

# The Significance of the Old Testament Today

BY H. L. ELLISON

THE infant Church was born and spent the first formative years of its life within the framework of Judaism. There can be little doubt that it was the toleration won by the Qumran Covenanters, influential more by the quality than the quantity of their membership, that enabled the Church to grow up in Jerusalem and Palestine with only occasional persecution. Gamaliel's shrewd *apologia* for toleration (Acts v. 34-39) probably represented less his own convictions and more his recognition that the leaders of the persecutors were Sadducees, whom he disliked and feared far more than the Nazarenes. This position lasted until the great revolt against Rome, and even more Bar Kochba's revolt (132-135) demonstrated clearly that the Messiahship of Jesus of Nazareth had created a very wide gulf between the Christian Jew and other members of his nation.

The developing worship of the Synagogue formed the pattern for the Church's own worship, a pattern that has never been quite lost. Through John the Baptist Christian Baptism was in some way linked with the familiar Jewish baptism of proselytes. The Lord's Supper, though striking a new note by its weekly, or it may be even more frequent, celebration, was firmly anchored in the Passover supper. Above all the Church took over, automatically and without question, the Old Testament. To many it must have been significant that the birthday of the Church fell on the Feast of Pentecost,<sup>1</sup> which for the Synagogue was traditionally the Feast of the Giving of the Law on Mount Sinai. They will have remembered that Jeremiah's promise (xxxii. 31-34) was of a new covenant with a new power, but not of a new law.<sup>2</sup> For the early Church the Old Testament was quite simply the Scriptures.

There was no significant change in the first few decades after the Church first turned to the Hellenistic world. Before the death of Paul there will have been few converts who had not been prepared in some measure for the Gospel message by contact with the Synagogue, whether they had become proselytes or only God-fearers, or whether it had been no more than a shaking of their pagan concepts by the vision of something profoundly different. Even in the most Gentile churches there will have been enough converts from Judaism to carry on Jewish views of the Old Testament.

There can be little doubt that C. H. Dodd is correct, when he maintains, in his book *According to the Scriptures*, that certain portions of the Old Testament were a fundamental portion of the basic *kerygma* (not merely certain proof-texts). Messianic significance was attributed to them, and the Church claimed the authority of Christ Himself for this interpretation (Luke xxiv. 27, 44). These passages will have been known by most Church members, so that even a passing reference to one of them in an apostolic letter will have been understood. This

means that while many parts of the Old Testament will have been unknown, or at the best imperfectly known to many Gentile Christians, they will have had a firm grasp of its heart.

To such an extent were the Old Testament Scriptures part of the Church's life that, as Melito of Sardis and the second column in Origen's *Hexapla* bear witness, they were for some centuries read in their original Hebrew in public worship, at least in some areas and on some occasions.\*

The result of all this was that while the early Church had grown up with the controversy on the place and understanding of the Law of Moses in the new covenant, it had not asked itself what purpose the old Scriptures served now that the fulfilment had come and a new corpus of Scripture had grown up beside it. As so often happens in such cases, the first challenge to traditional views of sufficient importance to have been preserved in the memory of the Church went to extremes. Marcion (flourished about 140), whose upbringing had been Christian, for he was a son of the bishop of Synope in Pontus, had imbibed some measure of Gnostic dualism. He rejected the spiritual, in contrast to the historical, value of the Old Testament completely, and attributed no authority of any kind to it. The Church, stung to the quick, excommunicated him and reaffirmed the authority of the Old Testament.

The sequel was that any intelligent discussion on the place and use of the Old Testament had become virtually impossible, for anyone challenging accepted views ran the risk of being accused of Marcionism. It was inevitable that the use of the Old Testament should rapidly languish, and it soon became either a source of proof-texts, Messianic or otherwise, or a challenge to the skill of allegorizers.

In spite of a revival of interest in the Old Testament among the Reformers the position remained little changed down to the middle of the nineteenth century. Certain books like the Psalter—and this is true of every period of the Church's history—and many outstanding chapters were familiar, but the ordinary Christian had little conception what to do with it as a whole. It is true that the Brethren and those influenced by them suggested a better way, but it very soon ran to waste and was lost in the desert of exaggerated dispensationalism.

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The weakness of the ordinary Christian's position was shown clearly by the differing fate of the radical criticism of the Old and New Testaments. Though the latter has left permanent traces on our understanding of the New Testament, it has been decisively routed; though constant efforts are being made to revive it, they are not likely to succeed. In contrast the radical criticism of the Old Testament has in the eyes of most been, until very recently, a complete victor. The vast majority of Protestant Christians, especially the more nominal among them, regard the Old Testament as a book whose historical narratives have little value and whose spiritual message is suspect.

This striking difference has not been due to the Old Testament critics being so much better scholars than their New Testament counterparts, or to the much greater vulnerability of the Old Testament.

It was simply that men cared passionately whether the New Testament was true or not, and so were prepared to give their time and best talents to proving its accuracy. With the Old Testament, however, they seldom felt it mattered enough to make the effort. Those who did care all too often descended to the fatal *a priori* argument that it must be true because it was inspired.

This is not the place to discuss the details of the remarkable swing towards orthodoxy of a sort among many Old Testament scholars in the last few decades. This has not been due primarily to modern archeological discoveries or any of the other adventitious aids the conservative is apt to grasp at so eagerly. The reason has been that in their study of the Old Testament, scholars have discovered for themselves that it is Word of God, and it has exercised its self-authenticating power on them.

This is the point where we must start, when we think of the significance of the Old Testament for today. It contains the revelation of God to Israel in centuries past both by act and word, and it is an abiding revelation to this day and for this day.

While the Old Testament in almost all its parts looks forward for the fulfilment of all it proclaims about the purposes of God, it is far more than merely foretelling, which has mere antiquarian interest now that the fulfilment has gone into effect. While it sketches the future lines of the kingdom of God, it is no mere set of blue-prints, the only value of which is to check the accuracy of God's present building. While it is a necessary preparation, without which the New Testament could not have been, it is no mere scaffolding, which now that God's goal has been reached, must be dismantled so that His structure may be seen in all its glory. It need hardly be added that it has not been handed down to us to serve as an intellectual stimulant to develop skill in allegorizing.

If we are to look for a picture of the Old Testament in its relationship to the New, which will in some true measure express its value, we should rather think of the building of some great cathedral. The Old Testament is its foundation and the lower courses of the walls. Viewed at this stage they give some concept of the wonder to come, but except for one who had seen the architect's plans or model they are insufficient to convey the grandeur of the builder's conception or to allow many of the parts to be identified with certainty, for the unifying element is lacking. The New Testament supplies the upper courses of the walls and the roof, thereby not merely completing the building, but creating an architectural unity and revealing its complete purpose. To put the matter thus is to go far beyond the Augustinian explanation: "The New is in the Old concealed; the Old is in the New revealed," for it affirms not merely the unity but that each part needs the other, for neither is complete in itself.

To this many will at once object that the complete truth of God is to be found in the New Testament; that even though certain doctrines may be expounded more clearly and in greater detail in the Old, for example, God as Creator and Ruler over the nations, in these matters the use of the Old is merely a convenience and not a necessity. This attitude is a legacy of the Hellenization of Christianity from the

second century on, which assumed virtually as an axiom that the prime purpose of revelation was the making known of certain truths about God, which otherwise would not have been attainable by men. As Emil Brunner has said, "Very early in the history of the Church . . . the idea arose under the influence of Greek philosophy that the divine revelation of the Bible had to do with the communication of those doctrinal truths which were inaccessible by themselves to human reason; and correspondingly that faith consisted in holding these supernaturally revealed doctrines for truth."<sup>4</sup>

Even if the Old Testament were to serve no other purpose, its presence in the Canon of Scripture would be fully justified by its repeated denial of this theological concept held so widely both by Christian scholars and by many in the pews. For it God is not merely the God that speaks and in speaking reveals, but equally the God that acts; and it is vain to ask whether the word or the act is more important or should have priority. It is no mere coincidence that in Hebrew *dabar* means, according to the context, word, thing, or happening.

Even E. J. Young, after quite correctly rejecting G. E. Wright's over-emphasis on God's acts,<sup>5</sup> but stressing the vital role of history in revelation, can allow himself to say: "It is true that God could have given His completed revelation to man at one time, had He so desired. He is an omnipotent God, and is not subject to man".<sup>6</sup> This is a typical example of the theological fallacy mentioned earlier. The problem of revelation is not at the Divine end, but at the human; it is not a question of what God can, but what man can. God's actions are essential if man is to understand His words.

We see this worked out in many ways in the Bible. Whether the historical background is expressly stated or not, the prophetic message is always placed in and conditioned by historical circumstances. We have no problem of suffering in the Bible, but only one of the sufferer.

In other words the history of God's people in the Old Testament is part of God's revelation, just as the history of Jesus Christ, who is the fulfilment of Israel (Isa. xlix. 3, R.V.), in incarnation, humiliation, death, resurrection, and exaltation is the climax of revelation. We repeat as a matter of course that what our Lord did is of more importance than what He taught. It is surely as true that what God did in the history of Israel was more important than His words that accompanied it.

It has been a sure instinct, then, that has made the Christian at every period recoil from replacing the Bible by a manual of theology. However perfectly it may summarize (and even expand!) the teaching of Scripture, it can never do justice to the history in Scripture, and is bound to a greater or less extent to divorce the teaching from the history.

Were we then to lose or abandon the Old Testament, we should lose the revelatory history contained in it (except in the small measure in which it is referred to in the New), and in addition the history in the New would largely lack its full meaning, because its necessary introduction would not be there.

We must carry this thought a step further. It was necessary that in the fulness of time the Word who was in the beginning should not

merely act, as He had done down through the ages, but become man. So in measure it was right through the history of Israel. God's speaking and acting was always in measure an imparting of Himself. Later Jewish thought could conceive of the Law as written in letters of fire in heaven, of which Moses made no more than a transcript. Islam can speak in the same way of the Quran. In both cases revelation is merely the transferring of the eternally existing creation into a new sphere. But in biblical revelation it is God Himself who comes into His creation, and coming leaves it other than it was for salvation or judgment.

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Some of the most stimulating writing on the Old Testament since the war has been on what is normally called Old Testament Theology. For the most part it has been an effort to let the Old Testament speak for itself in its own language. According to personal predilection some writers have stressed merely that it looks to a point beyond itself, that it is consciously incomplete; others have made it clear that it looks to Jesus Christ as the fulfiller and the focal point of its teaching. But one and all have refused to listen to E. J. Young's wish that Old Testament theology should serve "as a useful handmaid to the discipline of Systematic Theology." They have insisted on the revelation contained in the Old Testament being allowed to be heard for its own sake, even though it is incomplete.

The results have been for the most part extraordinarily satisfying.\* The Old Testament has emerged as a living book with a message in its own right which repeatedly demands a modification of much of our understanding of the New. That is because they are not two separate books. It would be a strange procedure to take a book on philosophy or science and then read the final third first; then having done so to interpret the first two-thirds from the impressions we had formed from the end. But that is how the Bible has so often been treated.

It was only natural that during the great period of creed-making and of the formulation of Christian doctrine, a period in which almost all contact had been lost with Jew and Jewish Christian alike, the Greek-speaking Fathers should interpret both the Old Testament in its Septuagint form and the New Testament in terms of the Greek which was their mother-tongue. As naturally, too, the Latin Fathers followed them.\* The Reformation coincided with a revival in the knowledge of Hebrew, but there was hidden from the great translators of the Bible and the Reformation theologians the extent to which the New Testament depended on the translation Greek of the Septuagint. As a result the vocabulary of the two Testaments has shown an unjustifiable divergence in our standard versions.

Thanks especially to G. Kittel's *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament*, of which unfortunately only a few of the main articles have been translated into English, the student who is not a linguistic expert has been enabled to trace the close links in language between the Testaments, and to interpret the New, not in terms of Hellenistic thought, but in those of the Old and of Jewish thought between the Testaments. The latter study has been even more aided by Strack-

Billerbeck : *Kommentar eum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrasch*, though here no portion has so far appeared in English. The swing in scholarly thought has gone so far, especially since the discovery of the Qumran scrolls, that today even John and Hebrews are being understood through Hebraic rather than Hellenistic thought.

Put simply it means that we have to learn *within reason* (all extremes are harmful) to interpret the New Testament in the light of the Old, and not the Old as though it were the New in the fancy dress of type and allegory. When we look at the few great commentaries that have retained their value down the centuries, we shall find that most of them conform to this pattern.

The consternation caused by a recent little book by the Swiss theologian Oscar Cullmann on the immortality of the soul is illuminating. He proclaimed on the basis of Scripture that it was not a biblical doctrine. Yet, for at least several centuries, many, more concerned with the Bible than Greek philosophy, have been saying the same thing. Perhaps it was some of their often unwarranted conclusions that caused them to be little listened to. If Cullmann has had a readier hearing, however, it will have been because of the new respect abroad for the Old Testament. The concept of the immortality of the soul cannot be demonstrated in a Jewish setting before the apocryphal *Wisdom of Solomon* (1st cent. B.C.), which was a product of the dispersion in Egypt and written under Hellenistic influence. There are no grounds for supposing that the writers of the New Testament, when they used *psychē*, were similarly influenced.

Far more important has been the realization that the anthropology of the Old Testament is quite other than that which we with our Hellenistic heritage have read into both Testaments. Old Testament man is neither bipartite nor tripartite, but a psychosomatic unity. *Nephesh*, which we have translated "soul" wherever the context would permit, is fundamentally man in his unity of life, of which body and spirit are integral and necessary parts. Even where parts of the body are mentioned in a metaphorical or semi-metaphorical manner—for example, heart, eyes, hands—it is the whole man expressing himself through that portion of his body, or what it symbolizes, that is implied. The unity of a man is a truth that both psychology and medicine have been learning, and now the Church is increasingly realizing its truth and some of its practical implications.

As a result of the growing importance of the body in Christian thought there is an increasing willingness to acknowledge that the eschatology of most dogmatic theology is not a fair reproduction of biblical eschatology. In spite of Greek mockery and scepticism the Church insisted on holding fast to the resurrection of the body, but it has often been a sore embarrassment to it. Today it is widely denied by many theologians, and it plays very little part in much popular Christianity, for "one goes to heaven when one dies". For the rest this material universe was surrendered to neo-Platonic hatred of matter and was regarded as something which was fated to disappear for ever once its purpose was served. Where, however, the Old Testament stress on the body is accepted there has been a growing understanding also of its stress on this material world as God's crea-

tion. Hence, in spite of much bitter dogmatic assertion to the contrary, there is an increasing tendency to recognize that the chiliasm of the early Church, in spite of many extravagances, was nearer the spirit of Scripture than our obliteration of the material creation in favour of the spiritual.

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There are many reasons why the average Jew does not become a Christian, one of the most potent being that so often no Christian has made any effort to demonstrate the love of Christ to him. But where a God-fearing Jew has really been introduced to Jesus of Nazareth and yet rejects Him, the reason is normally that he does not see the tokens of the Messiah in society.

It would be unfair to suggest that the Church never had a vision of the Kingdom of God in society, or that having it, it lost it completely. It would be especially unfair to the great medieval experiment of the Church of Rome and to the efforts of many a social reformer and Christian socialist since that time. But the simple fact remains that while the Church has wrought very much good, it has conspicuously failed in its task of showing the power of God at work in society. It is a well-known fact that in the middle-ages in the rare cases of Christian-Jewish litigation, where it was open to the parties to go before a Christian or a Jewish court, the Christian almost always chose the Jewish court as more likely to do justice. If we were to compare any synagogue in Britain with a neighbouring church, it is almost certain that the synagogue will show a greater community spirit, a greater care for those that can be reached *organizationally*—the Jew himself is likely to acknowledge that where it is a call for the pure outpouring of *individual* love, the church will probably show up better every time.

The reason for this is not far to seek. We have always been slow to believe that the social legislation of the Pentateuch is a Divine revelation and an expression of God's will not merely for pre-Christian Israel but for mankind. It is all too often overlooked that in one of the peaks of Messianic prophecy (Isa. xi. 1-9), the King is marked out above all as the enforcer of social righteousness.

Behind this lies also our common misunderstanding of the New Testament teaching on Satan and the forces of evil. That the teaching of Christ and His apostles on this matter, as on others too, has gone well beyond that of the Old Testament is indubitable, but to go beyond does not mean to deny. Even if not in intent yet certainly in practice very much Christian theology, both scholarly and popular, is dualistic in outlook. It has entirely lost the Old Testament vision that Satan, however unwillingly, is an instrument in the hands of God to fulfil His will. We seldom catch the note of the Psalmist :

Surely the wrath of man shall praise Thee :  
the overflowings of wrath shalt Thou gird to Thyself as an ornament (Psa. lxxvi. 10).

Repeatedly I have found that for many the words of Isaiah are a stumbling-block to be emptied of all true meaning and to be denied the force of their context :

I am the LORD, and there is no other.  
 I form light and create darkness,  
 I make weal and create woe,  
 I am the LORD, who do all these things (Isa. xlv. 6, 7, R.S.V.)

We dare not at our peril seek to empty the teaching of the New Testament about the forces of evil of their meaning, but it is only the Old Testament that enables us to read them in their true context of the eternal sovereignty of God and so to hold them in balance.

Let this suffice. Whatever we do or do not find in the Old Testament, it is both the preparation for the Gospel message and the background against which and the framework within which our salvation was won. Hence its study will always throw new light on the implications of the Gospel and will afford the possibility of seeing all the details in due proportion. The fulfilment was infinitely higher than the foretelling, for it moves in a higher dimension, but for all that it conforms to the pattern and mould of the foretelling. It is only as we in measure understand the foretelling that we shall be able to stretch out to grasp "the length and breadth and depth and height, and know the love of Christ which passeth knowledge".

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> This article is not taking sides in a vexed controversy beyond affirming that there is truth in *both* views: that the Church is in some sense the continuation of old Israel and that it is God's new creation in Christ.

<sup>2</sup> For convenience the Hebrew *torah*=instruction is represented by the traditional "law".

<sup>3</sup> See P. Kahle: *Die Aussprache des Hebräischen in Vetus Testamentum* X, p. 385.

<sup>4</sup> *The Divine-Human Encounter*, p. 12.

<sup>5</sup> *In God who Acts*.

<sup>6</sup> *The Study of Old Testament Theology Today*, pp. 20f., 36.

<sup>7</sup> *op. cit.*, p. 110.

<sup>8</sup> This article must perforce look away from and ignore some of the aberrations caused by certain higher critical views.

<sup>9</sup> There is little evidence that Jerome's knowledge of Hebrew caused him to take a significantly different path.