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CHRIST AND THE OLD TESTAMENT

I

THE passages in the four Gospels in which Our Lord directly or indirectly refers to the Old Testament, when brought together on a single sheet of foolscap, give palpable expression to the fact, already assumed, that He was intimately acquainted with the Jewish Scriptures. The ease with which quotations from all parts of Scripture spring to his lips argues a deep knowledge of its contents and an acute appreciation of their relevance.

Christ quotes from nearly all the separate books and accepts the recognised threefold division into Law, Prophets, and Psalms. (Luke xxiv. 44.) He also makes use of the current term "ὁ νόμος" as applicable to the whole canon; e.g. in John x. 34, where He describes the verse from the Psalms "I said ye are gods" as being "in your law". Furthermore He has no scruple in identifying Himself with the common view of authorship which was held at his time. In quite half a dozen passages Moses is credited by name with the authorship of the Law, here co-extensive with the five books of the Pentateuch; and in nearly every case the correctness of the ascription is vital to the circumstances in which it was made. This is especially evident in John v. 46, 47, where the repose of faith in Jesus' words is regarded as an obvious corollary to faith in the writings of Moses, "for he (ἐκεῖνος) wrote of Me". In the same manner Psalm cx is unhesitatingly ascribed to David in more than ordinarily exact terms, for whereas it might be argued that the use of the word "David" is a mere generalization on the analogy of the title of the whole corpus of Psalms as the "Psalms of David", when a few at least we know were the work of other psalmists, the addition of the words "himself" and "in the Holy Spirit" make the literal veracity of the ascription imperative.

Like his contemporaries again Our Lord clearly recognised the divine origin of the Old Testament Scriptures. In Matt.

xix. 4-6 He meets a question of the Pharisees on divorce with an explicit reference of Genesis ii. 24 to God as its author; "He who made them said—'What therefore GOD hath joined together . . .'". Yet this passage does not give us a saying of God's recorded in Scripture, but just a word of Scripture itself, and can be treated as a declaration of God's only on the assumption that all Scripture is a declaration of God's. Other similar instances could be adduced to prove that Our Lord's adduction of Scripture as an authoritative document rests on an ascription of it to God as its author. Nor was this made merely during the days of His flesh when He may be supposed to have accommodated Himself to the ideas of His time. It was in a resurrection appearance that He laid down the simple "Thus it is written" as the sufficient ground of confident belief (Luke xxiv. 46). Nor as Professor Warfield points out—"can we explain away Jesus' testimony to the divine trustworthiness of Scripture by interpreting it as not His own but that of His followers, placed on His lips by them in their reports of His words. Not only is it too constant, minute, intimate, and in part incidental, and therefore, as it were, hidden, to admit of this interpretation; but it so pervades all our channels of information concerning Jesus' teaching as to make it certain that it actually came from Him".

No wonder then that Our Lord expected the same intimate knowledge of the sacred Scriptures to be the possession of the religious leaders of His day. "Have ye never read?" seems to have been a phrase often upon His lips, and implies that a knowledge of the Scriptures should have carried with it an ability to interpret them aright. To the Sadducees He said, "Ye err, not knowing the Scriptures" (Matt. xxii. 29), and throughout John iii. 1-21 the implication is that Nicodemus, as a teacher in Israel, should have been in a position to appreciate the deep spiritual truths that Our Lord was laying before him.

It is significant, therefore, to note the attitude that Jesus took towards the "tradition of the elders" which the Scribes and Pharisees had, for all intents and purposes, come to rate at an equal value with Scripture itself. In Mark vii. 5 He and His disciples are openly attacked for violating this tradition in respect of ceremonial washing before meals; Our Lord not only fully admits the charge but proceeds straight away by a quotation from Isaiah to register a strong protest against mere human

ordinances which had rendered inoperative obedience to the divine commandment. Not content with a general statement He deals with the specific instance of Corban, whereby the Fifth Commandment was entirely overridden in the interests of a spurious piety, and strongly enforces the Law of God in contrast to the faulty codes of human ingenuity.

It is interesting to observe, in passing, that Our Lord takes no account of what has come to be called the study of comparative religions. We may safely presume that in Galilee of the Gentiles He must have come into contact with Greek and Oriental, as distinct from Jewish, thought, but no trace of any knowledge of these systems is found in the records that have come down to us of His teaching. Whatever views we may hold of other ethical codes being "broken lights of the one True Light . . .": we must admit the fact that Jesus was content to confine Himself within the limits of the Old Testament revelation.

Faced with this corroborative evidence of the unique authority which Our Lord reposed in the Holy Scriptures, we may go on to examine the precise attitude which He maintained towards the repository of such unquestioning allegiance. We may discern here two apparently divergent modes of approach. In the first place He lays strong emphasis on the indestructibility of the written word as it stands. In Matthew v. 18 He says: "Verily I say unto you, until Heaven and earth pass away, there shall not have passed away from the law one jot or one horn, until all be fulfilled." Some liberal critics have tried to show that in this passage Our Lord was referring, not to the law-codex, but to the absolute law of God: but the context demands that it should be the law as written, in which form alone, incidentally, could it be said to have "jodhs and horns". Again, in a controversy with the Scribes and Pharisees already mentioned (John x. 34 sqq.), Jesus follows up His quotation of Psalm lxxxii. 6 "I said, Ye are gods," with the words "the Scripture cannot be broken". He argues the infallibility of the clause on which He founds His argument from the infallibility of the record in which it occurs. Similar appeals to the authority of the written word could be adduced from the Gospel narratives. Many an argument is regarded as clinched by the simple expression *γέγραπται*. To meet this problem the liberal is compelled to fall back on the idea of

accommodation. Our Lord, he says, was merely meeting His opponents on their own ground: and if He did not by virtue of His incarnational limitations actually share their erroneous views about the integrity of Scripture and its ultimate authority, then at any rate He was content to accept their own premisses for the purpose of confuting their deductions from them. In other words He employed the *argumentum ad hominem*. This suggestion may appear attractive until we discover in the narratives of the Temptation, that the particular "homo" concerned is none other than the Devil. We shall then have to have recourse to yet other expedients. Either we must predicate accommodation on the part of both Our Lord and the Devil, which is absurd: or else we must suppose that Our Lord deliberately misrepresented the content of His experience in order to make it intelligible to the defective outlook of His disciples. That there must be a certain element of truth in some sort of accommodation must not blind us to the fact so well expressed by Warfield: "It is one thing to adapt the teaching of truth to the stage of receptivity of the learner: it is another thing to adopt the errors of the time as to the very matters to be taught." What would the disciples have thought if, when they themselves subsequently met the attacks of Satan with Scripture, they found that their Master had misled them in respect of the basis of their confidence? They would have felt, we may surmise, not very different from us, when the liberals present us with a defective Christ whose assumptions and modes of reasoning therefrom are not applicable to all time.

II

We have seen, therefore, Our Lord's emphasis on the indestructibility of the written word. But over against this we must set His refusal to be bound by the mere letter of the law. While holding firmly to the intrinsic value of each component part of the documents of the Old Testament He is certainly no literalist. In this He differs strongly, as has already been pointed out, from one of the chief schools of contemporary Jewish thought, that of the Pharisees. He was always seeking for a deeper meaning below the surface: in His own words He "came not to destroy, but to fulfil", i.e. "to fill out", "give fullness of meaning to" the law. The Pharisaic approach, on the other hand, had the effect of

“making the law of none effect through their own tradition”. Our Lord’s treatment of Scripture is best seen in the Sermon on the Mount. His exegesis is at first sight so searching that He appears to set the old law in contrast and almost in opposition to the new. “Ye have heard that it was said to them of old time . . . but *I* say unto you. . . .” The comment of Dean Alford on this verse is illuminating: “It will be noticed,” he says, “that Our Lord does not here speak against the *abuse* of the law by tradition, but that every instance here given is either from the law itself, or such traditional teaching as was in accordance with it. The contrasts here are not between the law misunderstood and the law rightly interpreted, but between *the law and its ancient exposition*, which in their letter and as given were *κενά*, and *the same as spiritualised*, *πεπληρωμένα*, by Christ: not between two lawgivers, Moses and Christ, but between *οἱ ἀρχαῖοι* and *ὑμεῖς*: between (the idea is that of Chrysostom) the children, by the same husband, of the bond-woman and the freewoman. . . . The just and holy and true law was necessarily restricted in meaning and degraded in position, until He came, whose office it was to fulfil and glorify it.” The apparent discrepancy is thus resolvable on the ground of *progressive revelation*, a phrase of which no conservative need be afraid, so long as he realises that it is *progressive revelation*, adequate at each stage to the moral perception of the recipient and in no wise superseded but rather filled out and amplified by subsequent unveiling of God’s truth. The older media through which God has expressed Himself are thus to be maintained as vehicles of an even deeper unfolding of His character and will. Truth is always consistent with itself, and the essential unity of the Old and New Testaments bears ample testimony to this fact.

It is now time to survey briefly Our Lord’s use of the Old Testament in relation to himself and His Mission. The first thing we notice is the deliberate application to Himself of Scripture figures and types. He identifies Himself with the Suffering Servant of Isaiah (Luke xxii. 37), with the Danielic Son of Man (a phrase He regularly uses of Himself) with the stone which the builders rejected (Mark xii. 10, 11); He accepts the title Son of David and applies to Himself the sacrificial language of the Pentateuch, He regards the details of His life as being foreshadowed in the pages of the Old

Testament. The hostility of the Jews and His rejection at their hands (John xv. 25 and Matt. x. 35), the triumphal entry (Matt. xxi. 16), His betrayal (John xxii. 18) all take place simply *ἵνα ἡ γραφή πληρωθῆ*. In the garden of Gethsemane He refused supernatural assistance with the words "how then should the Scriptures be fulfilled that thus it must be?"

Some sceptics have supposed that Jesus was a mere man who set Himself as far as possible to fulfil certain "prophecies" which He found in the religious writings of His people. Quite apart from the fact that this theory leaves the Resurrection and the subsequent rise of the Church inexplicable, we may note that Our Lord in His application of prophecy uses what we may venture to call intelligent discrimination. The most striking instance of this is in the scene in the synagogue at Nazareth where Jesus in His reading from Isaiah lxī sharply distinguishes between the "acceptable year of the Lord" and "the day of vengeance of our God" by an abrupt break at that point.

It was as no blind enthusiast therefore that Our Lord deliberately subordinated Himself, as it were, to the dictates of Scripture. If, as we have already seen, He regarded the Old Testament in all its parts as a declaration of God, we shall not be surprised that this is the case. In one place (Luke xxii. 22) He says "The Son of Man goeth as it was determined" (*κατὰ τὸ ὀρισμένον*)—a reference to what St. Peter in Acts ii. 23 calls the "determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God"; in another Christ says (Matt. xxvi. 24) "the Son of Man goeth as it is written of him". The revealed will of God is thus closely related to the expression of it in Scripture.

His confidence in the prophetic content of Scripture leads Him when dealing with the future in the hearing of the disciples continually to ground their expectation on the written Word, so that, when any given event foretold by Him actually occurred, they would be able to find a clue to its significance in the Old Testament. In this use of Scripture He Himself led the way, for on the Emmaus road, fresh as it were from the double triumph of Calvary and the Resurrection, instead of enunciating the significance of what had happened in un-dogmatic, untrammelled, philosophical principles, He takes the wondering disciples straight back to the Old Testament and "expounded unto them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself".

The foregoing considerations should serve to free us from the misapprehension that Jesus Christ only bears witness to the plenary authority of the Old Testament revelation in an isolated passage here and there; on the contrary His whole outlook is coloured by an implicit acknowledgement of its infallibility. The greater number of liberal critics admit this, but they are concerned to shew that this "defective view" was part of Our Lord's self-limitation for the purposes of the Incarnation; this, however, is only to confuse omniscience and infallibility, for while it is not necessary to suppose that He was conscious of all truth at every moment of time it is essential to hold fast to the belief that every given pronouncement is free from the contamination of error unless we are to undermine completely our confidence in Christ as a teacher of doctrine. In any case, where are we to draw the line between matters of eternal and matters of purely parochial interest? So we may appropriately conclude with a searching question from the lips of the Saviour Himself: "If I have told you earthly things and ye believe not how shall ye believe if I tell you heavenly things?"

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