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The Hebrew Thought and the New Testament

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In their attempt to discover the meaning of the Gospel scholars of the New Testament very often tend to ignore the Old Testament background. The New Testament is dependent on, and relative to, the Old Testament. The two Testaments are not mutually exclusive, but together they offer validity to the Christian message. For a right understanding of the Gospel one should look through the Old Testament, which has actually prepared the way for the Messiah.

The Apostolic Church considered the Old Testament as the sacred Scripture and interpreted the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. St. Matthew, St. Paul, and the other New Testament writers lavishly used the Old Testament phrases and terms in their proclamation of the 'New Way'. Thus they could convince many Jews that Jesus of Nazareth was really the expected Messiah of the Old Testament. Those Jewish converts were compelled to undergo the Jewish religious rituals in order to enable them to be perfect adherents of the new faith. But they were forbidden by the Church from observing the meticulous customs of their fathers, but were asked to live in the spirit of Christ, the Head of the New Israel. While leading their life in the 'New Way', the Christian community interpreted the faith and propagated it among the people around them. Their medium of interpretation was the Greek language, the *lingua franca* of the day. The ideas they had of the new religion were of Hebrew origin, but they were constrained to translate them into Greek in order to make known the Catholic Gospel to the world around them. We are also faced with the same need. We should get at the real meaning of the Gospel message, lying behind the Greek language of the New Testament in the Hebrew thought, before we translate it into our own languages.

The Hebrew Language.—The ecclesiastical language of Israel in the time of our Lord was Hebrew, while the spoken language of Palestine was Aramaic. Our Lord must have used Aramaic in His ministry to convey His message to the people. The 'diaspora' of the Jews knew very little of their religious language. It is on account of this fact that in the third century B.C. the Hebrew Massoretic text had to be translated into Greek.

Our Lord Himself may have used Greek in His conversation with His non-Jewish audience. However, His ideas were Hebrew, and it was those ideas that translators endeavoured to render into Greek. Even in the translation the idioms, phrases, similes, and proverbs employed were all Hebraic in Hellenistic garb. As is well known, in translation it is not easy to bring out the exact meaning of the original in a different tongue. The New Testament writers also had to face similar handicaps in rendering Hebrew ideas into Greek. They collected not only the oral traditions of the Hebrew-Aramaic sermons and discourses of our Lord, but may also have incorporated into their writing translations of Aramaic materials. The problem therefore is there, but that is no excuse for confusing ideas.

The Theology.—In the light of the religious ideas of the Old Testament and of the particular sayings of Jesus the Christian scholar undertakes the study of the New Testament theology. As the New Testament has no existence independent of the Old Testament, so there cannot be a New Testament theology isolated from the Old Testament. A theology of the New Testament unrelated to the Old Testament is a complete violation of the Biblical revelation. A correct exposition of the New Testament theology should always be in harmony with the Old Testament theology. The New Testament theology should be regarded as being a new interpretation of the Old Testament theology in the light of the revelation of God in Jesus Christ.

In expounding the New Testament theology one has to remember that the ideas dealt with are derived from the Old Testament. As he expounds the contents of the New Testament in the light of non-Hebraic thought, he should on no account identify the ideas of the latter with those of the Bible, even while employing languages other than Hebrew to communicate the Gospel. If the theologian happens to attribute non-Hebraic ideas to the peculiar Biblical expressions, the result would be a deviation from the true message of the Gospel. For instance, terms like covenant, incarnation, redemption, and history have their own specific meaning-contents. In translating such Hebrew concepts New Testament writers themselves have made use of Greek terms and expressions. Therefore, if the Christian theologian does not take pains to go back to the Old Testament and get at the real meaning behind the Greek translation itself, there is every probability of misinterpreting the Gospel in terms of Greek philosophy. It is sad to see some Christians ignore this truth and expound the New Testament as though our Lord were the fulfilment of Greek speculation. What they really do is to substitute the Christ who came in the flesh for a Christ who is nothing but the phantom of the Greek abstract ideas. The task of the Christian theologian is to proclaim the Christ who came in the flesh, not the salvation, but the Saviour of mankind.

The study of the New Testament theology has led some people to observe a polarity between the 'Testaments'. In the history of the Church it was Marcion who first condemned the

Old Testament, but he came to be condemned by the Church on account of that. The Catholic Church always maintained the unity of the Testaments. Our Lord saw the Old Testament as the word of God, and through it He established His identity as its fulfilment. To capture this understanding of, and devotion to, the Old Testament is a crucial need of our time.

In his effort to rediscover the meaning of the Gospel the New Testament theologian may follow the lead of St. Paul who struggled to communicate the content of the Christian message to the Gentiles. He endeavoured to transmit the Hebrew ideas in the thought-forms of the people to whom he preached the Gospel. It is true that St. Paul was not always consistent in his method. There were times when he accepted the Old Testament as the word of God; but there were also times when he maintained that the law was superseded by Christ, the central point of revelation. These two lines of thought gave his writings 'a strong tension, according to some even an unbearable tension, which is said to be a sign of absolute confusion' (Vriezen: *Theology of the Old Testament*, p. 82). He tried to mix 'diluted' Judaism and 'superficial Hellenism'.

It is indeed a necessity for the New Testament theologian to make use of different languages as vehicles to interpret the Gospel. In this he should try to avoid the pitfalls into which St. Paul happened to fall. If he blindly accepts the Greek terms which the New Testament writers have employed, without reference to the Hebrew, the ideas which he endeavours to communicate may not be Biblical. It should be remembered that Hellenism is not the theological background of Christianity, and that it does not agree with the religious ideas of the Hebrews.

A New Interpretation.—A pattern of theological thinking needs to be worked out in which the theology of the New Testament with all its wealth and depth derived from the Old Testament are preserved, so that the Gospel in its purity may be preached. For this purpose it is necessary to recapitulate the Hebrew thought underlying the New Testament terms and translate them directly to the languages in which we are going to teach and preach the word of God. The basic foundation of this theological interpretation should be the affirmation that Christ is the fulfilment of the Hebrew expectation regarding the coming of the Messiah, naturally taking the Old Testament as the *preparatio evangelica*. One example should illustrate the point. The term 'incarnation' means 'the Word became flesh'. Before expounding the term, one should explain words like 'history', 'Word', and 'flesh' in the light of Hebrew ideas. The meaning of these ideas in Greek is not much different from the way in which they are understood in Indian thought. Therefore, in translating the term 'incarnation' one should make sure that one has understood the Hebrew ideas properly. Otherwise, there is every chance of making a confusion of the Christian emphasis with the Hindu concept of *Avatar* or the Greek theory of the *Logos*, neither of which is adequate to conserve the meaning-content of the

Biblical proclamation 'the Word became flesh'. To the Hebrew mind the act of the Divine Reality in Christ Jesus was a concrete, visible, and tangible evidence of God's living Presence, the indwelling of 'Shechina', the Immanuel, right in the midst of His people. Neither of the concepts *Logos* and *Avatar* can convey this definiteness of meaning that the living God is indwelling Jesus Christ in the midst of sinful humanity.

The Indian and Greek religious philosophies are based on abstract ideas and therefore fail to express the concrete empirical experience of the Hebrews. We should therefore vehemently oppose any attempt to replace the Old Testament with the sacred writings of the East. There is no scripture like the Old Testament which can play the part of a preparation for evangelism. Through it our Lord comes in the most vivid way near to every man in need of a Saviour.

Relevance to Indigenous Thought.—The nature of the Gospel is catholic though its content is Semitic. By its very nature it compels us to take it to the ends of the earth and proclaim it to all creatures. It is here that we are faced with the problem of transplanting the Semitic sapling into alien soil. We in India have to interpret the Gospel in language with which people in our country are familiar. But we should guard, not lose, the original Hebrew emphasis ingrained in the Gospel. New words have to be coined to keep the purity and truth of the Gospel. The Indian theologian should not follow simply the Greek ideas conveyed by the Greek terms of the New Testament, but should follow the lead of the New Testament writers and work out a new terminology. His task should be to translate the Hebrew religious ideas contained in the Gospel into indigenous terms and help the people of India see the vision of the revelation of God in Jesus Christ.

The study of the Greek language is important, not for understanding the religious ideas of the New Testament, but for distinguishing Greek thought from the Hebrew. The student of the New Testament should endeavour to extract the original Hebrew meaning-content even from the Greek terms. To encourage the Christian scholar in his work of interpreting the Gospel from its real setting to the indigenous thought forms, it may be desirable to ask the theological student to translate New Testament Greek into his mother-tongue and not into English, as the present custom is in our theological education. Facilities should be given to him to study the Hebrew language and religious ideas, so that he may discover the original nature of the Gospel.

To sum up, then, the Church in India should encourage the study of the Old Testament with Hebrew and the gaining of a working knowledge of Greek together with a sound grasp of indigenous thinking. In this way it should be possible for the Church in our country to present the Christ, the Saviour of the world, to our brethren of other faiths.