

CHAPTER IV

THE OLD TESTAMENT IN THE CHURCH TO-DAY

No further light came in the 18th century, when in view of the parlous state of religion generally until the Evangelical Revival, neglect of the Old Testament was only to be expected. But in the 19th came the excitement of historical critical study, with its rediscovery of the meaning and value of books as first written in their historical context. For most modern readers this has saved the Old Testament, which otherwise would have been unintelligible and of doubtful value even as an antiquarian document, since its historical records embodied occasional contradiction of each other. This whole Hebrew library has come to life ; its message for its own time can be clearly seen, and in most cases has relevance also to our own day. Yet we are beginning to wonder whether our gain in understanding the Old Testament books in their first meaning is partly offset by a blurring of their significance in the whole sweep of revelation through the mighty acts of God. For example, it is good to have rediscovered the prophets' emphasis on social righteousness, and to be able to preach from texts in Amos concerning the economic injustices of our own time. But it is not so good to lose that something in the prophets which the first Church found, and which if the Emmaus story is correct our Lord first set forth as concerning Himself, and constituting the key to the whole story. We have not lost it in the case of Isaiah liii which, with all our clearer knowledge of the Exile, of the revival of religion which then took place, and of the price paid for it in suffering, nevertheless in our own minds can never cease to be a pointer to Calvary. But in a large part of the Old Testament we tend to be more occupied with the historic religious literature of a remarkable people than with the developing plot of a story unfolding towards Christ as its true meaning and climax. Is this the story of the Jews, or the opening part of the story of the world's salvation (i.e. *our* salvation) through Christ ? That is the question for our day, for however great the Hebrew religious literature may be, unless it is essential to the full understanding of Christ

the pressures and preoccupations of the 20th century will compel us to let it go.

That issue came into the foreground in the earliest days of the struggle of the "Confessional Church" in Germany. Many voices, inspired alike by pure anti-Semitism and by the nationalism which was too proud to own any debt to other races than the Germanic, were raised in contempt of the shiftiness of Jacob, of the low moral level of some doings recorded in Judges, or of the irrelevance of the ceremonial legislation of the Pentateuch to modern life. If the fine and lusty young people whom the new outlook of national-socialism had awakened to proud hopes for the future were to be won for Christ, must He not be shown as the fulfiller of Germanism, rather than Judaism? The Old Testament would, of course, remain as the record of what historically preceded the New, but as guide for the new Germany it would be a mere embarrassment, and it must certainly be excluded from the curricula of schools. The argument was precisely that which makes some teachers repudiate the Old Testament in dealing with young modern Indians.

But danger sometimes makes men abnormally clear-sighted, and it will always redound to the credit of the Confessional Church that from the beginning it saw this peril with complete clarity, and courageously took the unpopular way of upholding the permanent necessity of the Old Testament to the Christian. This Church's leaders have been unsurpassed in the force and lucidity with which they have expounded some of the matters with which the present chapters are concerned. They have helped us all, where we needed such help, to perceive that these books are not preparation for, but part of, the communication of God to man which is the eternal gospel; that without them, even having the New Testament, we shall read it with distorted vision, get its perspective wrong, miss its fulness of truth about God in His redemptive dealings with man, and even falsify its picture of the Lord Jesus Christ Himself.

It would be useful if more of their writings were available in English, for there are some similarities in our own situation. Friends with long experience of religious education in British schools have assured me that there is sometimes the same unwillingness to teach the Old Testament in British teachers, and that the result is the inculcation of a sentimental humanism in place of historic Christianity, with the loss of fundamental teaching about God which Jesus did not need to give, because His hearers had all received it already from the Old Testament.

We have fewer of the savage and crude attacks which have been common in Germany, and when made they are less dangerous because their very violence provokes reaction. But many ordinary Christians to-day, preoccupied with the sins of the patriarchs or of David, fail to perceive any divine action controlling these sinners and preparing a people for a heritage to be revealed in later days. They thus miss something of the meaning of the Church of God. If the books which we collectively know as the Old Testament are merely the religious records of the Jews, there is some justification alike for those National-Socialists who keep them out of the schools where modern Germans are educated, and for those nationalist Indian Christian teachers who would prefer to teach their pupils the Bhagavadgita. But if the Old Testament so truly points to Christ that we miss an important part of His significance unless we see Him as the fulfiller of the Old, we can never do without it. Has modern historical critical study deprived us of this view of Christ? Or is it possible that we are on the verge of a deepened understanding of our Lord, which will reunite some of the "fundamentalists" and "liberals" who have lately been grievously separated?

We were quite mistaken if we ever supposed that historical and literary criticism had deprived the Old Testament books of that forward look which our fathers saw in them when they were so preoccupied with prophecies. Those books remain as incomplete as before, awaiting Something or Someone desired but dimly foreseen. There is no parallel in other religious literatures to their steadfast hope in the future. They show that Israel alone among the nations of the earth has learned that God is one, and holy. They show with equal plainness that the reign of that alone Holy One is still in the future, but certain to be realized some day upon a transformed earth.

Their idea of the inauguration of that reign, by natural catastrophes or bloody battles, was at first crude, and continued crude in some minds even until Jesus Christ's own time, but with some it became so refined by the experience of vicarious and redemptive suffering that in due course their words could without change appropriately characterize our Lord's own acts and passion. The story of the Hebrews has for its main theme the things which God did to obtain for Himself a people, but throughout it like a haunting refrain runs the hint that this Israel or Judah does not truly deserve its name or special privilege; there will some day be a people which truly knows and is united to its God. God raises up

this king or that prophet, but more and more the hope for the future is fixed upon the greater king and prophet still to come, God's own Anointed. Were we to hear of it for the first time it would strike us as an amazing phenomenon that not for a decade in a crisis of depression, but for centuries of common life, a whole nation drew constant inspiration from the thought of him who was to come, of whom the noblest kings and prophets it had known were shadowy types and forerunners.

It is the same with the Torah, which is only imperfectly translated by the term "Law", since it is not merely legislation, but rather guidance concerning the life which befits a people whom God has made peculiarly His own. Such guidance may in principle be adjusted to changing conditions and increased enlightenment. However shocking to the Pharisees seemed Jesus' words, "but I say unto you", they accorded with the spirit animating the moral codes in Mosaic or Deuteronomic times, which was living and dynamic, preparing those who faithfully obeyed them for higher obedience in due time. Even the regulations concerning sacrifice have a character of their own, being completely free from the bargaining spirit or the magical notions which mark most pagan offerings, and derived from the gracious will of the God Who makes a way for His people to approach Him in spite of their sins and limitations. The long-continued argument between ceremonialists and prophets, which reaches its peak in Micah's "He hath showed thee, O man, what is good", shows how the Hebrews felt sacrifice to be no finished work in itself, but a symbol of a renewed relationship between man and God, suggesting like all symbols a reality both present and to come. (See Deut. x. 12, Micah vi. 6-8, Ps. xl. 6-8.) So when Christ died and rose again, the first Church naturally and inevitably saw in His passion the completion equally of sacrifice and of the psalmists' and prophets' obedience to the will of God. The courts of Solomon's temple may have looked at times as gory and to modern minds as repellent as do those of the Kalighat temple in Calcutta, but the bloodshedding in the first was linked with something capable of infinite growth, the doing of the will of God so far as it was understood, whereas that in the other is joined to a whole complex of ideas which point not to an ethical future but to an animistic past.

Is there anything in historical and literary criticism which invalidates the N.T. suggestions (chiefly in Hebrews) concerning "types and shadows"? The clarification of ancient history has thrown into sharper relief the fact that *this* sequence

of events and no other was the setting for the appearance of Christ ; that God's dealings with the Jews led up to Jesus as the story of the gods and their peoples in the surrounding lands did not. Fuller knowledge of Bible lands and Bible times has shown that there were many peoples and races in South-Eastern Asia who at about 1500 B.C., must have appeared much like the Jews. That only makes more remarkable the fact that the events and the religious development which the Old Testament records happened to that people alone. And as these happenings actually prepared the way for the later and yet more remarkable events which the New Testament records, they naturally provided the suitable language and illustrations by which the N.T. writers could set forth the full meaning of the facts of Christ and His Church. In other words, the earlier happenings *did* foreshadow the later, as the N.T. writers saw, and as we can see who look back over the whole history of Israel, including the Israel that is the Church. The story of the deliverance from Pharaoh became, even long before Christ, a "thought pattern" for divine deliverance in any human emergency. It did not lose its appropriateness when Jesus wrought the greatest deliverance of all. In St. Paul's mind both Baptism and the Lord's Supper, the two sacraments of deliverance, were illustrated by the experiences of the Red Sea and the wilderness. Our fathers "were all baptized unto Moses", and "did all eat of the same spiritual meat" (I. Cor. x. 1-4). In Psalm xcv the whole passage beginning "To-day if ye will hear his voice, harden not your hearts" shows how the psalmist felt the story of the disobedience in the wilderness and failure to reach the promised rest, a story of long ago, to be relevant to his own time. The author of Hebrews found in it the best language by which to admonish and encourage dispirited Jewish Christians (Heb. iii and iv). Throughout the centuries thousands of missionaries who have had to lead some new flock of Christians from darkness and spiritual bondage to the promised land of light and love in the knowledge of God, have found no text-book to compare with the stories of Israel's wanderings, telling how in spite of their lack of faith, their murmurings and rebellions, and the opposition of their foes, the divine patience and discipline brought them by devious ways to the promised land at last. As a good example of how inevitably the earlier story provided the imagery by which the true meaning of the later could be unfolded, consider St. John of Damascus' hymn rejoicing in the Resurrection :

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“ Come, ye faithful, raise the strain
Of triumphant gladness ;
God hath brought His Israel
Into joy from sadness ;
Loosed from Pharaoh’s bitter yoke
Jacob’s sons and daughters ;
Led them with unmoistened foot
Through the Red Sea’s waters.”

So, too, the stories of creation or of the patriarchs, now seen as told by prophetic or priestly narrators to illustrate the divine Word and Law which were their main concern, become thereby even more appropriate illustrations of the Word and the Law who became flesh. “ Let there be light ” was a word of the old dispensation (Gen. i. 3), but could St. Paul have found any better language for God’s shining in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of His glory in the face of Jesus Christ ? (II Cor. iv. 6).

The unique experience of the people of Israel which was spoken of in Part Two, and particularly that forward-looking hope which so remarkably characterized it, resulted among other things in the special aptitude of these records to become the vehicle of Christian teaching when once the fuller light in Christ had dawned. In strictest accuracy they can be said to contain many types and foreshadowings of those more perfect things which were to come. What is more, that very element of anticipation in them which brings this about is their true message. Whoever has missed this in them has misunderstood them.

To recognize this is not to relapse into the unlimited allegorizings of most mediæval writers or of some moderns, by which scripture can be made to mean anything the interpreter desires. It is rather to see God’s hand in the whole course of history of which Jesus is the centre, and to perceive His work more clearly by allowing its earlier and later stages to illuminate each other. Linguistic and historical disciplines make their exacting demand that we discover what words meant when the Hebrew writer first set them down. But a wider use of the same disciplines over the range of Jewish-Christian history may show the meaning of those same words deepening through the experience of the centuries, and finally, when Christ appears, uttering truth about Him which is eternal, part of God’s message to men of faith in every age.

So we are recovering in our day a deeper sense of the unity of the Bible as one whole record of the revelation of God.

There seems to be need for a book, which will make this more plain, in addition to the many works on the Old Testament which have appeared in recent times.¹ At the end of last century George Adam Smith showed how modern criticism had given the Christian preacher richer material in his Old Testament than the older methods of interpretation, but a vast amount of knowledge has accumulated since then, and Christian theology has passed through several phases. Recently a young German-Swiss scholar, deeply influenced by Karl Barth, steeped in the works of Luther and Calvin, and familiar with recent literary and historical scholarship in the O.T. field, published the first of three volumes which are to show how the Old Testament preaches the Gospel to us in our times.² But we need simpler books, less weighted with quotations, which will show to British readers the ways in which the Old Testament, rightly understood, increases our understanding of Jesus Christ. In the meantime we have the best guide in the New Testament itself, filled with interpretations of the Old as pointing to the New. And nothing in modern criticism weakens the sense of divine inspiration with which we read such words as the following, which make the Old the appropriate vehicle for the glory of the New: "Ye are come unto mount Zion, and unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable hosts of angels, to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God the Judge of all, and to the spirits of just men made

¹ This need has been met even before this could be printed, by A. G. Hebert's *The Throne of David*, Faber 1941, whose sub-title exactly describes its contents as "A Study of the Fulfilment of the Old Testament in Jesus Christ and His Church." It answers clearly the theological questions which are raised by such facts as the present book deals with, showing how the Old Testament is the word of God, but not the final word, because its true meaning is to be found in the New. It gives yet more solidity to the foundations of the Christian doctrine of Revelation and Inspiration, expounds the reasons for the liturgical use of the Old Testament and shows how essential it is that the Church to-day should understand herself in the light of the symbols and images which the New Testament took over from the Old, and filled with new meaning by using them of Jesus Christ and of His Church.

Father Hebert himself calls attention to two other books which also have special value as using a rich equipment of Old Testament scholarship while arriving at the conclusion that the Israelites were specially called of God, that the New Testament reading of their story is true, and that both Books of the Bible form one living, inseparable whole, revealing the mystery of God's Will which He "purposed . . . unto a dispensation of the Fulness of the times, to sum up all things in Christ" (Eph. i. 10). They are *The Call of Israel* (O.U.P. 1934) and *The Fulness of Israel* (O.U.P. 1938), both by W. J. Phythian-Adams. See p. 50, f.n.

² *Das Christuszeugnis des Alten Testaments, Band I.* by Wilhelm Vischer, *Das Gesetz*, Munich 1935.

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perfect, and to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling that speaketh better than that of Abel " (Heb. xii. 22-24). We are not Hebrews, yet even for us no other language can with equal power set forth the meaning of Christ, His Church, the Salvation which He has wrought, and the bond which binds us to Him.

SAMPLE