

Chapter 7

THE OLD AND NEW TESTAMENTS¹

I. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

OBJECTIONS have again and again been raised to the doctrine of the law which we have just sketched out. Lutherans especially, but also Reformed Christians, have urged that Calvin's legalistic tendencies led him to blur the boundaries between the Old and the New Testaments.² "It is significant", says Wernle in his commentary on the *Institutes*, "that it was the Reformed Christians precisely who had a specially keen interest in this Christianization of the Old Testament. The Reformed Christians were the practical party in the Reformation movement; the New Testament was not sufficient for their ecclesiastical-political institutions; they were compelled to go back to its Old Testament background and hence needed a unified authoritative Bible. The evangelical national state church and the Christian state as ideally pictured by the Reformed Christians both rest upon the basis of Old Testament theocracy."³ The modern theologian has so little understanding of Calvin's conception of the old covenant that at this point he is much more inclined to agree with the fanatics: "In his moral zeal, Calvin utterly denies the difference between the Old and the New Testaments, closes his eyes to all the new values which

¹ M. Simon: "Die Beziehung zwischen Altem und Neuem Testament in der Schriftauslegung Calvins", *Ref. Kirchenztg.*, 82, 1932, pp. 17 ff. H. H. Wolf, *Die Einheit des Bundes. Das Verhältnis von Altem und Neuem Testament bei Calvin*, Bethel, 1942.

² R. Seeberg: *Dogmengeschichte*, 4, 565 ff. A. Lang: *Johannes Calvin*, 1909, p. 75.

³ P. Wernle: *Der evangelische Glaube*, III, *Calvin*, p. 268.

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Jesus brought into the world, and degrades Him to the position of an interpreter of the ancient lawgiver Moses. How much more clearly the Baptists saw the truth in this respect." "The New Testament must be fitted in with the authority of the Old Testament; Christ is interpreted according to Moses."¹ Our reason for giving such extended quotations is that they have become widely regarded as of decisive importance. This is how people commonly think about Calvin's teaching on the law and his view of the Old and New Testaments.

A theologian such as Calvin does not understand the relationship of the two Testaments in such wise that he reads the Old into the New and vice versa. Certainly he uses the one to elucidate the other. But that is not the important thing. The decisive point is the recognition that the Old Testament promises what the New Testament offers to us in Christ.² The salvation of the saints of the Old Testament is founded, just as much as our own, in Jesus Christ.³ Therefore in both cases what is in question is the one "body of Christ—the church"; the new covenant is no other than the old covenant instituted by God and broken by the people of Israel.⁴ Christ is the foundation of the divine covenant to which both the Old Testament and the New bear witness.⁵

2. THE OLD TESTAMENT

If we consider the Old Testament by itself and enquire about its meaning we have to note the following: in Calvin's opinion the Old Testament does not reflect a primitive form of religion lower in degree than that of the New. It is not the expression of the religious laws and customs of the Jews, but from the first line to the last it preaches to us about Christ. "The law"—and in so saying Calvin does not mean merely the commandments but the whole corpus of so-called Mosaic religion—"was not laid down four hundred years after the

¹ P. Wernle, *op. cit.*, p. 13 and p. 30.

² CR 40, 395.

³ CR 28, 288.

⁴ CR 40 ff., 395 f.

⁵ CR 48, 289; cf. CR 48, 569.

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death of Abraham in order to lead the chosen people away from Christ, but rather in order to hold them upright until His coming, to stir up in them a religious zeal, and to strengthen them in hope lest they should languish and lapse through the long delay of His advent.”¹ It is meant to maintain in the pious the expectation of the Christ that was to come.² The sacrifices and ceremonies served this end. “God did not ordain them in order to give His servants enough to do in earthly things, but rather to raise their minds to things above.”³ The same purpose was served by the strictness of the commands which caused them to look forward to Him who should perfectly fulfil them.⁴ The kings and priests also of the Old Testament are, so to speak, mirrors in which the people can see reflected the one King and High Priest.⁵ And the prophets were sent to prevent the people from becoming fettered to the cultus and commands as such; they were to guide the thoughts of the people to the one goal of all the doctrines and arrangements of the law: Jesus Christ.⁶

But the Old Testament does not merely in some vague sense adumbrate Christ; it proclaims Him in the strictest sense as the Mediator between God and man. He is the mirror in which the hidden God becomes visible to His people⁷; He is above all the Redeemer through whom alone the people could gain access to God. “When Jesus Christ was still not revealed in the flesh, He was already the Mediator, and all the patriarchs of old could approach God only when they were guided to Him by the Saviour and when the Saviour enabled them to find grace in the presence of God; and they could base their prayers only on the ground that they were pleasing to God because a Saviour was promised to them.”⁸ The efficacy of the one Sacrifice which He perfected is eternal, extending itself to all times.⁹ The work of Christ is so decisively operative that even the destiny of those who were under the old covenant depends on it.

¹ *In.* II, 7, 1.

² *In.* II, 9, 1.

³ *In.* II, 7, 1.

⁴ *In.* II, 7, 2.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *In.* II, 7, 1.

⁷ *In.* IV, 8, 4.

⁸ *CR* 41, 555; cf. *CR* 41, 558; 44, 162; 50, 217, 224.

⁹ *CR* 55, 118.

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Without Christ and His sacrifice all the promises of the Old Testament would be of no avail,¹ and the commands would bring death to their hearers. "Christ is the sustaining ground of the promises because in Him alone God the Father is gracious to us."² Christ belongs as much to the commands as to the promises.³ The whole covenant of God with His sinful people is not only recognized as valid in Jesus Christ but is also centred in Him. In this sense the Old Testament as a whole proclaims the Christ.

3. THE NEW TESTAMENT AS DISTINCT FROM THE OLD TESTAMENT

The New Testament bears witness to this same Mediator Jesus Christ. But in contrast to the Old Testament its life-breath springs from the incarnation of the Son of God. "Those mysteries which the men of the Old Testament beheld in the form of shadows have been plainly revealed to us."⁴ For this reason the Gospel may not be regarded as interchangeable with the promises of the old covenant. "The gospel in the proper sense is the solemn announcement of the revealed Christ in whom also the promises are fulfilled."⁵ Because the New Testament declares to us the Christ who has come in the flesh, and the Old Testament Him who was to come in the flesh, Calvin is fond of elucidating the difference by saying that the New Testament is like a colourful picture whereas the Old presents the appearance of a shadowy outline.⁶ In the *Institutes* Calvin has enumerated the differences, which on close examination he feels compelled to note between the two Testaments,⁷ and we can therefore spare ourselves the trouble of mentioning them, especially as they are reducible to one—that between the clarity of the gospel and the obscurity of the word which was preached before the gospel.⁸ But both Testaments testify to the same Word, both proclaim Jesus Christ, the one in one manner, the other

¹ CR 38, 407.

² CR 50, 22.

³ In. II, 7, 2.

⁴ In. II, 9, 1.

⁵ CR 49, 9.

⁶ CR 55, 121.

⁷ In. II, 11; OS 3, 423 ff.

⁸ In. II, 9, 10.

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in another manner.¹ Hence the differences which Calvin notes between the Old and New Testaments must not be misunderstood. If the New Testament proclaims Christ more clearly, it is not to imply that we now have Christ simply in our possession whereas the pious men of the Old Testament could only look forward to His coming. No; we too stand yet in hope.² We, like the people of Israel, are referred to the Word and to the Holy Ghost who makes this Word a living reality to us. "In so far as we accept Christ we do not possess Him otherwise than cloaked in His promises. Hence it is that while He dwells in our hearts we may walk far from Him because we walk by faith and not by sight."³

On the other hand it must be said with regard to the Old Testament that its function was not confined to that of foreshadowing Christ as the Mediator. Christ was truly presented and imparted to hearers through its words.⁴ For the saints of the old covenant, as for us, these words were confirmed by sacramental signs which sealed the promises.⁵ In this way the patriarchs ate the same spiritual food and drank the same spiritual drink as we Christians; and this was Christ.⁶ Further, the Old Testament did not have this significance for the people of Israel only; it is given to us also for the same purpose. We say this not merely with reference to single parts but also with reference to the Old Testament as a whole. In discussing the problem of the law we saw that the Old Testament accounts of sacrifices and cultus have not lost their significance. "Although the ceremonies are no longer in use, their essential truth is still valid for us through the person of Him on whom their fulfilment depends."⁷ The Old Testament is neither a superseded book as far as we are concerned, nor is it merely of auxiliary use enabling us to understand the New Testament better. We possess the Old Testament solely because it awakens in us faith in Jesus Christ. In that purpose the Old Testament is at one with the New.⁸

¹ CR 40, 396.

² CR 55, 121.

³ In. II, 9, 3.

⁴ In. I, 9, 3; CR 39, 64.

⁵ In. II, 10, 6.

⁶ In. II, 10, 5.

⁷ CR 9, 747.

⁸ CR 48, 569.

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4. THE JUXTAPOSITION OF THE TWO TESTAMENTS

The juxtaposition and succession of the two Testaments emphasizes the fact that they do not aim at giving us religious and moral instruction, or holding ideals before our minds, but at testifying to the Word which at a given moment in the history of the world became flesh. For this reason there is a before and after. Since at that moment not just any event, nor even a merely momentous event, took place in the history of humanity, but rather God's only begotten Son entered the world, the time before just as much as the time after was shaped by the operation of the event itself. But this must be rightly understood. Had Jesus Christ been only a man, a religious personality of the greatest dimensions, then His coming might well have been surmised in advance. But this is not what is meant when we say that the action of Jesus Christ shaped the time which preceded Him. What is meant is rather this: because the Incarnate Word is God, His efficacy is not restricted to our own Christian era. Hence He could already by the word of His witnesses and the sacramental cultus draw near to the saints of the old covenant and bestow Himself upon them. For this reason the Old Testament does not merely reflect a people's religious consciousness nor its words simply point as signposts to the one Word; rather they communicate the reality of that Word to the hearers when the Holy Ghost renders the latter responsive. If any one interprets the Old Testament otherwise, he is forgetting in his blindness that Christ "was true God who from the beginning and without intermission has spread the wings of His grace".¹

¹ CR 9, 305.