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The Old Testament in Relation to the Gospel.

ANYONE able to approach the Old Testament simply as literature, and to consider it as but one among many other "Sacred Books of the East" would find it a strange and puzzling collection of writings. He might be fascinated by the brilliancy of its high lights, he would certainly be repelled by some of its deep shadows. On one page he would find the noblest and most majestic conceptions of God as the Creator of the world and the Redeemer of His people; on another he would read of God's alleged approval of bloodthirsty deeds and immoral acts. He might read, if it were not too wearisome, the minute and elaborate details of a priestly cult and a sacrificial ritual, with not a few quasi-magical elements—all presented as divine ordinance and God's foremost requirement. But he would also find passionate and eloquent denunciation of such a cult and such an emphasis, from men who held that religion essentially consists in justice, mercy and humility before God. Not less difficult to reconcile would be the narrow and vindictive nationalism of Esther, with the universalism of the large-hearted Book of Jonah. Whatever be the final verdict on the Old Testament, it is beyond question a book of strong and even jarring contrasts, of which the unity, if there be one, is by no means easily apparent. It certainly recalls the remark of a scholar of wide knowledge that "In no religion of antiquity was there such a strong tendency to bring opposites together as in Canaanite and Phoenician belief and practice." [1]

What of those who approach it as divine revelation? This strange and puzzling collection of literature was, in its Greek form, the earliest Bible of the Christian Church, long before there was any New Testament. But even those Jews who became the first Christians found it hard to reconcile the Old Testament with their own new faith in the crucified yet risen Messiah. We see them searching for prophecies of the Cross, or claiming, like the Epistle to the Hebrews, that the old was but a shadowy allegory of the new, or like the apostle Paul, asserting that Law and Gospel stand in sharpest antithesis. All through the Christian centuries, the Church has never quite known what to do with the Old Testament. Sometimes it was rejected altogether, as by Gnostic Christians; sometimes it was allegorised until a passage

[1] W. F. Albright, *Archaeology and the Religion of Israel*, p. 80.

which had seemed an intrusive element became an iridescent pearl; sometimes it was forced into the Procrustean bed of a systematic theology, and made into a text-book of dogma. At the present day, such methods have been largely discredited, and replaced by historical interpretation, *i.e.* by the insistence that the primary meaning of any passage in the Old Testament is to be that which it had when first written or spoken. The full and fearless acceptance of the principles of historical interpretation removes many of the difficulties once felt about the inconsistencies and contradictions of the Old Testament, for these fall into their place as parts of a changing history. But we must not shut our eyes to the fact that historical interpretation creates new problems and sets new questions which cannot be evaded. I do not mean questions of the historicity of this or that event, the truth of this or that statement; I mean that great previous question as to what historical revelation means.

Strictly speaking, a historical revelation is a contradiction in terms. History records a slow and blundering movement of human societies, which is not always progress. Its foreground is filled with the activities of men, and each generation disputes as to what its background really is,—God, fate, chance. It seems to be dominated by economic factors on the one hand, or by the wilfulness of its "great men" on the other, and its critical epochs appear to be largely at the mercy of accident. Could there be a more clumsy medium to reveal the nature and will of an unchanging God, holy and majestic? If an ancient king, such as the Babylonian Hammurabi wished to communicate his legislative will to his people, he engraved on stone a great compendium of law, public and unchangeable. If a modern king desires to make contact with the millions of his empire, he has the wireless at his disposal. God must have far more direct and conclusive ways of communicating truth than through the records of an ancient people. Yet, apparently, He has chosen the slowest and most misleading of all—the way of history. Why?

Two great answers to this question may be drawn from the realm of practical religion. The first is that God was dealing with each successive generation, so as to enlist their actual co-operation in the process. History, if it means anything at all, means genuine human activity, an activity which adds *quality*, rather than *quantity*, to the ultimate purpose of God. It is not, in its details, a foregone conclusion, however certain faith may be as to the cosmic result. An ancient writer[2] said of the famous statue of the Olympian Zeus carved by Phidias, and no longer

[2] Quintilian, XII. x. 9; the original is *cuius pulchritudo adiecisse aliquid etiam receptae religioni videtur.* I owe the reference to Macgregor and Purdy's *Jew and Greek*, p. 207.

existent, that "its beauty seems to have added something even to traditional religion." If the work of the creative artist thus adds to the invisible idea, shall we not believe that every human discovery of truth, every moral victory or achievement, every man of God[3] brings the new quality of actuality to the thought of God Himself. God has created man to be His fellow-worker, in however humble and limited a fashion. The passion to create something worth while is the source of the world's best work, in artist or artisan, in statesman or teacher, in explorer or inventor. It carries on to larger ends the instinct of the child's play and the boy's hobbies. But it is more—it is a real and vital link with God. Men are given the power to create by the great Creator of all things, and by their freely rendered creative work they enter, even unconsciously, into actual fellowship with Him. Traherne has finely said of God that "When all that could be wrought by the use of His own liberty was attained, by man's liberty He attained more".[4] Apply this to the historical revelation of the Old Testament, and we see how the stern conscience of Amos, the loving sympathy of Hosea, the faith and insight of Isaiah, the inner struggles of Jeremiah, are all taken up into the very substance of revelation. As revelation, they have their permanent value, but they also belong to particular men and particular generations; they show God's care for the individual life as well as for the goal of history. God gets His work done, but He values the workman not less but more than the work. The revelation of God in history is something wrought out in time to meet the needs of time. But the man in whom and through whom it is thus wrought out belongs to eternity. A historical revelation shows us what no other could—God working through man's freedom both *in* time and *for* eternity.

The second discernible reason for a historical revelation springs from its very limitations and apparent disadvantages. The God who is above history empties Himself in order to be manifested in and through history. His divinity is necessarily veiled in our humanity. No revelation of God can enter our world without clothing itself with the conditions of our world. God can be comprehended by us only at the point where He chooses to make contact with us, and that is a point of human experience. We recognise that there will be hills and valleys in a historical revelation, and always need a contoured map, but both hill and valley belong to man's earth as well as to God's creation.

[3] Cf. the Rabbinic saying, quoted from *Sifre*, Deut. 113, by Box in *The People and the Book*, p. 460: Before our father Abraham came into the world, God was, as it were, only the King of heaven, but when Abraham came, He made Himself to be King over heaven and earth.

[4] *Centuries of Meditations*, IV., 46.

We cannot call the high levels wholly God's and the low levels wholly man's, which seems to be the principle underlying some Biblical anthologies. It is all God's, for it belongs to that providential control of history through which He has chosen to reveal Himself. But it is all man's, for it is uttered in human speech, wrought out from human purpose, made of the very stuff of our humanity. God will be known, as it were, in disguise, known through the very disguise of our humanity, recognised for His intrinsic worth, and not on the ground of any lesser authority than Himself. Men are always trying to evade the responsibility of such a challenge, in morals or in religion or in politics, by delegating to another the choice God would have made by themselves. But not even Church or Bible, however, necessary for man's development, can relieve him from the need for moral judgments and the exercises of moral responsibility. If they could, they would defeat the very object of revelation, which is to train man into the right use of his spiritual freedom. We see, then, that the scandal of the Old Testament is the scandal of the Cross, writ large over the centuries—God's use of the human to reveal the divine.

In what has been said, it has been assumed that the Old Testament and the Gospel of the New form a real unity. I have no sympathy at all with the thesis recently maintained by a Christian theologian of Germany—Emanuel Hirsch—that the justification for the inclusion of the Old Testament in the Christian Bible is its antithesis to the New Testament, as showing us what the Gospel is *not*. Such a thesis might be maintained in regard to certain elements of the Old Testament, such as the Book of Esther for conduct and the Book of Ecclesiastes for doctrine. But it is quite untrue of the Old Testament as a whole. The earliest Christian communities were guided by a sure instinct when they retained the Jewish Scriptures with a new interpretation drawn from the Person and Work of Jesus Christ. After the New Testament writings embodying this interpretation were added to the Old, Augustine rightly expressed the relation of the two in words which have become famous: "The New Testament was veiled in the Old; the Old Testament is unveiled in the New."[5] We can accept that as true, even though our methods of exegesis are not his, nor indeed those of the long succession of exegetes who lived and worked before the full significance of a historical interpretation of the Bible was recognised. But, once this recognition is reached, how is the unity of the Bible to be

[5] Serm. CLX., quoted in Rawlinson's *The New Testament Doctrine of the Christ*, p. 18n, where also another expression of the same idea is given (*quamquam in vetere novum lateat, et in novo vetus pateat*) from *Quaest in Exodum*, II. 73, ad Ex. XX., 19.

maintained? If we shrink to-day from forcing Christian doctrine into "proof-texts" with a quite different historical meaning, in what way is the Christian Gospel still to be found in the Old Testament?

The answer can be put into a sentence—there is a deep continuity of *life*, human life guided and inspired by the Spirit of the living God, to be found in the Old Testament, which reaches its consummation and interpretation in the Christian Gospel. The relation is not that of a pattern endlessly repeated in the whole design as on a loom, but of root and stem and leaf and flower in the living plant. Beneath the visible continuity of land and people, there is the invisible continuity of spiritual development. I propose to illustrate this very briefly in regard to the Incarnation, the Atonement, and the characteristic type of life which we call Christian, since these three essentally constitute the basis of the Gospel.

(1) There is no book which deals so drastically and frankly with the sin of man as does the Old Testament; yet there is no book prior to the New which so exalts man's dignity and significance in the sight of God. Above all other creatures man stands supreme, born to rule them, and alone able to have conscious intercourse with the Creator of them all (Cf. Ps. viii.). So it is no accident of history that the human consciousness and conscience should become the supreme channel of revelation, as we see in the great prophets. There were many other channels, for the religion of Israel is rich in the variety of means of mediation. God and man came into contact through the divine control of physical events which we call miracle, through an elaborate sacrificial system bound up with the giving of oracles and the casting of lots, and finally through the Jewish acceptance of a written law as the complete and final revelation of the divine will. But the fundamental revelation was that through history, and history as interpreted by the prophetic intuition of the will of God. We do not always realise how sharply this highest mode of revelation stands in contrast with those other modes, the nature-miracle, the sacred rite, the sacred book, all of them shared with other peoples, and not peculiar to Israel. But this *is* peculiar to Israel, and without true parallel elsewhere—to know God through history interpreted by the moral consciousness of prophets, both elements being wrought into a divine unity. This is the great characteristic of the Old Testament. The prophets themselves are conscious of the immeasurable superiority of their direct moral and spiritual contact with God over that through the cult and its sacrifices,[6] that through idols, and even

[6] Quite in this spirit, Ep. Diognet. § 3 equates the use of material sacrifice with the use of idols.

(as with Jeremiah) that through a book.[7] The denunciation of all forms of idolatry by the higher religion of Israel is specially noticeable. The idol is the semblance of outer forms, the apotheosis of the material; it was fitly provided with chains (Is. xl. 19) for, as Claude Houghton somewhere says, it is the denial of the principle of growth. Thus it is the supreme antithesis of the spiritual. The prophets who claim that God is speaking to man through their human thoughts and feelings, and shaping their wills to His purpose, are in fact presenting the relevant positive truth over against the negative falsehood of the idol. They are exalting the spiritual in human nature to its highest by making it the channel of God's truth. Could we find a deeper or more impressive prophecy of the Incarnation than that? Jesus of Nazareth comes in the line of the prophets that He may rise above them into His unique place. It is the line of Israel's prophecy which is divinely chosen to be the form of the manifestation of the Word of God. The filial consciousness of our Lord is the prophetic raised to new heights of meaning. The deepest prophecy of the Incarnation is not that which first attracted Christian eyes, the future glory of the Bethlehem where David was born, and where a new prince of his line should appear; the far more vital continuity is that with *God's use of human nature in the Old Testament,* seen especially in prophecy. Jeremiah is not the forerunner of the Lord because he called himself in his time of persecution "a lamb that is led to the slaughter", but because, in his own imperfect way, he so yielded his consciousness to God that divine truth was born into the world through him. The principle of the Incarnation is no arbitrary claim of theologians; it is the principle which has inspired the highest religion of the Old Testament. It is fundamental in a genuinely historical revelation.

(2) When we think of the Cross of Christ, the spiritual continuity between the Old Testament and the New ought to be still more apparent. I do not, of course, mean in such unworthy trivialities as that of Clement of Rome (12), who regards the scarlet thread which Rahab hung from her window as a prophecy that "through the blood of the Lord there shall be redemption"; nor again that of the author of the Epistle of Barnabas (9), who extracts from the number of Abraham's 318 servants the name of Jesus and the symbol of the Cross by way of the Greek letters which may stand for this number. I mean that the religion of Israel is from the beginning a redemptive religion, which goes on ever deepening the meaning of redemption. The redemption of Israel from Egypt never lost its power to inspire confidence

[7] Note his prophecy of the New Covenant (XXXI. 31ff.) which has no use for the sacred book (cf. VIII. 8).

in the devout Israelite, though it was a redemption from physical bondage and wholly within the sphere of this present life on earth. The great prophets presented the God of Israel as able to redeem from spiritual as well as from material captivity, and in His name promised forgiveness to the penitent. They contrast Him with the lifeless idols of the heathen, a burden for weary beasts; whereas He is the burden-bearer, who carries Israel as His burden (Is. xlvi. 1-4). Hosea (xi. 8) breaks off his denunciation of the sin of Israel to cry in God's name:

> How shall I give thee up, Ephraim?
> How shall I deliver thee (up) Israel? . . .
> Mine heart is turned within me,
> My compassions are kindled together.
> I will not execute the fierceness of mine anger
> I will not return to destroy Ephraim:
> For I am God and not man.

In that same name, Jeremiah bids the disappointed and despondent Baruch rise to the height of keeping God company in His apparent failure, or as the Christian would say, of sharing the Cross with his Lord (xlv. 4, 5). In another place (xii. 11), Jeremiah uses a pregnant phrase concerning God's feelings for His invaded land: "They have made it a desolation: it mourneth *to my sorrow* (R.V. "unto Me"), being desolate."[8] "To God's sorrow"—no phrase could better express the truth of divine suffering through human sin which runs through the higher prophetic teaching of the Old Testament. It is the vicarious suffering of love, which will not let Israel go. It is the divine counterpart to Isaiah liii. in which Israel is called into the same fellowship of suffering, in order to save. How much that chapter meant to Jesus Himself we all know, and in Him the vicarious suffering of man and the vicarious suffering of God achieve their unity. If our eyes were clearer, we should see that there is a crown of thorns worn by Nature and accepted by God Himself.

The poetry of the Gospel, then, the great romance of God's love story, runs right through the Bible, if we are patient enough to search for it. It never was something that could be proved by argument; it is known, if it *is* known, like all poetic truth, *i.e.* by an intuition. It possesses the authority of its own beauty, and it needs no other. Long before Jesus proclaims the love of the Father in the parable of the prodigal son, a prophet had sketched, however dimly, the truth of the divine initiative (Jer. xxxi. 1-3), by the picture of Jehovah going out into the wilderness

[8] So Driver: the literal Hebrew is "upon me," cf. Jacob's words, "Rachel died upon me," to the same effect (Gen. XLVIII. 7). As Cornill says, it is God's burden which the prophet here feels.

to bring His people rest, and saying, "With everlasting love have I loved thee; therefore with covenant-love have I drawn thee." That love was a costly love to the God of the Old Testament, who is also the God of the New. It does not shrink from the suffering which sin must ever bring to holy love, whether in man or in God, and by that hidden suffering which was actualised in human history on the Cross, God saves the sinner.

(3) In the third place, there is the particular quality characteristic of the actual life we call Christian. Most people would agree that the best summary of it is to be found in 1 Corinthians xiii., the hymn of love. If we consider that hymn in its setting within the Epistle, we see two ruling features. It is more about the duty than the emotion of love; it is concerned with the hard, patient fulfilment of service even to the ungrateful for the sake of Christ. Further, it is set before us as the greatest gift of the Spirit, *i.e.* its fulfilment depends on the surrender of the soul to a higher than itself. Carry back these two elements of the Christian life, viz. obligation and inspiration, to their origin, and you must begin with the Semitic clan of the desert, existing only through the solidarity of mutual obligation, exercising within its narrow limits a rough justice and a genuine mercy. The larger life of settled Israel still needed those primitive virtues; we find the prophets demanding a morality which is that of the clan raised to a higher level, and demanding it as the essential condition for the approach of Israel to the God of Israel. Gradually the prophets came to see that God must help men to fulfil His own requirement, as in that "new covenant" which Jeremiah sees to be necessary, when God shall enter into individual and inner relation with each Israelite. Jeremiah's younger contemporary, Ezekiel, makes the necessity for supernatural aid more explicit, when he gives the divine promise, "A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you" (xxxvi. 26). The prophet Hosea, a couple of centuries earlier, had already diagnosed the real trouble, and quite on the lines of the Sermon on the Mount, when he spoke of "the *spirit* of whoredom" in Israel as the cause of its outward defection. The Gospel deals with this disloyal spirit by awakening a new loyalty, the loyalty of response to the redeeming love of God. But do not let us forget that already in the Old Testament God is set forth as a loveable God. "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God" is not so paradoxical as it sounds, for it is an invitation rather than a command (see Dt. vi.).

The Christian ethic, therefore, so different from the Greek[9]

[9] In Greece, the state was more artificial and ethics was based on the relation of the individual to social tradition and political order; the ideal was a harmony of man's nature, not obedience to divine law.

goes back to the sublimation of clan loyalties, with Christ as the centre of the new social solidarity, and the Holy Spirit as the constraining energy, and both conceptions spring from the Old Testament. There are many different levels of morality in the Old Testament, and the Ten Commandments by no means represent its highest point in this respect.[10] The highest ethical conception is that of the covenanted love between God and man inspiring and producing a covenanted love and duty between man and man, which becomes the noblest offering man can take to God. The Christian life of the New Testament, of which the wonder and the beauty is an inspiration and rebuke, has its roots in the soil of the Old Testament, and both root and fruit reveal, as they depend on, grace as well as nature.

I have done no more than outline a great theme which many years of Gospel ministry would not exhaust. I have been arguing for the value of the Old Testament not to the philologist or the archaeologist or the mere historian, but to the Gospel preacher. If it be said, as it sometimes is said, that the New Testament gives us all we need, and that the Old Testament may therefore be suffered to fall into comparative neglect, I would suggest three outstanding reasons which show God to be wiser than man in including the Old Testament within the Christian Bible.

In the first place, there is distinct educational value in having divine truth presented to us in simpler and more elementary forms, as well as in its highest manifestation. Until men have learnt some of the elementary things which the Old Testament can teach concerning sin and righteousness and judgment, they are not likely to appreciate the height and depth and magnitude of the Gospel of grace and forgiveness. That is specially true at the present time, when men are tempted to despise the apparent simplicity of the Gospel as being superficial and inadequate for the many and diverse needs of modern society. In the second place, the Old Testament has supplied an incomparable vocabulary of worship and devotion. How impoverished would be our worship and our private prayer without the Psalms—the twenty-third and the fifty-first for example? The difficulty to-day, as we all know, is that the new generation does not know this vocabulary, and does not understand us when we use it. The appeal of the Gospel is the invitation to begin a new life, which cannot dispense with the traditional language of devotion, or hope to invent anything that will ever replace the Old Testament.

In the third place, the Old Testament displays with incomparable power the living God who controls all history, past and present and future. The extensity of the Old Testament answers

[10] Lev. XIX. and Job XXXI. rank above the Decalogue in ethical value; see G. B. Gray, *The Divine Discipline of Israel*, pp. 96ff, 102.

to the intensity of the New. In contrast with the generation or two of New Testament records, there are the dozen centuries of changeful life, flung up against great imperial backgrounds, centuries which show God as their interpretative principle and as their dynamic energy. By universal consent, the world of to-day sorely needs both insight and faith. It seems to us more chaotic than ever before, partly because of modern publicity and rapid inter-communication. But without the prophetic interpretation, Israel's world would have seemed not less without meaning. The prophets did what the mirrors of the kaleidoscope do; they brought the jumbled fragments of coloured glass into an orderly and beautiful pattern. The prophetic insight evoked the faith of their disciples; the spiritual aristocracy of prophecy led the democracy of discipleship. From the time of Isaiah, we can see those disciples treasuring up the *obiter dicta* of their masters, or talking to one another as we overhear them in the book of Malachi, or engaged in the prayer and praise of the temple courts, or at last leaving their fishing-nets to follow a young Rabbi unique in grace and truth. That long line of many centuries projects its momentum through the New Testament Church into our own age, and both clarifies our purpose and renews our faith. The whole Bible is the historical revelation of the living God, who is not less present, active and gracious to-day than in those far-off centuries of Israel's history, when His mighty acts first revealed His eternal purpose to save and to bless.

H. Wheeler Robinson.

Gleanings from J. C. Carlile, gathered by Marguerite Williams. (Kingsgate Press, 1s. 6d.)

For many years Miss Williams most faithfully assisted Dr. Carlile in his work as editor of the *Baptist Times*. Her appreciation of the man and his writings led her to make regular brief extracts from his articles, and it is these which are made available in this booklet. Dr. Carlile had had a wide experience of life, he was an effective preacher, and he had a facile pen. These fifty passages are characteristic of his devotional writing and many will be glad to possess them.