OLD TESTAMENT STORIES: THEIR PURPOSE AND THEIR ART. ¹

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IN the constitution of the story, long or short, there are three interwoven elements. All three are necessary, and there can be no story without them. There must be something done, by someone, and in some place. In other words we must have activity of some kind, physical or mental, character, and setting. These three elements need not exhaust all the component parts in a story, but they at least must be present. The variations rung on these three elements and the stress laid upon one or more of them, help largely to determine the particular character of the story and fix its classification. They give the story its tone and colour.

If a story is to be successful as a story, there must be occasion for it. There must be some incident to record, some situation to depict, some characterization to present. Since the success of a story depends largely on its effect upon the reader or hearer, it must be so presented as to maintain his interest. The art of the storyteller will fail of its purpose if the story is pointless or commonplace. Only the unusual, the unexpected, the marvellous can be relied upon to capture and hold the attention. In the short story—and in the Old Testament the stories are short—there should be a climax to which the story moves. The skill of the storyteller is revealed in his ability to arouse the interest of the reader, carry him along as the story proceeds, increasing all the while the intensity of interest, until the climax is reached.

The Old Testament stories are concerned mainly with the figures of Hebrew tradition, and they are, primarily at least, figures of real life. It may be, in order to achieve the purpose of the narrator, that these figures, when they become characters

¹ A lecture delivered in The John Rylands Library on the 12th of April, 1944.
of a story, are at times redrawn or overdrawn, that the setting in which they live and move may be idealized and the incidents in which they take part idyllized, and that the action, in the course of its detailing, may be elaborated or even exaggerated. There can, however, be no doubt that the Old Testament stories, in varying degree of course, are so skilfully composed that they attract and retain the interest and attention of the reader. There is probably no group of stories in world literature whose effect has been so striking and so permanent. The plot, the characters, and the phrasing are the joy and the abiding possession of millions.

What, then, can be described as the characteristic features of Old Testament story-telling? The worldwide appreciation accorded to the stories, shows that there must be something precious and durable in their content and structure. Even a superficial examination of a number of the stories with which the Old Testament records are so liberally embellished leads easily to the recognition of some marked features. An outstanding feature, and one which leaps to the eye everywhere, is the economy of words and the paucity of descriptive matter. Characters are introduced and drawn and scenes are depicted with remarkable brevity. Beyond the fact that Abraham was the son of Terah and took a wife Sarai and moved from Ur of the Chaldees to Haran and dwelt there we are told nothing more by way of introduction to Abraham. Elijah is introduced even more baldly. "Elijah the Tishbite, who was of the sojourners of Gilead." Of David we are merely told, "Now he was ruddy and withal of a beautiful countenance and goodly to look upon". The reader is thus left to form his estimate of the characters in the account given of their utterances and their deeds.

It follows that where there is such studied crystallization, each small detail becomes of account, and every word may be accounted of value. An example of the masterly fashion in which drama and pathos can be packed into a brief compass is given in this moving description of the death of the Shunammite child.¹ "And when the child was grown it fell on a day that he went out to his father to the reapers. And he said unto his father,

¹ 2 Kings 4:18.
My head, my head. And he said to his servant, Carry him to his mother. And when he had taken him and brought him to his mother, he sat on her knees until noon and then died."

The setting, too, of the narrative is often skilfully suggested but seldom described. Thus in the patriarchal narratives no definite idea is obtained by the reader of the country where Laban and Jacob lived and fed their flocks and herds. The flocks and herds materialize but only just sufficiently for the purposes of the tale. The landscape does not emerge at all. The mind's eye can only picture some country where sufficiency of grass grows, but whether the country is waste land or cultivated is left to the imagination. The appreciation of landscape is a product of western civilization for which the development of the art of painting may be partly responsible.

The characters are usually delineated in bold strokes, and a prominent feature is the use of dialogue. The narrators seem to find this literary medium particularly useful for the purposes of characterization. Where a modern story writer would devote long paragraphs to an appraisement of the characters of his story, the Hebrew narrators can produce the same result more artistically by a skilful use of dialogue. We get to know people by their utterances as well as by their actions. Dialogue, besides giving vividness to narrative, is probably the most effective medium for the presentation of character.

To maintain interest and heighten tension in the reader as the tale runs its allotted course, the storyteller, both ancient and modern, seeks to bring into play to serve his purpose responsive and poignant emotions of the reader, such as anticipation, curiosity, expectation, surprise, suspense, joy, delight, love, pity, apprehension, fear, terror, dread, horror, guilt and the like. It is the privilege and the pleasure of the reader to experience in his own person the emotions which stir the characters in the story. He can live their lives, participate in their feelings, share their dangers, enjoy their triumphs, be involved in their misfortunes, even become a partner in their crimes, with an entire absence of responsibility. He can live dangerously without fear; he can run counter to the laws of God and man and escape all consequences. By merely turning the page he can demonstrate
his safety and can revert in security to the task of solving the problems of his own less adventurous and more humdrum existence, reinvigorated with the thrill of the excitements he has thus experienced.

The Old Testament story can offer all this to the reader, but the Old Testament story has also inherent in it an element which is seldom present in the story of the modern fiction writer. All Old Testament stories have God in them. It is true that they deal largely with human beings and their doings but, sometimes in the foreground, sometimes in the background, sometimes visible, sometimes invisible, sometimes on earth, sometimes in the remote heaven, God is ever present. The reader may not see Him, may not visualize His presence, but he cannot escape His influence. God gives point to every Old Testament story for every such story is related in some way to God. It is instinct with God’s greatness and might, God’s teaching, God’s personal interest in His chosen people, and the worship and reverence due to God. In all Old Testament stories there is, then, an underlying tendency or motive. It is this tendency, this moral purpose which decides the Old Testament stories being what they are and where they are. The Old Testament is a book of religion. Its purpose is to direct the thoughts and minds of people Godward. The entire literature which goes into its composition is tinged with this moral purpose. The Old Testament story hence is designed to be, in addition to a record of happenings, a parable for the instruction of others in which the religious lesson to be conveyed predominates over the historicity of the incident with which it is concerned. God is thus the controlling factor in all Old Testament stories and motive or tendency plays a highly important rôle.

It has been a feature of other early literatures to use fable, especially that form of fable in which animals play the part of human beings, as the instrument for moral instruction. The fable allows great freedom of treatment. The characters are fictitious and where personality is not developed interest can be focussed directly on the lesson to be learned. The characters, too, are drawn to suit the purposes of the story, and the instruction desired can be conveyed more obviously and directly. Of
such nature are the Sanscrit Fables of Bidpai (or Pilpai) in early Buddha literature, the well-known Aesop’s Fables in Greek literature, and of La Fontaine in French literature. But the Hebrews did not require to have recourse to fables. Their traditions were so rich in great personalities that the tales associated with them could supply all the moral teaching they needed. Hence the fable is almost entirely absent from the Old Testament writings. There are but two examples of its use, and in each not animals but trees are personified. One is the fable in Judges of the trees that would anoint a king. The olive, the fig and the vine all refuse to give up their normal functions in order to become king. When an appeal is made to the bramble it mocks them, bidding them come to take refuge in its shadow. If they have no intention of doing so and are merely having sport, then may vengeance come forth from it to smite them. The other forms part of the snub administered by Jehoash, King of Israel, to Amaziah, King of Judah, where he quotes from a tree fable. “The thistle that was in Lebanon sent to the cedar that was in Lebanon, saying, Give thy daughter to my son to wife. And there passed by a beast of the field that was in Lebanon and trode down the thistle.” The setting of both these fables is Lebanon, and it is thought that they may be a survival from Canaanite literature, and that there possibly may have been a book of fables with some such title as The Book of the Stories of the Trees of Lebanon. To only two animals is the power of speech attributed in the Old Testament, the serpent in the Garden of Eden, and Balaam’s she-ass. In neither case are they constituents of an animal fable.

There is a view, widely held, that the Old Testament stories have received their artistic and polished form at the hands of professional storytellers. That is possibly so, for storytelling as a form of entertainment in the East may well have a long history. But it should not be forgotten that amongst the Hebrews the requirements of education must have necessitated the use of written literature of various forms. Boys had to be educated

1 9:8-15.
2 2 Kings 14:8, 9.
for the priesthood as well as for lay occupations. For teaching purposes texts are necessary. For children who must learn of their nation's past, the story forms the most valuable instrument of instruction. That many of our Old Testament stories are well suited, one might almost say, designed, for this purpose is self evident. The Garden of Eden, the Flood, the patriarchal narratives, Joseph and his brethren, Samson, David and Goliath, and very many more, are all stories such as children love and can appreciate. The language, too, in which they are told seems to bear this out. It is in general, simple, with easy syntax and is such as a child can readily assimilate. There is also the obvious moral lesson in each which can be so quickly and so firmly embedded in the mind and memory of childhood to endure throughout life.

We observed at the outset of the lecture that a story has as basic elements action, character, and setting, and in the case of the Old Testament stories, motive.

As a story in which the emphasis is laid on the action, we think naturally of the combat between David and Goliath. It is a story which is told in brief compass, but it is none the less effective. It has been skilfully composed to hold the interest and fan the excitement of the reader till the climax is reached. The story opens with a brief description of the setting. The Philistine and Israelite armies oppose each other from the slopes of two mountains with a valley between. The Philistine giant Goliath, who challenges any Israelite to single combat, is described in a fashion to inspire awe, his great height, his massive armour, his spear shaft like a weaver's beam, the weight of his iron spear head. He is a figure to strike terror, and this he does most certainly in the Israelite ranks. To show the extent of the panic Saul himself is included amongst the fearful, and the warriors of Israel flee from before the giant when he appears.

We are suddenly switched to David's household. He feeds his father's sheep. His father sends him to inquire after his three brothers, who are with the army of Saul. He goes, bearing at his father's request, food for his brothers and a gift of ten cheeses for their commanding officer. We follow him with interest as he reaches the army's supply column. He is in a
hurry. He leaves what he brought with him with the keeper of the baggage and rushes off to the army now lining up for battle. He meets and talks to his brothers. The giant stands out in front of the army as he did daily and David resents the challenge and asks what is to be done to this uncircumcized Philistine who has defied the armies of the living God. The reader feels that David is getting himself into a false and dangerous position. He is indirectly making an accusation of cowardice against the Israelite warriors and doing so from the vantage point of a non-combatant. This is brought out strongly by a rebuke from his elder brother, who is piqued at David’s attitude and scolds him angrily, saying in effect, Who are you to talk like this. You who have run away from your miserable sheep. All you want is to see a fight. But David retorts that there is a reason for his presence, and continues with his questions, thus making his position worse. The upshot is that the matter is brought to Saul and David is summoned to Saul’s presence. The reader now feels that David’s bluff, if it is a bluff, is being called. He cannot back down now without terrible disgrace, and the reader gets more and more fearful for David. This fear is increased when David, far from showing a proper humility and temporizing, boasts before Saul of his prowess against a lion and a bear. What he had done to the lion and the bear he can do to the Philistine giant with God’s help. The reader is somewhat relieved when Saul equips him with the best of armour. At least David will have some protection in the fight—indeed the best possible that can be supplied. Then the reader’s anxiety is added to considerably when David quickly discards it because he is inexpert in its use. But the reader is reassured because he knows that David is not alone. At the back of David stands the Lord. It is now the giant who glories in his might and boasts himself against the shepherd youth whom he disdains. He will give his flesh to the fowls of the air and the beasts of the field. He then curses David by his gods. It is now not merely a battle between David and Goliath, but a battle joined between the Lord and the Philistine gods. The action is delayed and the tension kept at full stretch as David goes to the brook to collect his five smooth stones. One stone is apparently enough, and when the
combatants approach each other the tension is dramatically relieved when the stone sinks into the forehead of the giant and he crashes to the ground. David, without even a sword of his own, has to make use of Goliath's own sword to behead him.

Notice the effective use of contrast in this vivid story of action. The mighty giant, the small shepherd boy, the man of war, the untrained stripling, the massive armour, the sling and stones. What a perfect reminder this exciting tale is to weak childhood that with God's help weakness can prevail against strength, and that God can choose the weak things of this world to confound the things that are mighty. The story is full of action, but the reader is kept on tenterhooks as to the outcome of the unequal struggle which he sees approaching. He is not hurried along to the climax. It is approached gradually with his interest kept at high tension.

We would select now a story where the emphasis rests on the characters. And one of the best examples of this is the story of Joseph. Whilst the setting of the story is a feature, it never controls it. Joseph does not advance to high rank and power because he happened to be sold into Egypt. You feel that he would have been equally successful if the Midianite caravan had been going the other way and he had been sold into slavery in Babylon. It is the character of Joseph vis-à-vis his brethren which is the main interest. A sudden reversal of fortune is something which intrigues every one. The reader feels it might be himself enjoying such a blissful experience. Joseph in the pit has reached the very depths of misery with death very near. From that point he ascends to affluence and is in a position to turn the tables on his brethren. The reader, from his vantage point behind the scenes, is privileged to know what is going on in the mind of Joseph and in the minds of his brethren. The irony of the situation grips him. His curiosity to see what Joseph will do to his brethren when he has unlimited power over them keeps his interest at full stretch. The punishment of the brethren is in their fearful and tortured minds and their stricken consciences. The skilful way in which they are kept on tenterhooks by finding themselves exposed to the charge of theft and all that that entailed, and to the loss of their
youngest brother and its feared effect on their aged father. The conscience smitten brothers have no rest. They cannot reconcile Joseph’s conduct with what has to be expected from one whom they had so injured. Even the favour shown by Joseph to them and his expressed forgiveness of their conduct does not allay their fears, which break forth afresh on the death of their father. They think that Joseph has only done all that he has done to please his father. When their father is dead and his restraining influence gone, they fear that the real vengeful Joseph will reveal himself so they concoct a dying message from their father to Joseph to spare their lives. Joseph’s brethren are not depicted as wholly bad or depraved. Joseph is introduced to us at the outset as a young tell-tale who got his brothers into trouble with their father. He is petted and favoured by the father so occasioning their jealousy and hatred. His dreams suggesting his own lordship over them and over his father and mother, intensify their hate. Clearly Joseph, this upstart youngster, needs to be suppressed, but death seems to the reader an unnatural and disproportionate punishment, especially for their own brother. It must be remembered, however, that these men were brothers of Joseph by the same father but not the same mother. The reader is not led to expect any deep affection existing between them and Joseph. This is brought out later in the story when Joseph’s great love for his full brother, Benjamin, is depicted.

The brothers act in concert, although Reuben and Judah are singled out as showing finer feelings. They are actively interested in helping Joseph and sparing the feelings of their father. The searching of heart in the brothers when Joseph demands the surrender of Benjamin is convincingly drawn. Through anxiety for their own safety and that of their youngest brother, and their fear of the effect of the surrender of Benjamin upon their father, they find themselves in a predicament from which they cannot escape. In all this they are enduring a merited punishment for their early treatment of Joseph. Their punishment is mental, not physical, but it is none the less severe.

The character of the aged father, Jacob, is skilfully delineated although he appears so seldom. But every appearance adds to our knowledge and contributes to our estimate of him. The
anxious old man, proud of the son of his old age, griefstricken at his presumed death, fearful lest Benjamin suffer the same fate, distrusting his other sons whom he clearly suspects of knowing more about Joseph’s death than they have revealed, so overjoyed at the reunion with the son whom he had so long regarded as dead, and could with difficulty be brought to realize was indeed alive, willing in his old age to go down to Egypt to die there, happy to die when he had seen and blessed Joseph’s two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim.

Joseph is an example of what a man can do and endure who has God as his helper. He surmounts all difficulties and dangers, conquers all temptations and emerges triumphant with the reward of wealth, position and honour. He is the perfect example of Hebrew ability, business acumen and enterprise suitably rewarded. He begins life in Potiphar’s house as a slave and soon is in charge of the household and the affairs of his master. He is put in prison and very soon he runs the prison. Through his introduction to Pharaoh he is given a small opening and in a brief space he controls all Egypt. He can afford to requite his brothers according to their deserts or to be magnanimous. He reveals greatness of soul in his attitude towards them. Conscious that he has a divine mission and task, all they did merely helped to bring it to fruition. “Ye meant evil against me but God meant it for good to save much people alive.” Family ties are strong in him and are revealed in his generous treatment of his brothers, in the love for Benjamin which he makes no effort to conceal, and in the care, affection and honour which he bestowed upon his father. His attainment to high rank enables Joseph to do for his brothers what he did do, but the only effect on Joseph of rank and station is to bring out more clearly his basic nobility of character. The whole story is a great character study, and it is remarkable how readily and how skilfully the characters are made to stand out in relief.

Perhaps an indication that the story was written having the instruction of children in mind, is the note that at the meal in Joseph’s house, when Joseph ate by himself, his Egyptian staff by themselves, and the brothers by themselves, Joseph showed favour to his brothers by sending from his table delicacies for
their acceptance. It is recorded that he sent for the youthful Benjamin five times as much as to any of the others. One wonders how Benjamin contrived to eat it all, but there is no doubt that affection manifesting itself in this lavish manner would make a strong appeal to children. That is often the way in which the child would like love to be expressed!

And now for a story where the setting dominates. The story of the great flood is such a story. It is the flood that has character. It takes charge from the day that the fountains of the great deep were broken up and the windows of heaven were opened. Rain on the earth 40 days and nights, with the waters increasing and the ark and its precious contents borne up. The highest mountains covered, 15 cubits and upwards, and every living thing destroyed. Waters prevailing over the whole earth. Waters do not dry up rapidly even with a wind. So after the rains ceased the waters decreased for 150 days (5 months say). After another 75 days the ark rested on the mountains of Ararat. Yet another 75 days and the tops of the mountains were seen. Then after another 40 days the opening of the windows and the sending forth of the raven and the dove with intervals of 7 days, bringing the time of the assuaging of the waters to roughly 360 days, the Egyptian year of 12 months of 30 days. Noah, beyond the fact that he was a righteous man and perfect in his generations and walked with God, is absolutely colourless. It is God who does all the directing, gives instructions for the building of the ark, and for its passengers, Noah simply obeys. If he was to be saved at all, it was to be expected that he would be righteous, since the flood was for the destruction of the unrighteous. Noah only opens his mouth after his drunkenness, and it was to curse Canaan and put him into subjection to his uncles, Shem and Japhet.¹

Another story which comes quickly to mind, one in which the setting tends to dominate, is the Garden of Eden. It is the garden of God, eastward in Eden planted with every tree, pleasant to the sight and good for food, which holds the mind's eye. The man is put there to till it and to keep it. There is the river going

¹ The composite nature of the Flood story and some other Old Testament stories, is not our immediate concern.
forth to water the garden and parting into four heads. There are the precious trees, the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, and the Tree of Life, with their coveted fruits. The cool of the evening, with God walking in it. The man and woman hiding in the undergrowth amongst the trees; their sewing aprons of fig leaves; the cursing of the ground; the return of the bodies to dust; and the sword flashing in all directions to keep the way of the Tree of Life; the interest in the garden itself. But not entirely so for Adam, Eve, and the serpent, although shadowy figures, are not entirely colourless. True, there is no great depth of intelligence, rather an understandable naïveté observable in our first parents, who had not developed the processes of thought sufficiently to be intelligent until they had eaten the forbidden fruit, and then knew enough to attempt deceit.

Another example of a story where the setting tends to dominate, although it is very doubtful whether it does so by intention, is the story of Ruth. Goethe described the story as “the loveliest little idyll that tradition has handed down to us”. The setting is delightful. It is a tale of simple folks and village life, the fresh air of the Judaean slopes, the kindly villagers, the waving grain, the reaping and the gleaning, the harvesters at work and at meal time, the bundles and the sheaves, the good natured Boaz, the anxious but shrewd Naomi, receiving the gleaning corn at the end of the day, the harvest festival and all it meant to Ruth. Apart from her deep loyalty to Naomi and her immortal words, “Entreat me not to leave thee, and to return from following after thee: for whither thou goest, I will go, and where thou lodgest, I will lodge. Thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God; where thou diest, I will die, and there will I be buried. The Lord do so to me, and more also, if aught but death part thee and me,” there is not much we can lay hold on in the delineation of Ruth. In addition to her steadfastness she displays throughout a proper humility and a sense of obedience. But Naomi is clearly the stronger character of the two. It is she who dominates the situation. It is she who decides to return from Moab, who argues with her daughters-in-law that they should remain, who has her answer to the village folks when
they greet her return, who tells Ruth where to glean, and who plans that Boaz shall be induced to marry Ruth—a clever, scheming woman. Boaz is the kindly, goodnatured countryman, but one who, when he is stirred, will not rest till he see what he wants obtained. There is one little sidelight which is worth noting. Although he is a simple countryman he breaks into poetry when he addresses Ruth with the words, "A full reward be given thee of the God of Israel under whose wings thou art come to take refuge". Here was the spirit of poetry already at work in the great-grandfather of David. It is perhaps not accidental that he is here using a poetic metaphor which is found in some five places in the Psalms but apparently nowhere else in the Old Testament.

A story in which the setting gives it charm, although it does not dominate, is the reception by Abraham of three visitors, one of whom appears to have been the Lord, as he sat in his tent door by the oaks of Mamre. When Abraham sees them he runs to meet them and bows himself to the earth. He urges them not to pass by; water will be fetched to wash their feet, and food prepared. Sarah is bidden take 3 measures of fine meal and bake it into cakes. Abraham ran to the herd for a calf, tender and good, and gave it to a servant to kill and dress. He took butter, milk and the calf, and set it before them, and he stood by them under the tree. This is the introduction to the announcement to Sarah of the birth of a son to her in her old age. The two parts of the tale are distinct and, indeed, could have been independent of each other. The introduction does not suggest or require this particular dénouement, nor does the story of the announcement to Sarah and her laughter necessitate a preface of this kind, or indeed a preface at all.

We have observed that in addition to action, character and setting which form the basic elements of the story there is in the Old Testament another element, motive. Motive may be easily discernible or it may be concealed. Usually it so operates as to give an ethical character to the tale, but sometimes it controls the form of presentation of the story. A good example of the latter is the story of the first meeting of Samuel and Saul. The
motive of the narrator, which you can gather from the general presentation of the history of the period, is to make it quite clear that Saul was chosen, from the first, by the Lord himself, and that Samuel had neither art nor part in the selection. The significance of the manner in which the story is unfolded can only be appreciated if the motive is apprehended, since it provides the key. The stress laid on the pursuit of the runaway asses by Saul and his servant and their wanderings through the territories of Ephraim, Shalishah, Shaalim, and finally Zuph, is to show that at every twist and turn Saul and his servant could have gone in directions which would have made the meeting impossible. But unseen by man, although hinted at in this way to the reader, God was bringing Samuel and Saul together. Finally in their wanderings Saul and his servant came to the lands of Zuph to an unnamed town. The town is not named to show that Saul and his servant did not recognize it. They have, indeed, lost their way, and think of returning home. By the mention of Zuph, the reader, however, knows that they are in the home district of Elkanah, the father of Samuel, whose home was in Ramah, and that this is consequently that town. As Saul and his servant approached the town they heard from the people of the neighbourhood that there was a ‘man of God’, a ‘seer’, resident in the town, with a reputation. This seemed to Saul and his servant an opportunity to get information about the asses, and their own whereabouts. They even discuss offering him a present, a circumstance calculated to intrigue the reader, so little do they know that it is the great Samuel to whom they are coming. Samuel was known throughout all Israel as a ‘prophet’, and if the country folk to whom they talked had called Samuel the ‘prophet’ Saul would no doubt have recognized who it was. But they called him a ‘seer’—and that to the minds of Saul and his servant merely conjured up a local wizard or seer. The reader, who is made aware of all this, is quietly amused at the situation. He follows Saul and his servant with interest to see what happens when they enter the town and encounter Samuel. Saul and his servant meet women going out to draw water as they approach the town, who tell them garrulously of their great fellow-townsman and his
movements and doings. This may have had the effect of opening
the eyes of Saul and the servant to some extent at least. At the
women's invitation they hurry on to meet Samuel. From him
they gather that he was expecting them, as he had been informed
by the Lord—but only the day before—whereas Saul and the
servant have been wandering for three days. We need not go
into the details of the meeting and its consequences. An
interesting sidelight on the story tending to show that Saul
knew it was the great Samuel and not a local seer is a short
paragraph recording a conversation between Saul and his uncle.
Saul, to his uncle's question, where had he gone, tells him that
he had come to Samuel. The uncle is at once interested and
excited. "Tell me, now, what did Samuel say unto thee?"
He was anxious to know what concern such a great personage
had with his nephew.

Modern critics, not discerning the motive underlying the
story, have jumped to the conclusion that Saul and his servant
came to an obscure town. The fact of its not having a name
might be regarded, they imply, as an indication that the whole
tale was legendary, where Saul and his servant consulted a local
seer called Samuel, who was inspired by God to anoint Saul as
King. This they regard as a different and contradictory re-
presentation of Samuel to that given elsewhere in the book,
where Samuel appears as a great prophet and leader of the nation.
In consequence the status and even the authenticity of Samuel
have been called in question, and the resultant tendency has been
to remove Samuel from the plane of history to that of legend.¹

We have already recorded our belief that the stories of the
Old Testament were used for the purposes of instruction, more
particularly of the young. An example in support of this con-
tention is Abraham's intervention with God for Sodom. The
analogue of this scene in daily life is the angry parent or teacher
sternly resolved to punish, and a favoured child who intervenes
on behalf of the offenders, and by wheedling and coaxing, wrings
concessions. The reader, or hearer, of the story, if a child, can

¹ For a fuller treatment see the writer's article "Samuel and Saul" in the
appreciate the situation. Each fresh concession seems to call for an end to be put to this intervention. Each fresh demand involves the fresh danger of a sharp rebuff, and calls for an added intensity of pleading. The angry Lord in the first place concedes that he will spare the city if fifty righteous are found in it. Then Abraham gets the required number of righteous reduced from fifty to forty-five, then to forty, then by reductions of ten at a time to the number ten. The pleading varies. "I have taken it upon me to speak to the Lord, I who am but dust and ashes." "O let not the Lord be angry, and I will speak ", "Behold now, I have taken it upon me to speak unto the Lord ", "O let not the Lord be angry, and I will speak but this once "). All this is thrilling danger to children, who naturally fear at every stage that the wrath of the Lord will burst forth against the luckless Abraham for presuming to interfere, and persisting in interfering with an enraged God in the just prosecution of his wrath. The anxious child could breathe a sigh of relief when Abraham desisted at the number ten, and the Lord went his way as soon as he had left off communing with Abraham.

Another story \(^1\) obviously meant for a warning to children, is the story of the occasion when Elisha the prophet was going up to Bethel, and as he went up the children of the city mocked him, crying after him, "Go up, bald head! Go up, bald head!" Elisha turned on them, and cursed them in the name of the Lord, with the sequel that two she-bears came out of a wood and tore forty-two of them! That story bears its own grim message—an obvious warning to children not to mock at, or make fun of, a holy man even if he is of odd appearance.

Another point we made was that the Old Testament story is somehow related to God. God is either in the foreground or the background. If God is in the foreground, as He is in so many of the early narratives, His contact with man becomes for the reader a matter of thrilling interest. In the early chapters of Genesis and throughout the patriarchal narratives there is, in general, nothing terrifying in the contact of God and man. He, indeed, appears in human form and talks intimately and naturally

\(^1\) 2 Kings 2: 23-24.
with Abraham who, in consequence, was known to later generations as "the friend of God". There is an underlying implication, of course, that the men with whom the Lord deals directly, such as Abraham, Moses, Aaron, etc., are men of a rare order, men presumably whose physical bodies had in them something of the Divine, something akin to the spiritual essence of the Divine Being. But there are also accounts in the Old Testament where the paralysing horror of actual contact between the ordinary human body and the world of spirit is well brought out. The words put in the mouth of Eliphaz the Temanite, in the Book of Job, vividly describe this feeling:

Now a thing was secretly brought to me,  
And mine ear received a whisper thereof  
In thoughts from the visions of the night  
When deep sleep falleth on man,  
Fear came upon me and shuddering,  
Which made all my bones to shake.  
Then a spirit passed before my face.  
The hair of my flesh stood up.  
It stood still. But I could not discern the appearance thereof.  
A semblance was before mine eyes.  
There was silence and I heard a voice say,  
Shall mortal man be more just than God?

An eerie and uncanny experience is here described with great skill. To the Hebrews exposure of man's person to the searing effects of the divine glory, meant death to man. No ordinary man could see God and live. Moses, we are reminded, was put in the cleft of the rock and covered with God's hand till God passed and then he was permitted to see His back. The theophany experienced by Elijah was sufficiently terrifying. The precursors of God's presence were the mighty wind that could rend rocks, the great fire and the fearful earthquake. Then came the still small voice, the voice of God, and when Elijah perceived that God had come, he wrapped his face in his mantle and stood in the mouth of the cave for protection. The wrapping in the mantle was to ward off the blinding effects of God's glory, at which he dared not look. Saul's experience of the spirit world through the medium of the old woman of Endor was uncanny enough. The old woman calls up the

1 Job 4: 12-17.
spirit of Samuel to speak dread words to Saul, and Saul was so overcome at the words, and no doubt at the appearance of Samuel, that he fell full length upon the earth, sore afraid.

Belshazzar's sacrilegious use, at a great feast, of the vessels which his father had taken from the Jerusalem Temple, was followed by an extraordinary happening which struck terror to the hearts of beholders. In the full blaze of the lamp light, the fingers only of a hand, nothing else, appeared and wrote warning words on the white plaster of the wall of the banquet hall. The king saw and was stricken with terror. This appearance from the spirit world in full light is an exception for the spirits prefer the darkness. The angel that wrestled with Jacob was in haste to be gone when dawn appeared. And darkness adds to the uncanniness. In the passage in the Book of Job we quoted, and in the visit of Saul to the witch of Endor, darkness plays an important rôle. There is, however, yet another scene where there is contact with the world of spirit, and where the setting is skilfully used to heighten the effect. This is the description of the covenant between God and Abram given in Genesis 15. The early form of the covenant in ancient Israel was for a victim to be cut in two and for the contracting parties to pass between the parts. Here Abram takes a heifer, a she-goat and a ram, each of three years old, together with a turtle dove and a young pigeon. The first three he divides each in two and laid the halves over against each other. The birds he did not divide. A touch of grim realism is introduced with the comment that the birds of prey came down on the carcases, and Abram drove them away. The sun begins to go down and a deep sleep fell on Abram, a horror of great darkness, or better a darkling horror. Then when the sun went down and darkness settled, a furnace of smoke and a torch of flame passed between the pieces. This was the Lord enacting his part of the covenant ceremony.

Jacob dreamed of the ladder stretching from earth to heaven with angels ascending and descending and God standing above it.¹ When Jacob waked out of his sleep he said, "Surely the Lord is in this place, and I knew it not." And he was afraid

¹ Gen. 28 : 10 ff.
and said, "How dreadful is this place! This is none other but the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven."

We have already observed that motive may at times control the presentation of a story and even its composition. This seems to be so in the relation of that other nocturnal experience of Jacob when he wrestled with a man till the breaking of the day. If there was ever an eerie experience surely it was this. It would lend itself so readily to vivid and dread-inspiring narration. But no! It is told in a calm, matter-of-fact way as an incident hardly out of the ordinary. It does not seem so surprising, however, when one perceives what is the chief interest in the mind of the narrator. He is interested in explaining the origin of the name Israel as a 'wrestling with God and prevailing' given to Jacob. We would hardly know that Jacob’s opponent was of the spirit world were it not for his haste to get away before the light came and the extraction of a blessing. The narrator, too, is interested in the origin of the name Peniel, and in the reason why the children of Israel do not eat the sciatic nerve "because he touched the hollow of Jacob’s thigh in the sinew which shrank". Thus an occasion and an opportunity for vivid description has been neglected to satisfy the prosaic ends of etymology and folklore.

There is a book in the Old Testament where a particular outlook and bias may have controlled its composition and have certainly influenced its admission to the Hebrew canon. It is the Book of Esther. Based no doubt on the tradition of the deliverance of the nation from a threatened destruction by the intervention of a woman, it has been elaborated into a tale of considerable power and interest. Its association, too, with the feast of Purim, has brought it into prominence. It is not the setting which dominates the story here. It is true that the magnificence of the seven days' feast in the court of the garden of the palace of Ahasuerus, the gorgeous hangings and the precious vessels are described in some detail. But, thereafter, the setting may be said to fade out and apart from the preparation of Esther by the royal attendants for her presentation to the king, only the gallows of Haman come prominently forward.

Ahasuerus (Xerxes) is a nebulous figure in the story. He is
a king, does the things expected of a king, and little more. Esther is not an heroic figure like Judith. When asked to plead for her people, she vacillates and points out the danger to herself in going unbidden into the presence of the king. She has to be driven to see where her duty lies by Mordecai. She has, however, the measure of Haman and, by playing on his vanity, she leads him on to his doom. The real hero and outstanding personality in the Book of Esther is Mordecai. Willing to take on responsibilities where he was not legally obliged, he brings up his cousin Esther after the death of her parents as his own child. When Esther was chosen for royal favour because of her beauty, he walked every day before the court of the women’s house anxious for her safety, but claimed no kinship with her. When she was promoted queen he continued to sit at the king’s gate. He uncovers a plot against the king and the conspirators are put to death. It is this service, recalled for the king during a sleepless night, which proves to be the first step towards Haman’s eclipse. He shows independence and courage in refusing to do reverence to Haman, the reason for this attitude is, however, not disclosed. When Haman in revenge plots the destruction of the Jews, it is Mordecai who stirs up Esther against her fears and her will to use her influence with the king, and it is Mordecai who ultimately takes Haman’s place.

The outstanding feature of the book is its strong nationalistic spirit. It breathes the air of Ezra and Nehemiah with their intolerance of mixed marriages, whereas the Book of Ruth, which glorifies the marriage between a Jew and a Moabitess, might be regarded as a counterblast to this extremism. Throughout the story of Esther there is a strong current of artificiality. Poetic justice makes a strong appeal to everyone, but its appearance in real life is generally rare. In the structure of the story in the Book of Esther, poetic justice may be almost said to run riot. Haman had the right to demand reverence from Mordecai, but eventually it is Haman who has to do reverence to Mordecai. Haman prepared a gallows for Mordecai. Instead he is hanged.

1 According to the Talmud she was Mordecai’s wife.
2 According to the Talmud Haman carried an idol, or was himself an idol, or had been originally a slave of Mordecai.
on it himself. Haman had a ring given him by the king when he was promoted to the chief place next to the king. The ring and the position went to Mordecai. Haman had a fine house and possessions, these went to Esther. Haman and those who plotted with him the destruction of the Jews perished. The Jews, throughout the far-flung Persian empire, instead of being massacred on the day appointed, massacred their adversaries. The turning of the tables in every case is perfect. In fact, it is too perfect. There are no loose ends where one would expect and would, under the circumstances, value loose ends. We know that often the wish is father to the thought. In the Book of Esther the wish is parent to a great many thoughts.

We have already stressed the parabolic use of the story in the Old Testament to convey a moral lesson. This seems notably so in the case of some stories which have apparently been expanded from their original form to provide such teaching. An instance of this is the well-known story of the visit of Naaman, the Syrian, to the prophet Elisha to be cured of his leprosy. The incident is complete, and the power of God to work marvels has been amply demonstrated when Naaman, cured, departs with his mules' loads of earth to worship the Lord in his homeland. But the moral lesson of the refusal of Elisha to take a reward for doing God's work needs emphasizing. The additional and almost independent incident of the cupidity of Gehazi serves to bring out the great contrast between the 'man of God' and the ordinary mortal. Gehazi, with none of the prophet's scruples about accepting reward, practises deceit in misrepresenting Elisha to Naaman, in fabricating an occasion for the reward, and in hiding everything, including Naaman's gift, from Elisha. But Elisha, being God's prophet, sees all and Gehazi is appropriately punished with the leprosy which Naaman had discarded.

There is another story of a similar nature in 1 Kings 13. The 'man of God,' who came from Judah to Bethel to prophesy against the altar beside which Jeroboam was standing, performed his task. When Jeroboam put forth his hand against him it was dried up. On the entreaty of the 'man of God,' God heals it. The king invites him to partake of refreshment but he refuses, the word of the Lord being very definite that he should
eat no bread nor drink water in that place and that he should return by another way. In all this the prophet carefully obeys instructions. Now the incident seems closed. The prophet has fulfilled his task and is on his way home to Judah. Then quite suddenly with no discernible motive, a complication is introduced, and we proceed to embark on a new incident which serves as a rider to the first incident, and has an obvious moral lesson. An old prophet of Bethel goes after the returning Judah prophet, tells him that he, too, is a prophet, and that he has had a message through an angel to bid the Judah prophet turn back to eat and drink with him. The narrative says candidly that he lied to him. The Judah prophet is persuaded to turn back to meet eventually with a divine denunciation for his action, and a threat of a violent death. This is dramatically fulfilled by his being slain by a lion on his homeward journey. The lion is a regular instrument of divine vengeance in the Old Testament, and the vision conjured up by the description of the body of the prophet at the wayside, and the lion and the ass standing placidly by, is especially intriguing to children. But it conveyed also the salutary lesson that no one should ever be turned aside from the execution of God's commands by any form of persuasion whatsoever.

We have now given you some examples of Old Testament stories of different kinds, with different purposes, and retaining the interest and attention of the reader by different means. We are under no necessity in our survey to consider the sources to which the stories may belong. For our purpose J, E, D, P, R and their multiples, and such other sigla as literary criticism may from time to time devise, need have no existence. We find that in the main the literary technique of all exhibit certain common features which we have tried to point out. They all share in a literary art which makes Hebrew literature distinct from the literatures of the surrounding lands. Indeed it can be said that the only real literature in the early mid-Eastern world is the Hebrew literature. There is certainly nothing to compare with it in the literatures of Babylon, Egypt and the Hittites. Their literatures, where they are not legal documents or bald historical records, or equally bald lists of all sorts of
subjects and objects, show stilted and arid compositions. Hebrew literature springs from the fertile mind and artistic spirit of the Hebrew and his conception of the world order. Since God created the world, and it is to His will and His actions that the Hebrew looked for the explanation of all, there is no formulation of natural law to which to appeal. To him the rain comes down from above when God opens the sluices in the firmament. The thunder clouds which float in the sky and move quickly across the heavens are His chariot, whence issue the signs of His presence and power in the thunder and the lightning. There was no intellectual curiosity for the early Hebrew, challenging his beliefs and disturbing the calm of his spirit. When Joshua bids the sun stand still on Gibeon and the moon in the valley of Aijalon, and it is recorded that the sun stood still and the moon stayed, there is no protesting voice raised to say that this is contrary to the laws of nature and could not be so. Thunder and rain are sent in the middle of wheat harvest at Samuel's instigation and Gideon has the unnatural signs for which he asked, fulfilled. Nobody feels the necessity to question anything of this. God is supreme in His own creation, and God is a divine personality whose purpose—at times represented as almost capricious—can be expressed at will. It is fitting, then, that the marvellous should be associated with all God's doings and interventions in the natural world, and these we are continually reminded should be made known. As the angel in the Book of Tobit said: "It is good to keep close the secret of a king, but it is honourable to show forth the works of God". And this the Hebrew delighted to do. So the Old Testament stories, composed with such fine literary feeling and artistic skill, in which dim traditions are enshrined and much history embodied, but which one and all convey great religious truths and grave moral lessons—the last being, indeed, their main function—will continue to delight and to edify generations of readers in the future, as they have delighted and edified those who have lived with them and treasured them in the past.