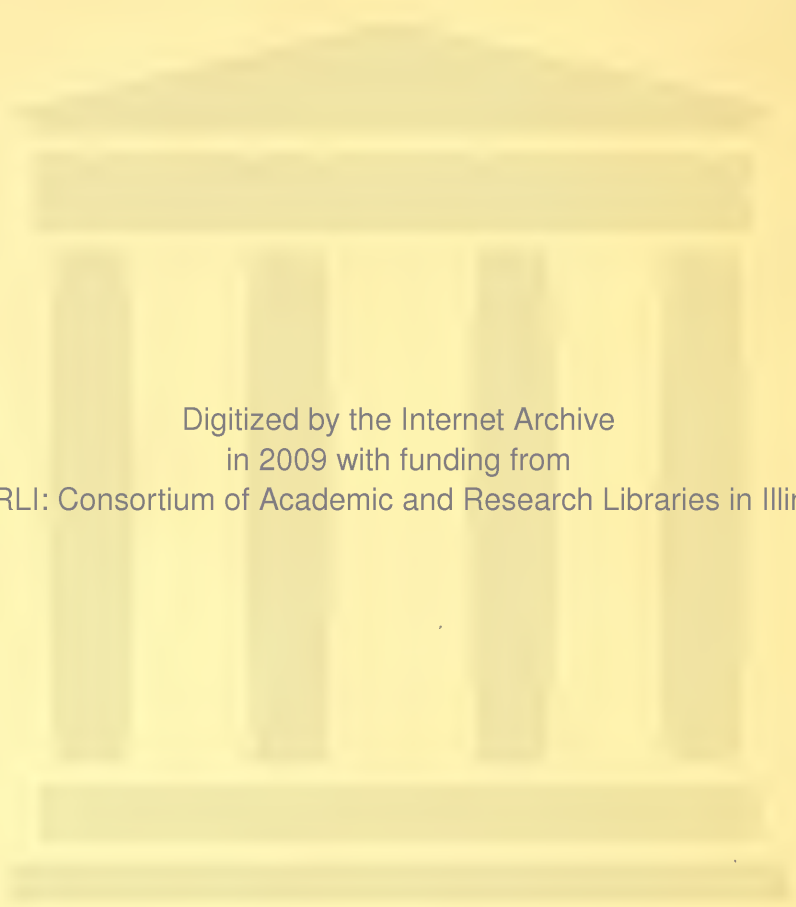
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THE KIOSK OF PHILÆ.

The building was never finished. The bare blocks of the columns above the lotos capitals were intended to be chiseled out as house-crowned Hathor faces.

Frontispiece to The Open Court.

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HEBREW FICTION.

BY REV. EDWARD DAY.

IT is curious to what extent the processes of the Hebrew mind, as those processes reveal themselves to us in the Old Testament, have been misconceived. The reason for this misconception probably may be found very largely in the old theory of inspiration. So long as men held to the thought of a verbally inspired Bible, they naturally conceived it to be in the main a plain statement of facts. Indeed, we may say that in accordance with this conception of the Scriptures there was little reason for supposing that the Hebrew mind had much to do creatively in making the literature preserved for us in the Old Testament canon. Such mental processes as were necessary to other peoples in the making of their literatures were supposedly unnecessary here. Not thus is it with the new conception of the Bible which is, happily for us, surely, though all too slowly, winning its way among thoughtful people. This reveals the folk-stories and the poetry, the legal codes and the prophetic writings, as well as other parts of the Old Testament, to have been as truly products of the Hebrew mind as the Iliad and the Odyssey, the Platonic dialogues and the tragic poetry were of the Greek mind.

In his fascinating study of *Semitic Origins* Prof. George Aaron Barton speaks of the Bedawi as the modern representatives of the Semitic peoples who anciently lived in Arabia. He reminds us that they are always underfed, that they suffer constantly from hunger and thirst, and that their bodies, thus weakened, fall an easy prey to disease. He further reminds us that "they range the silent desert, almost devoid of life, where the sun is powerful by day and the stars exceedingly brilliant by night." Dr. Barton then

goes on to remark that "this environment begets in them intensity of faith of a certain kind, ferocity, exclusiveness, and imagination. These are all Semitic characteristics wherever we find the Semites; and there can be little doubt but that this is the land in which these traits were ingrained in the race." I find myself heartily assenting to these words; especially do I feel that this scholar is right in speaking as he does of the imagination of the Semites. There are scholars who have failed to recognise this trait of the Semitic peoples. Repeatedly have we been told that they were destitute of imagination. Some seem to have taken the statement, "The Semite is unimaginative," as a sort of working hypothesis. This has led to a misunderstanding of the Hebrews among other Semitic peoples. Unquestionably it is partly in consequence of this that though there has been steady progress towards more intelligent conceptions of the Bible, the movement has on the whole been painfully slow. In time we shall, I trust, hear it confidently and unqualifiedly asserted that the Hebrew has ever shown himself as a man of letters gifted imaginatively, and that much, if not most of his work as it appears in the literary remains of his past, and especially as it comes before us in the Old Testament and the Apocrypha is in the nature of fiction.

The time may yet come when we shall have to conclude that much of the imaginative literature of the Indo-European peoples reveals in manifold ways traces of Semitic influence. The time is not yet ripe for any serious, not to say exhaustive, attempt to set forth the influence of Babylonia upon the Greeks. Such finds as that of the library of Assurbanipal, which Hilprecht dug out of a room in the ancient temple of Bel at Nippur and brought with him to the University of Pennsylvania recently, must be deciphered before we can safely speak with any reasonable degree of assurance. Yet even those of us who are unskilled in cuneiform can easily discover points of similarity between Homer and certain of the Babylonian epics, as the Gilgamesh epic.

To most of us the question as to the capacity of the Hebrew mind for imaginative literature has to do largely with the Old Testament. Has it any fiction; and if so, how much and what is to be so considered? Our examination must necessarily cover, though in a somewhat cursory way, the whole Old Testament field. That much of it is imaginative we shall find. This is the direction in which the most fearless scholarship is moving to-day. Not only shall we find that much was purely imaginative, but we shall also find that nothing wholly escaped the play of their fancy. Even

their chronicles which purported to be narratives of actual occurrences were often as untrue to fact as were their folk-lore and their poetry; while their legal codes, their proverbs and their psalmody were embedded in fictions manifold.

There are parts of the Old Testament which have long been recognised by many as fictitious. That the Book of Job is an imaginative poem, we have frequently been told. The dialogues are cast in a fictitious mold; but the story of the prologue is as truly fictitious. To the writer belonged the credit of conceiving both the slight story upon which he built his poem and the form in which he cast it. We might accept the statement of certain scholars that there was a typical patient man, known to Israel and alluded to in Ezekiel as Job, if it were not for our suspicion that the Book of Ezekiel is a Maccabean production in which it is not at all surprising that there should be mention of the Job of this very poem. All this has not been as frankly recognised as that the dialogues of this great drama of the inner life, or soul, are imaginary. The unknown writer, as he wrestled with the gigantic problem which the presence of evil and misfortune among men flung in its provoking way in his face, as though to mock him, puts words now in the mouth of his supposed patriarch and anon in that of some imaginary friend of his.

That Canticles, or the so-called Song of Solomon, is an imaginative love poem has been widely asserted for some time. Just now the contention of Herder in a modified form, that the little book consists of a number of independent love poems or ditties, is growing in favor.¹ Such a conception of the work leaves its imaginative character unquestioned. Though we no longer consider it a drama of pure love in which a certain number of characters play their separate parts consistently throughout, we still must admit that the different songs have their dramatic situations and characters of a purely fictitious nature. Accepting the book in this new light, we are helped to understand the vein of coarseness, or lewdness, which runs through these sensuous songs, a vein our English translations but partially conceal.

That certain of the shorter poems, as the so-called Blessing of Jacob, the song Israel is said to have sung at the Red Sea, the Song of Moses found in Deuteronomy, the Song of Deborah found in Judges v., the Psalm of Hannah in 1 Samuel ii., have some sort of basis in the folk-lore of Israel, if not in fact, must be admitted; but that their writers treated such material as they found at hand

¹See *Biblical Love Ditties*, Paul Haupt.

in a highly imaginative way is unquestionable. Compare for example at many points the Song of Deborah, a poem written probably eight or ten centuries after the event it celebrates could have transpired, with the folk-tale of Judges iv., the data of which are themselves seriously open to question; and you will find a wide divergence as to the number of Hebrew tribes engaged, two in the folk-tale to several in the poem; as to the number of men in arms, 10,000 in the folk-tale to 40,000 in the poem; as to the place of rendezvous, the side of Tabor in the folk-tale, Esdraelon in the poem. Notice, too, that while the crude, unfeeling folk-story represents the nomad woman Jael to have slain Sisera after she had taken him as a guest into her tent, an outrageous violation of the sacred laws of hospitality, the poem as the work of a more cultured age, with greater sensitiveness to the obligations and proprieties of life, represents her to have struck the warrior with a mallet a staggering blow upon the head as he bowed himself to drink of a bowl of milk at her tent door. Notice also with what consummate art this imaginative poem closes as the attention is taken from the carnage of battle and the tragic death of Sisera to the distant home where the women of the harem peer forth, watching for the return of their lords, questioning one another meanwhile as to their individual share in the spoil, spoil such as early Israel could not have yielded their enemies.

Even more noteworthy is the purely imaginary character of the poem of 1 Samuel ii., the Psalm of Hannah, as it is called. There is not a sentence that could have had any appropriateness as the words of an overjoyed mother. It is safe to say that the sanity of a mother who should improvise such a poem under similar circumstances to-day would be seriously questioned by her physician and friends. I chance to know a little miss to whom, after relating the narrative of 1 Samuel i., a father read this poem. She instantly and innocently remarked that it was in apropos. "I can't see," she added, "what it has to do with the story." In her intuitive insight she was right, though she had as a tiny literary critic left hopelessly behind the learned fathers of the Church for nearly two thousand years.

Passing from the imaginative poetry to the prose which has been regarded by many scholars as fictitious, we notice that the imaginative character of the Book of Ruth has long been recognised, though there are still those who are loath to think of Boaz and Ruth in any other light than as actual progenitors of David. Fortunately the fact that it is a tale after the style of those in the

Decameron is disguised for us by our translators. A certain Hebrew euphemism is invariably mistranslated. We, therefore, continue to speak of "this wonderfully beautiful idyl"; as we also persist in thinking of the book as a magnificent protest against the policy of Ezra and Nehemiah who are said to have forbidden foreign marriages.

A word should be said concerning Esther as a piece of fiction. That there is nothing in the way of historical data back of the story is widely admitted. In tone the book is pitilessly cruel; yet that it is actually without moral significance we would not think to assert, for while we find its story of the awful reprisal and slaughter of the Gentiles by the Jews revolting, we do regard with complacency the story of Haman's fall and Mordecai's exaltation. Not only is the book a piece of fiction, but it is in its way apparently a novel with a purpose. We have something akin to a plot, which is crudely worked out, as we have a tragic conclusion which leaves the newly wedded queen to enjoy undisturbed her royal husband, while her uncle is in power and her people about her and throughout the realm are prosperous and happy. All this was written to account for the institution of the feast of Purim and, it would seem, to deepen among the Jews a hatred of other peoples and to revivify, and to intensify withal, their national consciousness.

Popular attention has been so directed to the Book of Jonah that it is not surprising that many conservative Biblical students should have been forced to accept the conclusion of progressive scholars, that it is a fiction of the late post-exilic time designed to beget in the Jews more liberal views of the scope of their religion and to lead them to look upon their Gentile neighbors as within the reach of Yahveh as a pitiful and forgiving God. To so understand this little prophetic book is to find it the most akin to the New Testament evangel of any book in the Old Testament. It is to be hoped that sometime we may have a great oratorio of Jonah. The story, if only we can forget all the foolish things said of it, as we forget those said of our first parents when listening to Hayden's great oratorio of the creation, has magnificent possibilities in this direction.

There is one other book which should be noticed as belonging to the imaginative literature of the Hebrews, the book of Daniel, which is without any basis in fact. Even the thought of Daniel as the typical wise man of Israel, who finds mention in Ezekiel, must be surrendered, and for similar reasons to those which necessitate our concluding that there was no such typically patient man as Job

before the Book of Job was written. The only prominent actor taken from actual history, Nebuchadnezzar, was entirely misconceived by the writer who could have known little of the man himself, glorious as was his reign, for he lived four centuries prior to his time. Antiochus Epiphanes was the unprincipled ruler he had in mind, as he was the man he wished to see humbled. Here again we have fiction with a purpose. As a piece of early Maccabean writing this was designed to comfort the people in their distress and to hearten and reinforce them in their unequal and awful contest with Syria. Just here it may be remarked that William Stearns Davis, who has deserved the favor with which "A Friend of Cæsar" and "God Wills It" have been received, has ingloriously failed in "Belshazzar," because he has depended so slavishly on the Book of Daniel. We might excuse him for using the material of Daniel for purposes of fiction did he not profess to find it at crucial points more reliable than the well-attested conclusions of our best students of Babylonian life.

We by no means leave all the imaginative literature of the Old Testament behind when we turn to what purports to be the annals of Israel's past, for here we come upon myth, legend, and folk-lore which can have little, if any, historical basis. Here we find the Hebrew playing fancifully with his conceptions of the cosmos and nature as well as the supposed incidents of his own history in much the same way early peoples of other lands have ever done with theirs. If we look to this literature for facts, or for material that may be used in the moral instruction of the young, we need to be extremely cautious. Dr. G. Stanley Hall and a certain New York divine both lay themselves open to criticism just here. They tell us that here is something with which we should begin in our moral training of the young. That children, boys especially, enjoy these Old Testament stories must be admitted; that they may therefore be used for purposes of entertainment to some extent may be granted; but that there is danger if we try to get a moral out of them we may create the impression on the part of the children that we are subjecting them to undue strain, I for one believe. Some two years ago a prominent American sculptor appealed to me to name two or three small volumes which would be helpful to him in his use of the Old Testament in his family. His children were daily putting to him the most perplexing questions, critical questions such as few children thought to raise twenty-five years ago. A short time before, so he told me, he was reading some of the folk-stories of Genesis to his little boy when

he was interrupted and startled by the remark: "Pop! Seems to me these stories are like those I sometimes tell which wont bear 'vestigation." The little fellow was right: many of these stories are unmoral if not immoral. This is true of the Samson stories; it is also true of that thrice told tale in which a patriarch to save himself puts his wife in peril. The only moral of the story of Jacob's contest with the mysterious stranger at Peniel is the one indirectly suggested. The adversary in his wrestling bout with the patriarch strikes, and strikes below the belt. In other words, he, to use a modern athletic term, fouls. He should in consequence have been counted out. If the story means anything to us, it is that none, even an angel, should use his power illegitimately; but this the story was never designed to teach. In reality it reveals the disposition of Israel as a people in the late time to glory in themselves as those who could hold their own with celestial powers when fairly treated and as those who could, even when worsted, win their heart's desire at the hand of these powers by their importunity. We find, then, that Israel's legends and folk-tales, as highly fanciful and imaginary literature, must be recognised for just what they are; and must in consequence be used with extreme caution lest we press them too far.

When we turn to the old chronicles, the J and E narratives, as they are called, we find that the story of an Egyptian sojourn and a bondage there suffered bears many marks that lead us to surmise that it is fictitious. May it not be purely imaginative; and may it not reflect to a considerable extent the experiences during the time of the Babylonian exile? The conclusion of scholars that these chronicles belong to the pre-exilic time cannot be said to be considered an irreversible one.

That the Israelites were nomads when they forded the Jordan and settled in Canaan we know; they had been so from time immemorial. That the picture drawn in the late time of the old desert life was highly colored we know. They lived as nomads on their flocks and herds, not on manna, whatever that was conceived to be, and on quails; and they had to maintain themselves among their enemies by force of their own right arms. But what of the conquest, or rather of the settlement? We must go to the first chapter of Judges for anything approximating the truth, not to the Book of Joshua, which gives us the late priestly misconception of the supposed conquest of the land. A more curious piece of fiction it would be difficult to find anywhere. The very personality as well as the name, of this leader is open to question. The name

means one whom Yah or Yahveh helps or delivers. Presumably he was conceived to be a deliverer or saviour. With him in story was associated the fish, for "Nun," the name of the supposed father, is the Chaldaic for fish. In Caleb, on the other hand, we encounter a Semitic clan which became absorbed in the tribe of Judah, for Caleb is the Hebrew for dog, a clan name.

Fictitious as is this reputed history, it is scarcely less so than the stories of Samuel and Saul and those related of David and Solomon. Passing strange too is the way in which Josiah and Ezra figure in the history of Israel. One is idealised and made to play a mighty part as a Deuteronomic reformer; the other appears to have been created *de novo* for the part the priests wished him to play as the great scribe.

The men known to scholars as Deuteronomists, who gave Israel Deuteronomy which they fictitiously represented Moses to have promulgated just before the people entered Canaan and who redacted, or edited, the historical books, wished the people to think there had been an effort made in the pre-exilic time to conform the life of the people to their peculiar conceptions and legal codes. So they told a wondrous story of the finding of a law-book and of a bloody reprisal and reform which Josiah in consequence brought about, thus rooting out all idolatrous practices and centralising the pure worship of Yahveh their God in Jerusalem. Then a century or so later, when the priests wished to promulgate their Levitical codes, they told a marvellous story of a man whom they called Ezra, and of a return of thousands under the patronage of Cyrus. That there is not a shred of truth in it all, Dr. C. C. Torrey of Yale University has shown in his masterly treatise published as his doctor's thesis in Germany a few years ago.¹

Of the many other fictitious stories which were woven into the old chronicles I need not speak. Israel was in its meager way making history in those times, but such history as it made had little interest, and left few traces, while the stories told in the late time to give prestige to some party, or to further some reform, were carefully preserved. Most of the early poetry, to which we find occasional reference, and many of the old chronicles appear to have been lost, while this other literature was painstakingly preserved.

In speaking of Hebrew fiction I can linger only to call attention to the fact that both the liturgic and the gnomic poetry were ascribed by their late writers to men of the early time as David

¹*The Composition and Historical Value of Ezra-Nehemiah.*

and Solomon. Whether the prophetic literature was also pseud-epigraphic is a question which has been as yet scarcely raised by Hebrew scholars. If I have done anything in the way of original work beyond showing the fictitious nature of the Josiah story of the promulgation of Deuteronomy, it has been what I have done with my collaborator in revealing, what I take to be a fact, that such books as Amos, Hosea, and Micah were, as prophetic literature, written in the late post-exilic time and attributed to supposed prophets who, though they do not appear in the old chronicles as actual personages, were conceived to have existed and to have played an important part as moral reformers and statesman.¹ These fictions whereby the poetic and prophetic writings were dated back and ascribed to real or imaginary persons of the earlier centuries have their counterparts in the Apocrypha which in its general characteristics and its contents resembles large parts of the Old Testament.

It may seem at first thought as though the recognition of the fact that so much of the literature of the Hebrews is imaginative must disparage it as literature. Such is not the case. The value of the legal codes, the prophetic writings, and the liturgic and gnostic poetry, is scarcely touched by the fictions into which they are cast or enveloped. The thread of incident found in Jeremiah may be as purely imaginary as that which runs through Leviticus; but the discovery of the fact does not thereby discredit the prophetic thought. So far as purely fictitious parts of the Old Testament are concerned, we need to remember that the purposes back of these writings gave them their value to Israel, as they may enhance their interest for, if they do not increase their value to us. The growing life and thought of the people may be traced by us, albeit not as easily as would be possible had we a matter-of-fact narrative.

We should bear in mind the fact that the great masterpieces of the world belong to imaginative literature: the Iliad and the Odyssey, the Æneid, the Divine Comedy, Faust, Paradise Lost, and the Dramas and the Comedies of Shakespeare, all are imaginative. We need also to bear in mind the fact that it is not until recent years that history, save in exceptional instances, has been made a narrative of facts, if, indeed, it be yet. It has become customary to denounce the excessive novel reading of our day, though we personally read our full share of modern fiction. It should be

¹"Is the Book of Amos Post-Exilic," by Edward Day and Walter H. Chapin, in *The American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literatures*, January, 1902.

remembered that men and women have ever shown an appetite for romance and that now that history and certain other forms of literature have lost much that is grotesque and fanciful, those who read must necessarily for the most part turn to fiction for entertainment. At all events nothing is gained through concealing the real nature of Hebrew literature.

Much of the literature of Israel is charged with moral purpose; it has in consequence certain ethical values for us. Yet even here quite apart from any beauty of form, there must be some sort of critical knowledge of its contents or its mission to the individual student or reader is an imperfect one. We would master it as literature that we may the more truly appreciate its worth and beauty. So far as its ethical values are concerned, we may leave it largely to the pulpit and its supposedly trained exegetes. We surely may go to it as one of the world's great literatures to be thrilled by whatever is sublime and to be charmed by whatever is beautiful; to be entertained by its pleasing fictions and rendered more devout by its unsurpassed devotional poetry.