

## THE THEOLOGICAL AND ETHICAL VALUE OF THE OLD TESTAMENT.

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**M**Y title excludes much of Old Testament Criticism. The subject is very little affected by questions of date, authorship, or even historical accuracy. The religious value of a Psalm does not depend upon it being written by David; it is just the same if its author lived some centuries later. So the theological or ethical value of a passage in the Book of Isaiah does not depend upon it being written by Isaiah, son of Amoz, contemporary with Hezekiah. In fact, critical hypotheses make much less difference to religion, as distinct from history, than is generally recognized.

No doubt the Old Testament is now very much under a cloud. There is a strong tendency to emphasize the value of Christ's teaching, or the nature of the Christian spirit, by depreciating the Old Testament, its theology and its morals. It is either forgotten that the New Testament is based on the Old and takes up much of it; or else it is held that the Jewish training of the Apostles positively led them to mistake various points of Gospel Christianity, e.g. to misconceive the meaning of Christ's Death. The disregard of the Old Testament is no doubt greatly due to a feeling that it has been largely dethroned by criticism, while the New remains. But on the one hand, much of the criticism of the Old Testament leaves its theological and moral value very slightly affected; on the other, criticism is extremely busy with the New Testament also.

Rejection of the authority of the Old Testament is no new thing. In the early Church (Cent. II), Marcion rejected it altogether. His conception of God was one of pure benevolence, with nothing of justice or of punishment. (This has an extremely modern look about it.) But the God of the Old Testament is clearly a God of judgment, inflicting punishment; hence He can be only an inferior Being, far below the good God, the Father of Christ, Who had hitherto been unknown.

Marcion wrote a book called *Antitheses*, contrasting the Old

and the New Testaments, e.g. he contrasted the behaviour of Elisha towards children with that of our Lord. Tertullian, however, calls this a shameless antithesis, comparing quite different things. Innocent children are not the same as boys old enough to insult and blaspheme. Another answer is that those who came for a blessing received it; the boys did not come to Elisha for his blessing. The Church, in fact, though having to face Old Testament difficulties, yet could not ignore the fact that Christianity is historically built upon it. But just as modern Theosophy is akin to the old Gnosticism, so much of the modern attitude to the Old Testament is a revival of Marcionism, especially in its conception of God as simply kind and beneficent, with nothing in Him to fear. The sentimentalism which poses as the highest Christianity fashions a God in its own likeness.

But the Old Testament has been misused in other directions. The difference between the Old and the New has at times been ignored. Even now we sometimes find appeals to Old Testament isolated texts to establish purely Christian doctrines, which one is reasonably sure were never in the writer's mind. This superficial or forced exegesis appeals only to those who regard any isolated verse or sentence as authoritative as it stands, apart from its context or primary meaning. But it irritates those who regard these points as essential. Apart from such considerations there is no check on the use or misuse of Scripture phrases.

Again, at various times, almost from the Christianizing of the Roman Empire, but most strongly in Reformation and post-Reformation times, various civil laws in the Old Testament have been regarded as morally binding upon Christians. This was, however, never carried through consistently, only eclectically, without any clear principle why some laws and not others should be, not merely adopted as good, but regarded as ordained by God for ever. The Seventh "Article of Religion" puts the whole matter well: "The Law, given from God by Moses, as touching ceremonies and rites, does not bind Christian men, nor ought its civil precepts to be received of necessity in any commonwealth; yet no Christian man is free from obedience to the commandments which are called moral." This is very sound and sensible; it implies that civil precepts may often with advantage be taken from the Old Testament; but this should be based on the intrinsic merits or suitability

of such precepts, not on the fact that they occur in Scripture. One may hold that it would be good if more of them were so taken over in this country, e.g. if *restitution* were insisted upon in the case of offences against property, or if a false witness were punished by "doing to him as he thought to have done to his brother." But two difficulties remain: (1) The boundary between civil and moral laws is sometimes hard to draw, e.g. in the cases of the prohibited degrees of marriage. This is sometimes the case even between the ceremonial and the moral, e.g. how far do the Biblical laws about the Sabbath apply to the Lord's Day? (2) If a law or regulation is taken over from the Old Testament, or coincides with one found there, is it therefore more binding on the conscience than other laws taken from other sources? Again, if "Thou shalt not follow a multitude to do evil" is regarded as a moral law, how far is it set aside by the principles of democracy, according to which the wish of the majority should be carried out, however unwise or unjust others may think it?

Another tendency has been to make the Old Testament a mere collection of Messianic types and prophecies; or, which is very much but not quite the same, to apply it all allegorically to the Christian life. This last began very early, having indeed pre-Christian precedent; Philo interpreted the Pentateuch allegorically. To Christians the Old Testament was originally "the Scripture"; only later were the New Testament books regarded as canonical in the same sense. Yet clearly there were in the literal history some objectionable things, and much did not give direct spiritual help. The solution was that of allegory. On the one hand, this enabled some of the Fathers to combine very high views on the inspiration of Scripture with abandonment of the literal history where difficult; it was written simply to teach the spiritual lessons. On the other, spiritual lessons could be found in the most unpromising parts, e.g. in genealogies by interpreting the Hebrew names, not always correctly. Often the resultant teaching is very good and true, though divorced from the original meaning of the passage, e.g. Psalm cxxxvii. 9, "Happy shall he be that taketh and dasheth thy little ones against the rock" was obviously difficult for Christians to use literally. Actually, the most sensible way is to repeat such verses *historically* as expressing the feelings of the *Psalmist*, not necessarily our own; much else in the Psalms

has to be used in this way, e.g. "I will offer bullocks and goats." Or as Bishop Dowden asks, can the ordinary worshipper be speaking of *himself* when he repeats the Magnificat, "All generations shall call *me* blessed"? But the Psalm verse was thus allegorized: "'Babel' means confusion. The children of the daughter of Babel are vain, confused evil thoughts. The rock is Christ. When vain or evil thoughts come to us, destroy them by recourse to Christ the Rock." The result is excellent, though far removed from the Psalmist's thought.

It is also not very satisfactory to value the Old Testament mainly for Messianic Prophecies. Many of these do not appeal to every one; to some of us they often seem far-fetched, only secondary applications of the original meaning. It is without doubt a striking fact that many Old Testament sayings are in a high degree true of Christ. But it is not very satisfactory to take isolated verses of a passage as direct Messianic prophecies, while adjacent verses are not regarded as such; or else to force these other verses into bearing such a sense. Also often in the Psalms there is practical loss in regarding the words as a direct prophecy of Christ. We lose the encouragement derived from the Psalmist's personal experience and feel it difficult to use his words to express our own personal feelings.

The value of the Old Testament is, however, not merely historical. It conveys religious and moral lessons, partly in the history by way of example or warning, partly more directly. Christianity starts from the Old Testament religion, though it modifies or completes it. Some things which lie at the root of Christianity are taken for granted in the New Testament as belonging to its basis, e.g. Christianity rests on Theism—the doctrine not merely of a purely immanent God, but also of a living transcendent God. The doctrine—and the consciousness of the living God—runs through the Old Testament. And this God is a God of righteousness. In the Old Testament, religion and morality are never disconnected, as often comes to be the case in other religions, when we find on the one side popular religions with very little to do with morality or righteousness; on the other, philosophies, sometimes of high tone, but largely agnostic or even atheistic, or at best pantheistic. This could not be asserted of the Old Testament religion or "wisdom." The popular religion was no doubt always in danger of

falling to the level of that of the surrounding nations ; but the prophets prevented this, without losing sight of the Divine Personality and government of the world. Even things below our ideas of morality were in accordance with the accepted ideas of the age and region.

New Testament morality also presupposes that of the Old. The current idea that the Lord's teaching is systematic and complete in itself, and that it contains all Christianity, is a mere assumption without clear evidence. It is, in fact, obvious that much which He said is unrecorded. One whole side of His teaching, brought out by St. John, is very slightly represented in the other Gospels ; hence it is possible that other elements in His teaching are only slightly represented. (The cry " Back to Christ " commonly means " Back to Jesus the Prophet of Nazareth "—ignoring any special value in His Death or His Resurrection, which are prominent in the Apostolic interpretation of the Gospel ; and even then rejects various elements in the teaching ascribed to Him. It is often a plausible pretext for dropping Christian theology.)

He took most of the Old Testament teaching for granted, though modifying and correcting some of it. Again, His teaching was primarily meant for, and suited to, His immediate hearers ; He was familiar with their circumstances, needs and ideas, and said what they needed and could assimilate. Had He told them just the things *we* should like to know, or the things specially suiting *our* needs and conditions, His words would not have taken hold of His hearers, would never have been recorded, and so would never have reached us at all ! *Our* special conditions were not primarily in view.

For instance, Patriotism is clearly not taught by Our Lord, or indeed in the New Testament generally. Hence arise two opposite criticisms of Christianity. (1) " This is one of many signs that its ethics are imperfect ; it encourages only the milder ( ' feminine ' ) virtues, having no place for the stronger ones ; or it inculcates a ' slave-morality. ' " (2) " Patriotism is unchristian. " But we have to remember the ideas and position of the people to whom the Lord spoke. The Old Testament is full of patriotism. Jews did not need any teaching of it ; they were inclined to carry it much too far, to make it the supreme virtue. And there was no particular need—or indeed room—for national feeling among the small nation-

alities of the Roman Empire. (See C. W. Emmet in *The Faith and the War*.) Here as elsewhere a completely different result is reached if we regard the New Testament as *setting aside* the Old, or as qualifying and supplementing it, while taking over the bulk of its teaching.

We have, of course, to face the moral difficulties of the Old Testament. These are, however, often unduly exaggerated by forgetfulness of the general condition and ideas of the ancient world. (See Mozley, *Lectures on the Old Testament*.) Unhistorical ideas of the laws of Israel are also to blame; it is often imagined that they were all divinely ordained *de novo*, instead of being largely adaptations or modifications of existing laws and practices. God found Israel on much the same level as their neighbours; He took them to train them gradually to something higher. We must never ignore the progressive character of revelation. Yet the progression is not such as to involve a nearly complete break between the Old Testament and the New. The old idea, that the actions of leading Old Testament characters (except when these actions are clearly condemned in Scripture) furnish a clear precedent of conduct for us, would mean setting aside all knowledge of God and His will subsequently gained. But much current condemnation of such acts is very cheap and unfair; it often puts the worst possible construction upon them. It is a cheap and easy way of displaying the superior moral enlightenment that the speaker or writer enjoys.

I am not afraid for the future of the Old Testament; but I am afraid for the future of those churches or communities which despise or ignore the Old Testament—believing in a God of benevolence but not in one of righteousness; and so regarding all enforcement of law as anti-christian. Either this sentiment which passes for the purest Christianity, while repudiating God's earlier revelation, will ultimately find its true level; or if it so continues to weaken the hands of society that civilization is swept away by a flood of barbarism, then the barbaric Churches which survive will find themselves at home in the roughest parts of the Old Testament.

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