

# The Christian Approach to the Old Testament.

**I**N what relationship does the Old Testament stand to the New Testament? Is it, as Dr. Brunner has said, "as the beginning of a sentence is to the end of the sentence"? Or is the Old Testament, to use Luther's figure, the cradle and swaddling bands in which Christ lies? In what sense is the New Testament the fulfilment of the Old? Is there in the many words of God to ancient Israel enshrined in the Old Testament a Word of God for our times? Or is it simply a ladder by which we climb to the New Testament and which we then kick away? Such are questions that emerge when we reflect on the place that both Testaments have had in the life and thought of the Christian Church. There the approach has always been christological and this is still desiderated: "... we need ... books ... which will show to British readers the ways in which the Old Testament, rightly understood, increases our understanding of Jesus Christ."<sup>1</sup>

It is unfortunate in many ways that there has come to be so great a cleavage between the two Testaments, for there are great truths and convictions in both that go far beyond any such artificial distinction in the Canon and which have indeed cut across many human dividing lines such as those of Jew and Gentile, slave and free.

## 1. THE OLD TESTAMENT AS THE SCRIPTURE OF THE EARLY CHURCH.

Jesus and His followers regarded the Old Testament as Scripture and the early Church naturally continued to do so although it was not until the Council of Carthage in 397 that this fact was made articulate, and by that time New Testament Scriptures were also recognised. It was simply a matter of continuing Synagogue usage, and of accepting as sacred, that is as "defiling the hands," such books as were believed to have been inspired by God through the Holy Spirit.<sup>2</sup> Jesus made reference to Old Testament incidents and passages, and used it not only in controversy with the Pharisees, but drew largely from it for the content and shaping of His teaching—the Beatitudes abound in Old Testament language, the two great commandments come directly from it, and so does much of the content of the Son of Man conception. Acceptance of the Old Testament as Scripture is

<sup>1</sup> G. Phillips: *The Old Testament in the World Church*, 1942, p. 90. "Rightly understood" is an ambiguous expression here.

<sup>2</sup> G. F. Moore *Judaism*, Pt. I, Chap. II.

axiomatic for the whole of the New Testament. It was sufficient at times simply to introduce quotations from it with the words, "As it is written," or "For it is written," though now and again they are qualified as being written either in the Law or the Prophets or the Psalms. For the most part it was the Greek Translation, the Septuagint, with which the New Testament writers were familiar. Their thinking, writing and vocabulary were very largely determined by their familiarity with it, as may be seen not so much in the frequent quotations from it—many of which, as will be seen, stand in a class apart—as in the details of religious thought and terminology. No one may read the fine passage in 2 Cor. iii. 1-iv. 6, contrasting the fading glory of the former ministry with the ever-renewed glory of the ministry of Christ, and enter fully into its meaning and spirit without constant reference to the Old Testament ideas which form the warp, as it were, of the fabric. "One cannot forget for a moment the historic fact that the New Testament was written by men to whom the Old Testament was 'Holy Scripture'; every one of its documents is saturated by the thought, and indeed by the very language of its predecessor, for there is rarely a sentence which does not require a deep knowledge of that predecessor for its proper interpretation."<sup>3</sup>

One very important corollary of this use of the Old Testament, and one that is not always given the place in our thinking that it deserves, is that the early Christians doubtless found much in it that was fully adequate as a revelation of God and a statement of man's faith, and that therefore needed no Christian re-interpretation. The New Testament by no means replaced the Old Testament as Scripture.

## 2. THE DOCTRINAL USE OF THE OLD TESTAMENT.

Hand in hand with the use of the Old Testament as Scripture went the doctrinal use of it whereby events, their meaning or their record, were deliberately shaped by the use of Old Testament speech and idea. This arose inevitably from the belief that the Gospel was the fulfilment of much hitherto unfulfilled prophecy.

(a) How far did Jesus Himself use it in this way? "Think not that I came to destroy the law or the prophets: I came not to destroy but to fulfil." The clearest instance in the life of Jesus is the Triumphant Entry into Jerusalem where it seems certain that He chose to enter the city in the way He did so as to make a definite claim to messiahship on the basis of the prophecy in the Book of Zechariah (ix. 9). How much more of this kind of recapitulation is to be found in the events of His life is difficult

<sup>3</sup> A. T. Olmstead: *History, Ancient World, and the Bible*. J.N.E.S. January 1943, P. 8.

to say: the Entry into Jerusalem may be an isolated case. When we turn to His teaching, however, we find sufficient evidence that He knew Himself to be the keystone and the fulfilment of God's revelation. The conception of the messiahship which He put into the term "Son of Man" (Dan. vii. 13) may be traced back into the Old Testament in its component elements, but it must be noted that something unique emerged when they were gathered together in His person.<sup>4</sup>

(b) Thus did Jesus Himself lead the way into a doctrinal use of the Old Testament<sup>5</sup> which His followers were not slow to develop. "And Philip opened his mouth, and beginning from this scripture (Isa. liii. 7, 8), preached unto him Jesus" (Acts viii. 35). The experience of the Resurrection and the gift of the Spirit finally sealed their belief in Jesus as the Christ, and intensified their own searching of the Scriptures to find numberless anticipations of their experience in Christ. It was as though, confronted by two facts of religious experience, the one embodied in a book and the other in a person, and both being revelatory and redemptive, they appealed to the book to substantiate the events of the life and to the life to elucidate the words of the book. The appeal was made on the basis of fulfilment—things incomplete or unrealised in the first revelation were seen to be completed and realised in the Incarnation. In this appeal they were helped by the traditional Jewish methods of exegesis with which, as Synagogue attenders, they would be well familiar. Those methods, while not denying that written (and originally spoken) words have a literal and simple meaning, sought to elucidate more difficult or obscure passages by the use of typology and allegory; the former mainly in Palestine and the latter in Alexandria. St. Paul frankly used both methods and even named them: "which things contain an allegory: for these women are two covenants" (Gal. iv. 24); "Now these things happened unto them by way of example (τυπικως); and they were written for our admonition" (1 Cor. x. 11, cf. 6).

Two things need constantly to be borne in mind in speaking of the Old Testament in the New. 1. What was used was not *simply* the Old Testament, it was rather the Old Testament *as interpreted christologically*, that is, as read by the early Christians. It is a well-known fact that texts and passages come to bear meanings that were not originally contained by them, and this is especially so with allegorical and typological methods of exegesis.

<sup>4</sup> Nor must we overlook the inter-testamental Apocalyptic thought and literature as a probable source for some of the elements of the Christian Messianic idea.

<sup>5</sup> Note especially the comment of the two disciples after the walk on the Emmaus road—Luke xxiv. 32.

The subsequent history and use of written words (by the Germans called *Nachgeschichte*) becomes an all-important consideration. 2. There is evidence of the existence from the very earliest times of collections of Old Testament passages compiled, on the whole, for use in controversy with the Jews, and there is every possibility that such anthologies or *testimonia* were known and used by the majority of early Christians. Fulfilment quotations, such as the Matthean sequences, were probably taken from one such anthology. Use of Old Testament passages in this way would practically rule out historical exegesis.

(c) Following the New Testament precedent the Church has always used the Old Testament as a source for its doctrine and theology and the christological approach has inevitably fostered the retention of the typological method of exegesis. For Justin Martyr the "Old Testament was a complete Bible, historically and doctrinally" (Westcott), and the same may be said of most of the early Fathers. Indeed many of them, like Justin himself, were converted by the reading of the prophets of the Old Testament. Nor does the attitude of Clement of Alexandria, on the one hand, in setting the Books of the Old Testament on a par with the Greek philosophical writings or that of Marcion, on the other hand, in rejecting the Old Testament altogether, seriously affect this estimate. The Antiochene Fathers at the end of the fourth century, and the beginning of the fifth, pursued a method of literal and exact exegesis which has had permanent influence, but they held also that the historical events had spiritual lessons to teach, and to extract those they pursued the method of typology rather than of allegory. Typology<sup>6</sup> was firmly rooted and held its place alongside the other methods of exegesis through the Middle Ages and the Reformation down to the beginnings of historical criticism. The search for proof texts also continued vigorously, being strengthened by the belief in plenary inspiration. "The period of the religious wars was favourable neither for humanistic studies, nor for unprejudiced history. The Bible was studied as never before, and often with genuine scholarship, but this scholarship was rarely devoted to simple search of the truth, only to the citation of proof texts by which to confute sectarian adversaries. Thus the *odium theologicum* entrenched itself firmly in the field of Biblical scholarship from which it has never been completely eradicated."<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> There was necessarily some overlapping of the allegorical and the typological and, although allegory was somewhat discounted, it did, nevertheless, continue to exist. Wyclif could write: "Literal" ether historial vndurstondyng techith what thing is don; allegorik techith what we owen for to bileue.—*Is. Prof.*

<sup>7</sup> Olmstead, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

## 3. THE MODERN APPROACH.

Then came the rise of historicism and the methods of higher criticism, beginning with Astruc in 1753 and still continuing in our own times. This new approach tended to shift emphasis from the *revelation* of the Old Testament to the *record* of the individual books and to the development of Israel's religion. Familiarity with the results of historical criticism—forbidding as they often seem when resolved into formulae and capital letters—and a full dependence on them, with almost negligible differences of opinion in details, may be assumed for all Old Testament scholars to-day. This has been a necessary discipline, and has at least three positive values: 1. It has stimulated lively interest in the study of Old Testament religion. Much of the work on the Old Testament in the first quarter of the present century was based on the religion rather than the theology. Davidson's *Theology of the Old Testament*, published posthumously in 1904, admits frankly that "though we speak of Old Testament *Theology*, all that we can attempt is to present the religion or religious ideas of the Old Testament" (p. 11). 2. It has enabled Old Testament scholarship to find its proper place in the whole field of Near Eastern Studies which recent work in philology and archaeology has opened up, and to acquaint itself, as far as possible without prejudice, with those cultures of the ancient world which had contact with Israel. 3. The Old Testament has been studied *for its own sake* by Christian scholars and the shackles of allegorical and typological exegesis have been broken.

More recently, probably within the last twenty years, there has been a marked return to a theological interpretation arising from a belief in the Old Testament as a revelation from God, and not simply as man's record of that revelation. Two forces seem to have been at work to bring this change about, and the same two forces may be seen in its exposition. The one comes from within the sphere of Old Testament studies itself, for it is impossible for a Christian believer to maintain a purely academic approach—its unique and forward-looking revelation of God will burst out at so many points and will be no more contained than the fire of the word of God shut up within the prophet Jeremiah. The other force comes from such theological tendencies as that of the Barthian school with its emphasis on the givenness of revelation. There is a very grave danger that the latter, which is christological in its interest, will place too great a reliance on spiritual exegesis and neglect the firmly established principles of historical criticism and historical exegesis.

The task which Old Testament theologians now face and are pursuing, building on the foundations laid by the detailed critical work of the last century and a half, is that of finding and arti-

culating the fundamental truths about God and man's response to Him revealed therein, and of showing how there is a unity of purpose on God's part in the light of which men of faith have been enabled to understand and interpret the historical sequence of events in which they are involved. This task almost invariably becomes more than an examination and exposition of a static record of events and their interpretation, for there emerges a lively sense of a dynamic, a driving force running throughout the whole of the Old Testament and then driving on beyond into the realm of Apocalyptic between the Testaments, and finally and inevitably into the New Testament and the Gospel. It is the Incarnation which brings to a focus not only the hopes and aspirations of the Old Testament, but also the lessons and discoveries which were made at so many times and in so many varied ways. The nature of that driving force is redemptive, and it is in redemption that we must look for that which binds Old and New Testaments together.

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