

Chapter Five

SCHLEIERMACHER AND THE OLD TESTAMENT

THE orthodox doctrine of Scripture had been toppled from its pedestal in the eyes of all those amenable to reason. It might take a long time before the Churches were driven to acknowledge the fact, but an unfettered theology could not do otherwise than to concede it. The problem now arose what was the right way to regard Scripture, and implicit in it was also that of the degree of authority to be accorded to the Old Testament. The greatest mind in Protestant theology since the Reformation, Schleiermacher, grappled with this, as with many other things, and set forth views that in retrospect carry forward the problem from the point where the advanced line in Luther's thinking had left it.¹

For Schleiermacher, revelation does not stand at the centre of theology. He is closely linked with German Idealism, which had occupied itself with the ontological problem of the idea of God.² It had realized that God cannot be treated theoretically as a conditioned innerworldly entity, for He is the unconditioned. It posed the question for theology: how can we speak of God's Being in such a way as to do justice to His absoluteness? Idealism, furthermore, had an understanding for the practical nature of religion; it is not a theoretical certainty, but one that bears and governs our lives. Schleiermacher, therefore, sought its true sphere in the feelings and gave his famous religious-philosophical definition of (higher) religion as "feeling of absolute dependence on God".³ Revelation for him thus could be no communication of knowledge, as for the supernaturalists, but only the rise of a new religious experience. He defines revelation as something new in the sphere of religious feelings that is basic for a certain religious community's life and is not understandable from the historical nexus preceding.⁴ He makes no assertion about the new being divinely caused, for that would be dualistic. Thus theology through Schleier-

macher, after searching for God in vain in the objective sphere, came to look for him in the subjective.

It is obvious that Schleiermacher has absorbed the lesson of Lessing's researches. In his general doctrine of Scripture⁵ he teaches (1) that Holy Scripture cannot provide the basis for faith in Christ and only receives a special distinction where such faith is already present; (2) that the Holy Scriptures of the New Covenant are the first of an ever-since continued series of presentations of Christian faith and that they are normative for all subsequent presentations; (3) that the New Testament writings are "authentic" in their origin, (which term he dilutes to mean productions of the circles influenced by the Holy Spirit that went forth from Jesus, but not necessarily written by the authors to whom tradition attributes them), and that they are sufficient as norm for Christian teaching. The question is, Where does this leave the Old Testament?

Since Schleiermacher is bent on analysing the living Christian consciousness and extracting from it the beliefs that are a real expression of Christian convictions and spirit (for that is his new approach to doctrine), he naturally saw more clearly than those who operated in external fashion with Scripture authority that a gulf exists between the Hebrew and the Christian consciousness. He comes to grips with the matter of the Old Testament already when he discusses the relation of Christianity to Judaism on the one hand and to heathenism on the other.⁶ It is not enough to quote his general proposition and then dismiss it as is so often done. The discussion with which he attempts to substantiate his proposition deserves careful attention.

By "Judaism", Schleiermacher says he means "the Mosaic institutions" and anything earlier that influenced the Jewish people in the direction of separatism. He concedes that Christianity has a historical connection with Judaism in so far as Jesus was born a Jew. But one must not imagine this connection as too exclusive, for at the time of Christ this people's manner of thinking was no longer centred entirely on Moses and the prophets, but had been refashioned in many respects by non-Jewish ideas absorbed in the captivity and dispersion.⁷ On the other hand, Græco-Roman heathenism had also been prepared for monotheistic developments and was filled with the expectation of a new shape of things to come, while among the Jews the

Messianic promises were partly abandoned and partly misunderstood. If one views the entire historical situation comprehensively the differences between the two areas—Jewish and Græco-Roman—are less than would appear at the first glance. And the Jewish origin of Jesus is counterbalanced by two facts: first, that many more Gentiles than Jews went over to Christianity, and second, that Christianity would not have found as much acceptance among Jews as it did if Judaism had not itself been permeated by extraneous Græco-Roman influences.⁸

In so far as Christianity represents a transition from both Judaism and heathenism to another entity, its relation to both is the same. The transition from heathenism to Christianity appears more difficult, since the heathen had first to become monotheistic in order to become Christian; but in reality the two things were not so far apart, for monotheism was now given to the Gentiles in the form of Christianity, as previously in the form of Judaism. By contrast, the requirement made of the Jew not to rely on the law and to interpret the promises to Abraham otherwise than he was in the habit of doing was no less of a hurdle. Since we, therefore, must infer that Christian piety, as it was constituted from the very beginning, cannot simply be derived from the Judaism either of that time or of an earlier time, Christianity cannot in any way be regarded as a mere revised form of Judaism. If Paul in the third chapter of Galatians regards the faith of Abraham as the prototype of Christian faith and represents the Mosaic law as a temporary departure, one might infer that he wants to portray Christianity as a renewal of the original and pure Judaism of Abraham. But his real idea was only that Abraham's *faith* was related to the promise as ours is to the fulfilment, and not that the promise was the same to Abraham as the fulfilment is to us. And where he speaks specifically of the relation of Jews and Gentiles to Christ, he portrays Christ as the same for both, and both as equally far removed from God and therefore in need of Christ.

If Christianity bears the same relation to Judaism as it does to heathenism, it cannot be a continuation of Judaism any more than it is of heathenism. Whether the individual hails from the one area or the other, so far as his piety is concerned, he becomes a new man. The promise to Abraham, in so far as it is fulfilled

in Christ, is only portrayed as having a relation to Christ in the divine plan and not in the pious consciousness of Abraham and his people. And since we can only concede the sameness of a pious fellowship where the consciousness is formed in the same way, we cannot recognize an identity of Christianity and the Judaism of Abraham any more than an identity of Christianity and later Judaism or heathenism. Nor can one say that a purer, original Judaism bore the germ of Christianity in itself in such a manner that in a natural progression, without intervention of something new, Christianity would have evolved out of it, or that Christ Himself was so involved in this Jewish progression that a new common life and existence could not have begun with Him.

The widespread belief that there is a single Church of God which has existed from the beginning of the human race and will continue to the end, does not, Schleiermacher urges, contradict his statement as much as would appear. For if the Mosaic law has a place in this unified divine order of salvation, the same is also true of the Greek wisdom of the world, notably that tending toward monotheism, according to acknowledged Christian teachers.⁹ One cannot assert, of course, that the teaching of Christianity forms one whole with pagan wisdom without entirely cancelling the distinctiveness of Christianity. But if by this doctrine of the single Church one wishes to express the absolute relevance of Christ to all that is human, and make it extend even to the sphere of the past, then this is a purpose concerning which he cannot as yet express a judgment at this point in his doctrinal system, but with which his statement can well be harmonized. And so in Old Testament prophecy itself there is ascribed a different character to the New Covenant than to the Old (Jer. 31: 31-34). The juxtaposition in terminology already expresses the intrinsic separateness of the two quite definitely. Therefore, the rule is to be set up that for Christian use almost everything else found in the Old Testament is only a container for this particular prophecy, and that whatever is most definitely Jewish in its pages has the least value for the Christian. We can, accordingly, only find those of our Christian sentiments which are of a more general nature and not developed very peculiarly, reproduced with any exactitude in Old Testament passages; for those Christian sentiments that are dis-

tinctively developed, however, the Old Testament sayings will not be a suitable expression if we do not mentally subtract something or add something. Taking that into account we shall doubtless find in the utterances of the nobler and purer sort of heathenism many things relatively just as close and conformable to our point of view. Hence, apologists were formerly quite fond of referring to certain prophecies of Gentile origin that they regarded as "Messianic" and so recognized in that quarter a tendency of human nature toward Christianity.¹⁰ The classic proposition in which Schleiermacher sums up this discussion is—"Christianity, it is true, stands in a special historical connection with Judaism, but with respect to its historical existence and its purpose, it has the same relation to Judaism as to heathenism."¹¹

After setting forth his doctrine of Scripture as summarized above, Schleiermacher adds an appendix on the Old Testament.¹² This material, he says, stands outside the pale of doctrinal exposition because it is polemical, and thus will be superfluous as soon as the difference between the two groups of writings is recognized. He concedes, however, that the time when this will be the case is still remote. It would be audacious, furthermore, he grants, to set this up as the "Christian" teaching, since, in some quarters so much use is made of Old Testament passages for Christian edification that the New Testament only seems to play a minor role. And this takes place for opposite reasons both at the hands of those who place less value on that which is distinctive in Christianity and those who recognize that distinctive element as all-important for the salvation of man. Schleiermacher addresses himself only to the latter group because with them alone could he reach an understanding.

Turning to the Old Testament writings he distinguishes law and prophets. Concerning the law he says that if Paul is right in saying that the law, though divinely ordained, is something which came in between the promise to Abraham and its fulfilment (Gal. 3: 19), and that it is lacking in the power of the Spirit out of which Christian life proceeds (Rom. 7: 6 f. and 8: 3), then one cannot assert that the law was given by that same Spirit of which the apostle says that He is not communicated through the law and its works (Gal. 3: 2), but that God only sends Him into the heart in view of our connection with Christ.

Nor does Christ represent the Spirit that is sent (and with whose testimony He associates that of the disciples—John 14: 26, 15: 26, 27) as the return of one that was formerly present and had only disappeared for a time. But all the historical books from the giving of the law on hang together with the law.¹³ And if we contrast Messianic prophecy as that most related to Christianity with the law as that most foreign to it, nobody will dare to assert that the Jewish historical books contain more of the history of Messianic prophecy than that of the law. Yes, even in the prophetic writings the bulk of the material refers to the legal constitution and the affairs of the nation as such, and the spirit out of which these things have come is none other than the spirit of the group, and therefore has nothing to do with the Christian Spirit which as the One should remove the wall separating this people from other peoples. Hence Messianic prophecy alone is left which could be due to inspiration in the sense in which we use the term. But if we recall that the prophets only rise to such heights on rare occasions and that only with respect to this is the spirit that animated them called “Holy” (II Peter 1: 21), then we must conclude that such prophesying only occurred infrequently. The spirit of the group combined with the consciousness of a need of redemption expressed itself in the form of intimation of a more spiritual divine sovereignty. This intimation bore in itself the highest receptivity for the Holy Spirit, and was also able to kindle and maintain it outside of itself.

Next Schleiermacher inquires into the matter of the authority of the Old Testament. It cannot be denied on the whole, he thinks, that pious Christians recognize that a considerable difference exists between the two portions of Holy Scripture. Even the noblest psalms always contain something that Christian piety cannot regard as a pure expression of itself, so that one must first deceive oneself by unconscious addition and subtraction if one thinks that one can set up a Christian doctrine of God out of prophets and psalms. On the other hand, he finds that the great fondness of Christians for availing themselves of individual Old Testament sayings as expressions of piety is almost always combined with a legalistic mode of thinking or a bondage to the letter of Scripture.

Turning to the use of the Old Testament for theological pur-

poses, he grants that there are few Christian doctrines for which one has not attempted to adduce Old Testament passages as proof. But how, he asks, should it be possible that anything belonging to the doctrine of redemption through Christ should have been presented so clearly in the period of mere divinatory anticipation that it could still be usefully employed alongside of that which Christ Himself said, and that which His disciples said after His completion of the work of redemption?¹⁴ Or, if one wishes to imagine this as possible through inspiration, would not an entirely different recognition have had to be accorded the Redeemer and the manner in which He announced the Kingdom of God by that part of the Jewish people that was learned in the Scriptures, so that the effect would in no way be commensurate with the cause to which one would ascribe it? Furthermore, the history of Christian theology shows plainly how this effort to find our Christian faith in the Old Testament has partly had a baneful influence on our application of the art of interpretation, and partly heaped upon the development of doctrine and the debate concerning its more exact definitions a lot of useless complications; so that an improvement is only to be expected when one entirely abandons the Old Testament Scripture proof for Christian teaching and leaves aside supposed doctrines that are primarily based upon it.

But if something that has long been in vogue in the Church is to be reformed, it is necessary to show how this practice arose. There are two grounds upon which the external co-ordination of the two collections rest. First, that not only Christ and the apostles based teachings on Old Testament Scripture lessons but that this was continued in the early Church before the New Testament canon was formed. But it is impossible to conclude from this that a similar homiletic use of the Old Testament should even now continue, or that we would have to reckon it a disaster for the Church if the Old Testament were no longer as well known to Christians as the New. Indeed, the gradual recession of the Old Testament, in so far as its ecclesiastical validity stems from this historical connection, is in the nature of the case, and least of all can that historical connection guarantee the normativeness or the inspiration of these books. The Pauline passages which testify to the usefulness of the Old Testament writings primarily relate to this customary homi-

letical mode of using them, and the free manner in which the apostle himself employs them agrees entirely with that which we have said, so that he would testify for us that we have no further need of these proofs.

The second reason is that Christ and the apostles themselves refer to the Old Testament writings as to divine authorities favourable to Christianity. But from this it does not by any means follow that we shall have need of these adumbrations for our faith, since we have the experience—and the New Testament Scripture (John 4: 42) approves of it—that one ceases to believe for the sake of such testimonies once one has more direct and immediate certainty. He concedes, however, that it belongs to historical fidelity and completeness that that to which Christ and His first witnesses appealed as authority should be preserved. This applies almost exclusively to the prophetic writings and the Psalms; on this basis the practice of appending the Psalms to the New Testament seems justified. But since these writings had no separate existence at the time of Christ but only existed as parts of the holy collection, and are often only cited in this manner; and since, furthermore, occasional quotations from other books occur, one cannot object to it that the Old Testament (even though it cannot possibly form an indivisible whole for us in the same sense as for the Jewish people) be linked with the New Testament. Only the true state of affairs would be better expressed if the Old Testament were put after the New as an appendix, since the present order seemingly sets up the requirement that one must first go through the whole Old Testament in order to get to the New in the right way.

The greatest theologian of nineteenth-century Protestantism was thus in favour of putting the Old Testament in an extremely subordinate position. But he hesitates to draw the full consequences of his standpoint by joining the Marcionitic group. Elsewhere he asserts that from the arguments against conceding equal authority to the Old Testament it does not follow that the Bible should be cut in two. The latter is a resultant historical entity. That the Church has put the two parts together is a fact of such antiquity that no cause exists to change this, for the disadvantageous consequences that can arise from this circumstance can be obviated by other means.

This is all religious thinking of a high order. It should, perhaps, be mentioned that modern Old Testament scholarship cannot concede to Messianic Prophecy the weight that Schleiermacher gave it. But it is true historically, at least, that Jewish Christianity arose out of the sphere of Jewish Messianism, and so his point can stand with some modification. More controversial is his thesis that Christianity is as much a continuation of "heathenism" (in the sense noted above) as of Judaism. I have encountered no endorsement of it, unless it be the somewhat related, yet different view of De Lagarde (p. 93f.). But there is more to be said for Schleiermacher's view than is commonly realized.¹⁵ In the light of to-day's insight the Greek element in early Christianity was a very important factor in its survival and success. A mere Jewish messianic movement had no prospect of becoming a world religion. It was its metamorphosis into a religion of redemption, its employment of Greek mysticism and thought forms that set it aloft among the nations and permitted the properly denationalized Semitic element in it to become operative.¹⁶ Schleiermacher could not yet have seen this as clearly as we can. But apart from these historical considerations, a mere appraisal of the Hebraic and Greek heritage in Christianity, when properly carried out, will show that the latter is both considerable and essential. It seems to me that Schleiermacher's position in this matter deserves consideration.