

CHAPTER II

THE OLD TESTAMENT IN INDIA

For various reasons the attention of scholars has been mainly directed toward the errors and misapprehensions into which Christians fell, or tended to fall, by the use of the Old Testament, while the errors and misapprehensions to which they would have been exposed if the Old Testament had not been there to guide their ideas are forgotten.

F. C. BURKITT, *The Legacy of Israel*, p. 78.

It is my conviction that the Old Testament comes to a convert only later in his Christian life and not before.

One of our correspondents, himself a convert from Hinduism.

We seem in a different world when we turn to consider the use of the Old Testament in India. True, among those who come into the Church through the conversion of village groups (generally known as the "mass movement") many are at primitive levels of culture, and these feel something of the same appeal in the stories as do Africans, and as readily understand their message. But there are vital differences in the situation.

One is that the Church in India possesses the Old Testament in all the most generally spoken vernaculars, and has had it for generations—in the most important languages there have been repeated revisions of translations—so the book is accessible to all. Another is that, however primitive and illiterate are the vast majority of the "depressed classes" from which most members of the Christian community are recruited, they are not utterly cut off from the influence of other religions around them, either before or after conversion. In other words, whereas the African has only his folklore, the Indian has other religious literatures to serve as a possible alternative should he desire one. Again, while passionate love of national and racial heritage is common to Africa and to India, in India it has been clear and self-conscious for a longer period, has more obvious achievements in philosophy, religion and art on which to feed, and is given expression to-day by certain leaders whose genius places them in the front rank of humanity.

Finally, between the general culture which we call Semitic and that which we call Hindu-Aryan, there is a well-known deep gulf of difference which we have not space here to specify, but one indication is in the love of the one for the concrete and personal and of the other for the abstract and impersonal. There is no more concrete and personal religious book than the Old Testament.

These facts account for the complexity of the situation which has presented us with evidence from one place contradicting that from another, both being reliable. It is undeniable that many educated Hindus are repelled by what they regard as anthropomorphisms in the narratives concerning God's action. They call attention to the ferocity and intolerance with which the Israelites exterminated Canaanite opponents under divine command, and consider Jehovah to be a martial tribal deity unsuited to receive their own homage as tolerant and thinking modern men. How Sir S. Radhakrishnan, Spalding Professor of Indian Culture at the University of Oxford, feels about the contents of the Old Testament is sufficiently indicated by the following sentences from one of his books: "The intolerance of narrow monotheism is written in letters of blood across the history of man from the time when first the tribes of Israel burst into the land of Canaan. The worshippers of the one jealous God are egged on to aggressive wars against people of alien cults. They invoke divine sanction for the cruelties inflicted on the conquered. The spirit of old Israel is inherited by Christianity and Islam."¹

One who was converted to Christianity in South India as an adult recalls that when as a Hindu boy he joined the Mission High School, he hated the Christians and their ridiculous book, both Old and New Testament. Especially he hated the picture of Jehovah with a long beard, which seemed to him to differ little from the picture of Abraham. During his school career his attitude to the New Testament changed, but "I do not remember to have taken the Old Testament into consideration; had I done so I should have preferred the Hindu Purāṇas." Even later when receiving instruction for baptism his aversion to the Old Testament persisted, and he is convinced that "the Old Testament comes to a convert later in his Christian life and not before."

A curious, and one suspects not entirely serious, question put to an evangelist, as to whether Jehovah was a meat-eater, indicates the prejudice which the Old Testament has to en-

¹ *The Hindu View of Life*, p. 55, Allen and Unwin, 1927.

counter among Hindus. It was apparently based on the story in Genesis xviii, where Abraham kills a calf for his heavenly visitants.

We here only report this attitude, postponing till later what may be said in modification of it. Some famous converts in the past have found the Old Testament "confusing", and say that it should not be studied until after the New, and in the light of the New. One of these in the South was Vidvan Krishnapillai, whose subsequent devotional songs are more used in Tamil Christian worship to-day than those of any other writer. It is significant that these songs represent a wedding of Christian themes with Hindu religious terminology far more than with the language of, say, the Psalms, with the result that there creep in here and there undertones such as the unreality of human experience or the worthlessness of the body which are not essentially Christian. (This is noted here with no loss of homage to a great Christian who permanently enriched the worship of the whole Tamil-speaking Church.) The pre-disposition of Hindus against the Old Testament is somewhat superficial, for everything which can be said against it can be paralleled by something similar in Hindu Purānas, but it is widespread, and prevents Hindus at present from observing much of its message which, as we shall see in due course, has peculiar relevance to the India of to-day.

At the same time the traditional Indian love of the literature of religious devotion (*bhakti*) is a good beginning for appreciation of the Psalms, certain of which are winning their rightful place. It is said that in the Punjab some of them, in a metrical version, are sung even by non-Christians as they walk along the country roads. Yet even in the case of the Psalms an excessive focusing of attention upon the imprecatory elements creates prejudice, as in the case of one correspondent who says that the use of the Psalms in worship has done damage to true religion, by putting into people's minds the thought of a jealous, revengeful God. What has been said explains the fact that in most areas there is little use of the Old Testament in first contacts with Hindus. The exceptions seem to be where some of the German missionaries, under Barthian influence and finding Christ equally in the Old and in the New, use the very repelling quality of the Old Testament as a challenge to their hearers. One, for example, finds in the story of Elijah and the prophets of Baal at Mount Carmel "a typical missionary situation" and uses it in addressing Hindu audiences. Certainly most missionaries in India desire some way of enforc-

ing upon their hearers the necessity to use the will in face of the "either—or" of religion—"Choose ye this day whom ye will serve." But the majority of our correspondents would be well represented by the following from a British missionary : "I have not tried to use the Old Testament in first contacts with non-Christians. Sometimes in trying to convey one or other of its essential truths, I have used it, either by describing an incident from it (e.g. Isaiah's vision in the Temple, to illustrate the holiness of God) or by quoting a particular saying (e.g. that on the requirements of God in Micah vi. 6-8). I have also tried to give its essential teaching without such allusions, but I do not find this method successful. Probably the illustrative use of Old Testament material is best. More might perhaps be done in printing selections from the Old Testament and selling them . . . I do not think inquirers should be given the Old Testament as it stands."

Even in the preparation of candidates for baptism it is only in the German missions that systematic Old Testament instruction is given, though nearly all churches teach such candidates the Ten Commandments, and many add the 23rd Psalm and the stories of the Creation and the Flood. At the church porch, as it were, the new Christian enters into worship unaware of what the rest of the Old Testament could teach him. There are urgent practical reasons for this in the large numbers seeking to be taught and the fewness of the teachers ; all they can do is to impart a few essentials, mainly concerning the Lord Jesus Christ. But it is a fact not to be overlooked in any profound study of the life of the Church in India.

Once inside the Christian community, through day or Sunday schools and through other agencies, the Christians make their acquaintance with the Old Testament, sometimes very successfully, so that there are regions where the average Christian knows his Bible, including the Old Testament, better than does the average Christian in Britain or America. One example is the Church among the Khasis in Assam, where we are told that the pastors and teachers in their interpretation and use of the Old Testament compare favourably with their opposite numbers in Wales and England. It is noted all the same that misunderstanding of some precepts has given rise to a certain amount of legalism, for instance fanatical insistence by occasional individuals upon tithing. That, however, is said to do little harm. Elsewhere we hear of faulty understanding of the Old Testament doctrine of rewards and punishments leading to the notion of driving a bargain with God, trading

upon human merits. "A man said to me once: 'When I have had such a blow' (his nephew had died of cholera, because he refused to be inoculated) 'and have borne it so well, do you not think God owes me something?' His reasoning is very common. But it cannot be determined with certainty whether this was due to his conception of Old Testament doctrine, or was merely a carry-over from popular Hinduism in which ideas of merit are prominent."

Another criticism of the Church's teaching of the Old Testament in India is certainly applicable also in Britain, namely that it is fragmentary and unco-ordinated, unsuited to convey the knowledge of a history which became the vehicle of divine revelation. Some leaders are working at the necessary task of co-ordination, exhibiting the continuity between the different sections, and making the law, the history, and the prophets illuminate each other and combine in a united divine communication. "When one takes the stories of Genesis and Exodus as neither history nor children's stories, one can see their real importance. It is a great pity, to my mind, to think of these stories only as 'stories Jesus heard from His mother', or as being meant to evoke hero-worship in children from 10 to 14. They have that side, but they were originally told in order to explain and enforce the Law, and to think of these books as Law-books, reflecting the life of the nation, makes them real and interesting. We can then contrast Jephthah and Abraham and see that the two conceptions of duty have their place in an intelligible sequence, and how it is that the later and higher conception is told us five books earlier."

When we ask how much ordinary Christians read the Old Testament in their own personal devotions the answer is as varied as it would be in Britain. A fair broad generalization from the evidence is that modern young people read it very little, and that the older generation reads it with insufficient realization of its imperfection without the New. Such generalizations need qualification, for the unsophisticated, whether young or old, in India as everywhere else are attracted to many of the stories. We asked what parts of the Old Testament are read with most pleasure, and the following is a conflation of several lists given in reply: the narratives, the Psalms (especially about six favourites—Ps. i, xv, xxiii, xci, ciii, cxx and cxxi are mentioned), Proverbs, parts of Isaiah, Jeremiah and Job. This evidence, however, came from students in a theological college, who have been instructed sufficiently to appreciate the social and religious messages of

the prophets, and possibly were too inclined to think that other people felt as they did; some other testimony rather suggests that to most Indian Christians the prophets are unintelligible, shuttered windows, merely throwing out gleams of light in those occasional verses which are quoted in the New Testament as prophecy now fulfilled. In most languages there is still a dearth of the kind of commentary which could open up the meaning of books as a whole.

Pastors preach less from the Old than from the New Testament—we are assured in some quarters that three-quarters of the sermons preached nowadays are from the New Testament. This is a modern development, due to perception that the allegorical method of interpretation formerly popular is now discredited, and to realization of the differences between the Old and the New without a clear doctrine of progressive revelation to explain them. There is a growing tendency to regard this literature as distinctive of the Jews, a preface to rather than a part of the truly inspired story in the New Testament, and consequently “optional” for modern Christians. The danger in such a tendency is illustrated by the attitude of a student whose words we quote: “One can find a deeper experience of God in the life of man and also a greater longing for God in the hearts of great saints of Hinduism. This truth can be clearly understood in the poems of Tayumanavar, a Tamil saint, and other poetical works like *Devaram*, *Tiruvasagam*, *Theagaraja Kirthanas* and other Saivite and Vaishnavite saints. The Gospel of Christ can be preached more effectively with the knowledge of the truths found in these works. ‘*Bhagavadgita*’ can be substituted except for the difference, namely the clear, definite and progressive way in which the revelation of God is found in the Old Testament.” Probably the last sentence means that the *Bhagavadgita* *could have been* substituted for the Old Testament if it had not been that the latter shows a clearer progress in its revelation of God. There are others in India who go farther, and roundly assert that the Hindu sacred scriptures are for them the best “Old Testament”, or preface to the Gospel. We shall comment upon this later.

While we have been fortunate in our Indian correspondents, we have had to bear in mind all the time that behind the comparative few of their kind who can form opinions and conduct English correspondence are the masses of people, most of them illiterate, for whom the questions here discussed would seem to be entirely out of range. One of our inquiries was whether,

as in some other parts of the world, the ordinary village churches had more of the Old Testament in their life than of the New. In answer we were told of such instances of legalism as the one already mentioned, of a sense of brotherhood limited to one's own people or caste group, of outward Christian observance without its inward spirit, of unforgiving demands for full punishment of offences, of unreadiness to believe in the true repentance of other sinners, and very specially of the same absence of emphasis upon individual personal conversion which characterizes Judaism in its lower ranges. These faults found here and there are all justified by Old Testament quotations, and yet it is doubtful, in view of the exiguous knowledge of the Old Testament among some Christian villagers in whom these blemishes are conspicuous, whether they can fairly be counted to the discredit of the Old Testament. Are they not rather parts of the stock-in-trade of unredeemed humanity everywhere, Jewish or Gentile, British or Indian?

It is easier to point to faults which are in part due to neglect of the Old Testament, such as the imperfect sense of the connexion between religion and ethics which would be cured by any attention to the Hebrew prophets, or the readiness to make any workable compromise instead of standing out for a Christian principle. "For instance, in the village where I am camping now some caste Christians prefer to draw water themselves from the mission well and give it to the Christian boys of Panchāma origin in the village boarding home rather than let the boys draw it, lest the rest of the village break off relations with them." From more than one quarter we are told of an over-valuation of the professionally "religious" life as against that lived in society. "It is extraordinarily difficult for them to think that an ascetic life is not always holy." We even hear of the assumption that God is indifferent to good and evil. It is generally realized that the Christian community has not yet sufficiently conceived of itself as a dedicated people, a true Israel which is to be the medium of revelation. Only that realization, in the circumstances obtaining in India, with their unhappy communal stresses, is sufficient safeguard against the danger of becoming one caste among others. Not everyone realizes the fundamental difference between a church and a caste. In some quarters we hear of an excessive tolerance on national grounds towards surrounding non-Christian religions—"they have their good points as we have ours, and after all we are Indians and must value them." Some assume that there will always be the major religions of India, Hin-

duism, Islam, Christianity, existing alongside each other, and are quite content that they should maintain friendly relations with each other. The Old Testament insistence on a holy and jealous God would make short work of this attitude, and of the syncretism into which it is liable to drift. Finally, a convert who has digged deep into the lessons concerning the divine demand upon man learned by Israel through its experience of the Law, fears that with all its insistence upon Grace the Church in India misses the true meaning of the term when it neglects the Old Testament teaching on Law. "I think our congregations have stepped too early into 'Grace', overleaped an essential step. To realize his impotence in face of the demands of God's holiness man has first to realize fully and to face those demands in all seriousness, till he is altogether broken into despair, before he can step livingly into the grace of God and open his heart to the infinite claims of grace upon our lives. . . . There is not that awe, *Ehrfurcht*, which grace really received produces in life. The redeeming grace of God is misconceived and the type of religious life that results is that which the Old Testament Prophets struggled against." There is something here which deserves to be pondered over by the Church in every land as well as in India.