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A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php

The Christian Use of the Old Testament

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THERE can be no Christian use of the Old Testament unless it has something to do with Jesus Christ. Such use, then, is determined by the relation between God's final word in His Son and that which He spake at sundry times and in diverse manners by the prophets. This in its turn raises the question as to who and what the prophets were.

The true prophet was one who stood in the council of God (*e.g.*, Jer. xxiii. 18, 22). The word *sodh*, translated council, means primarily friendly or confidential conversation, and so friendliness or friendship—and then the conclave of those who share this friendship or intimacy (see Driver on Amos iii. 7). The prophet, in fact, was numbered among God's intimates, he had been brought into personal relationship with Him. And, as always happens in a personal relationship, God had revealed Himself to him. That is the heart of revelation, but we cannot leave the matter there. Between human beings, personal relationship with a man gives the clue to the understanding of what he does, because one can now see his actions as it were from inside. Similarly the prophets claimed that in their relationship with God they had been given an insight into the meaning of what God was doing in history. " Surely the Lord God will do nothing but He revealeth His secret to His servants the prophets " (Amos iii. 7). The word for secret is again *sodh* and now means what the prophet learned in his intimate conversation. Whenever God acts for man's salvation, there is a prophet on the scene, a man who knows God, and in that personal knowledge of God also knows the meaning of what God is doing in history.

Prophecy therefore becomes part of God's saving action. God had raised up Israel in preparation for the coming of Christ. The Jews alone believed in one living and righteous God, the Lord of all history, who would one day intervene to assert His sovereignty. But events in history by themselves would hardly have been enough to raise up such a people. Merely, for example, to let Israel escape from Egypt would only have been to transfer a slave people from one place to another. And so Moses was raised up, a man who knew God and so knew the secret of what He was doing in history, and was able to bring it home to His people. Not merely by His mighty acts, but also " by a prophet the Lord brought up Israel out of Egypt " (Hosea xii. 3). It is the same at every point in the story. God acted in history and revealed Himself to a man who was thereby shown the meaning of God's action in history and able to bring it home to His people. " Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, speak ye home to the heart of Jerusalem " (Isaiah xl. 1, R.V. marg.). That is the task of the prophet, and it is the backbone of the Old Testament—men of God bringing home to the heart of the people of God the divinely revealed meaning of the action of God in history.

I.

The core, therefore, of the Old Testament may be called prophetic history. It was written to bring home what God meant His people to learn from the events. From this point of view the inclusion in the prophetic canon of the historical books from Joshua to Kings is most appropriate, and we might also include the JE narratives of the Pentateuch under this heading. They were all written by men to whom God had given the secret of His action in history. It is prophetic history also that we find in the books of the prophets. They do not, of course, actually record many events, but neither do they give moral or theological truths in vacuo. Rather they are inspired commentaries on Israel's history—on God's redeeming acts in their past and on His judgments in their own day—showing what God meant by these events for the past, present and future of His people. Their exhortations and their predictions were given to them in the meaning of the history.

The rest of the Old Testament must be seen in its relation to this core of prophetic history. There are stories told to illustrate the truths revealed in the history. (In the light of this, much of the debate occasioned by fundamentalism may be seen to be merely a question of how large this element is, whether it includes any or all of Job? Daniel? Jonah? the Priestly narrative? etc.). There is a large body of the law regulating the life of God's people in the light of His self-revelation in history. Sometimes the connexion is explicit: "I am the Lord thy God which brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage: thou shalt have none other gods but Me." Elsewhere it is implied. That is why the law is attributed to Moses and put in the Exodus period. It was not simply that the nucleus of the law was given through him, but rather that the later writers and editors were saying in the only way open to them that what was demanded in this law was all of a piece with the revelation given to Moses and essential for maintenance of the Covenant relationship. We may compare the laws attributed to Solon in ancient Athens—not because he made all those laws but because they were essential if the impetus towards democracy started by his reforms was to be maintained. Then we have Psalms worshipping the God revealed in the history, and other miscellaneous material all related to the central core in one way or another—and so through that core to Christ.

If this is true, it follows that the Old Testament taken in its original and literal sense (and how much light has been thrown upon this by modern study of the Bible in spite of all its failings) has a permanent message for the Church. It is the record of how God prepared His people for the Incarnation, of what Israel had to learn before Christ could come, and therefore of what we must learn if His coming is to be effective in us. For we have been incorporated in the people of God and are the New Israel in Christ.

The New Testament presupposes the meaning attached in the Old Testament to nearly all its key words—God, Christ, sin, salvation, redemption, covenant, etc., etc. In fact, if a man tries to understand the New Testament without understanding the Old, he will misunderstand it. A century ago the Greek Testament was read with the help

of a lexicon of classical Greek. A generation ago many felt that the *Koine*, the spoken Greek of the first century revealed in the papyri, was the master key. To-day it is realised that a concordance to the Septuagint is a much surer guide, not only for the meaning of most of the key words, but often for the background of whole passsages. It is true that fanciful and even perverse use of this method has been made (not least in certain recent discussions of the Church and the Ministry), when a purely superficial and coincidental resemblance is made the basis of otherwise untenable doctrinal conclusions. But a right use of the Old Testament background can often bestow a flood of light on a passage. Consider our Lord's baptism.

He saw the heavens rending (σχιζομένους, Mark i. 10). This word links with Isaiah lxiv. 1(" Oh that thou wouldest rend the heavens and come down ") and is to be read in the light of this whole passage, Isaiah lxiii. 15-lxiv. 4, which suggests that here is the answer to Israel's passionate longing for God to act. He (in the person of the Spirit) now at last comes down. The Spirit again is to be interpreted in the light of the Old Testament use of the word, culminating in the concentration of the Spirit of the Lord on the Messianic rule of Isaiah xi. 1-2. The words spoken by the voice combine a Messianic note from Psalm ii. 7 with a suffering servant note from Isaiah xlii. 1.[1] In fact, to understand this and many other New Testament stories we must first steep ourselves, not merely in the particular verse in the Old Testament to which allusion is made, but in the whole passage in which the verse is found—indeed, in the whole Old Testament background of its leading ideas.

II.

But the Old Testament also gives us the moral education of the people of God. While some of its teaching is corrected in the New Testament, the rest is taken for granted. Therefore the earlier stages in the divine education cannot be skipped. This is particularly true of the younger Churches whose members start at a level far nearer that of the Israelites. " Here is an infant Church, which in ethics and religion is at the stage of the Hebrews when some of their codes were promulgated. Its teachers give it the Gospel without first giving it the law, and are surprised to find that it interprets the Gospel as if it were a law, misses the whole point of divine redemption and forgiveness, and produces an essentially legalistic Christianity. The very legalism which the teachers thought to avoid by omitting the Old Testament has descended on the Church for lack of the Old Testament rightly taught."[2] But the same principle applies to every Christian. The law is a necessary schoolmaster to bring us to Christ. The divine education given to Israel must be reproduced in every believer.

It may be worth taking an example of one aspect of Israel's education that is relevant to-day. An earlier generation, with the help of George Adam Smith and others, discovered the social relevance of the prophets, and the Church's social witness was correspondingly strengthened. The Church to-day is facing a different situation in which we might with advantage consider the social relevance of the Law in which the Mosaic and prophetic ideals were worked out in

detailed regulations. We might ponder the careful provision made for the poor in the regulations that part of the crop of each yield was to be left for them (Lev. xix. 9-10, xxv. 3-7 ; Dt. xxiv. 19-21) ; or the protection of the labourer which enforced prompt payment of wages (Leb. xix. 13 ; Dt. xxiv. 14-15). Or consider again the social significance of the rights of redemption connected with the year of Jubilee (Lev. xxv.), which secured a man's inalienable right to a certain minimum of property and were a safeguard against great concentrations of property in the hands of a few. The same aim of preventing utter destitution is found in the law prohibiting a man to take a debtor's millstone in pledge, " for he taketh a man's life in pledge " (Dt. xxiv. 6). Or again, even when a man was at the mercy of his creditor a certain minimum respect was secured for him in the law forbidding the creditor to go into the debtors house to collect his pledge. He must stand outside, while the debtor brought it out to him. In these and similar passages there is a divine message for the Christian to-day. They are still part of the curriculum in God's education of His people.

The same principle will apply throughout the whole Old Testament. There is a dangerous tendency to accept simply those parts of it " which strike a kindred note within us."[3] But as Phythican-Adams has said, " The Bible is a vehicle of Revelation, and it is not open to a believer to select from it only such passages as suit his personal taste."[4] There is an equally dangerous tendency to gloss over or explain away the low moral level of some part of the Old Testament. It has actually been argued that Old Testament polygamy in no way contradicts New Testament standards because then it is only the Bishop who must be the husband of one wife ! But this kind of sophistry finds no support in Scripture. Our Lord dismisses the Mosaic law about divorce as merely an accommodation contrary to the divine ideal made necessary by hardness of heart. Hosea (i. 4) condemns the barbarism of Jehu's revolution, although it was set on foot by Elisha and carried through in the name of the Lord (2 Kings ix. 6-10). The story remains one of barbarism and savagery, and yet at the same time part of the Biblical revelation. Israel had a long way to go, but nevertheless, God was teaching them.

Brunner [5] has suggested an apt comparison of a gramophone record. We hear the voice, but only through surface scratch. If we discard the record because of the scratch, we lose the voice. So God's word in the Old Testament comes through human weakness. There is a real growth in the understanding of God's will. But revelation is not to be held responsible for what it finds in the recipients but for the difference it makes. The Christian will neither discard those parts where he can see signs of human weakness, nor try to gloss the weakness over. He will read each part of it in the light of the whole. He will listen to God's voice through the human instruments in order to learn what God was then teaching His people of old and so teaching him to-day.

But does the original meaning of the Old Testament exhaust its significance ? Quite apart from New Testament interpretation, a careful reading of the Old Testament itself reveals that we have to take account of more than the original meaning. Consider Psalm xlv. Oesterly agrees with most scholars in regarding it as purely secular in

origin, written for the wedding of a king. The original meaning of the words addressed to the king in verse 6, " Thy throne, O God, is for ever and ever," is that " in ancient Israel the king was regarded as divine."[6] But surely this Psalm was included in the Canon, not because of its original meaning, but because post-exilic Judaism found a new meaning, applying it to the relation of the Messiah and Israel. In fact we may say that it is in the Bible on condition that it has that meaning. How then is the Christian to read it? Is he to take only its original meaning? Or the meaning which secured it its place in the Old Testament? Or a further meaning that it has in the light of our Lord (Heb. i. 8-9)? Is it not true of many Old Testament passages that they " run to Christ as tidal waves run to the sea, only to feel His reflex influence upon them"[7]? If we read the New Testament in the light of the Old, we cannot help reading the Old in the light of the New.

III.

It may be said that this opens the door to all the extravagances by which mystical interpretation has sometimes overlaid the message of Scripture. But equally concentration on the original meaning has been used to impoverish us of much of its significance. These abuses do not justify us in excluding either interpretation. Both are needed, neither can set aside the other, though the mystical interpretation must always be checked and guided by the literal.

The basic difficulty is, perhaps, that people are prepared to see God's hand in the facts which the Bible records but not in the Bible record of the facts. But the New Testament speaks of the Scripture or writing itself as inspired (2 Tim. iii. 16), and there is a sense in which inspiration is verbal, extending not merely to content but to the language. The sublimest thought would not profit us unless expressed in appropriate language. It is not being argued that the writers had an inerrant perception of either. For both form and content came by inspiration, not by dictation. But if we believe in that inspiration we need not be surprised if the Bible language has a divinely intended interpretation greater than the writer could realise.

If, however, we are going to launch out beyond the original meaning of the Old Testament and go forward from exegesis of the literal historical meaning to the interpretation of passages in the light of the Christian revelation, then we need some sign post to point us away from the maze of mere allegorism which has so often beset such efforts. Such a guide may be found in the notion that the Old Testament contains types of the redemption that is in Christ Jesus. Admittedly, typology has been used as if it were allegory. But between the two there is a clear distinction. The Greek τύπος means a rough outline, a preliminary sketch, a first draft. And so Bishop Westcott wrote[8]: " The difference (between type and allegory) is clear and decisive. Between the type and the antitype there is a historical, a real correspondence in the main idea of each event and institution. Between the allegory and the application the correspondence lies in special points arbitrarily taken to represent facts or thoughts of a different kind. . . . The understanding of the type lies in the application of a rule of proportion. The law by which it is regulated lies in the

record, the life. The understanding of the allegory depends on the fancy of the composer. He determines which of many possible applications shall be given to the subject with which he deals. A type pre-supposes a purpose in history wrought out from age to age. An allegory rests finally in the imagination."

Moreover the use of the word type in this sense has New Testament authority. St. Paul (1 Cor. x. 11) says that the events of the Exodus happened to Israel τυπικῶς—by way of type. In fact we are meant to see in them a rough draft of what was to come. It may be objected that allegorical interpretation is also found in the New Testament in Gal. iv. 21-31. But St. Paul's argument in this passage is *ad hominem*. Since they desired to return to Rabbinical Judaism, he met them on their own ground and used a rabbinical argument to refute their position. "Ye that desire to be under the law, do ye not hear the law?" Pythian-Adams[9] prefers the word "homology" to "type" in order to stress that the relationship between certain events in the Old and New Testaments is closer than that of analogy, that there is no merely accidental resemblance but a real and intimate "economic" relationship. But this seems to be safeguarded in the word "type" if we use it accurately.

The Bible is in fact built up on a typical framework. For the exodus-theme (with its associated thoughts, *e.g.*, redemption, ransom, covenant, the tabernacling Presence, the gift of inheritance, etc.) provides the clue for the interpretation of each successive stage in God's redeeming acts. The redemption from Egypt (Ex. xv. 13) is seen by the prophet as a shadow of the deliverance from Babylon. "Fear not, I have redeemed thee. . ." (Isa. xliii. 1-7).[10] Again, it provides the category in which the New Testament can speak of the historic "redemption that is in Christ Jesus" (Rom. iii. 24), which in its turn looks forward to a greater redemption. "Ye were sealed unto the day of redemption" (Eph. iv. 30): so that the Revelation constantly falls back on Exodus imagery to describe the things of the End. The plagues of Egypt, the crossing of the Red Sea, the song of Moses, the tabernacling Presence— all reappear as types of various elements in the end (Rev. viii. 11, ix. 1-3, xi. 38, xv. 3, xxi. 4).

IV.

Each stage in God's redeeming acts adumbrates a future redemption which is to recapitulate and transcend its predecessor. The resemblance is not accidental. For it is the same God who saw the affliction of His people and came down to deliver them from Egypt, who also saw the affliction of His people and came down to save them from sin. Moreover, the saving from Egypt is a step on the way to saving from sin, and there is a real correspondence between both these steps. They are typical (in the every day sense of the word) of God. Israel was saved not by law but by grace, by Jehovah's mighty hand and outstretched arm. She was separated from Egypt by passing through the baptismal waters of the Red Sea, fed with spiritual food and drink. Only after their deliverance was the demand made that "the ordinance of the law should be fulfilled in them." But as we have seen, the earlier story not only shows a correspondence with the later; it

provides the imagery, the authoritative categories by which alone the true meaning of the later can be understood. It is in fact a type of the later. Neither can be read without reference to the other. Both should be read in their total theological context.

So far we have been on firm ground, as we have been dealing with things which both the Old and New Testaments interpret typically. But may we not apply the same principle throughout our reading of the Old Testament? Whatever their mistakes in detail, were our forefathers wrong in principle when they read, for example, the priestly regulations about the tabernacle, sacrifice, priesthood, etc., as types of the redemption that is in Christ Jesus? Critical scholarship has actively discouraged such a process. But does not criticism itself suggest that the priestly institutions are the result of the way the Mosaic and prophetic revelation guided the priesthood to mould, control, purify, and develop this immemorial ritual of the Near East? In other words, the institutions of the Priestly code represent man's sense of need (for primitive worship is really a ritual expression of need), deepened and purified in the light of the revelation of a holy and righteous God. They were divinely inspired to keep alive and to deepen man's sense of need. Moreover, the priestly writers clearly had a meticulous concern for the details of ritual and symbolism. Therefore in considering, for example, the robes of the High Priest in Exodus ch. xxviii, we may take almost every point in them to be symbolic of some element in the necessary qualification of one who was to link God and man together. If Christ is God's last word to man then these needs are met in Him, and the Old Testament institutions are the shadow He cast before Him. Therefore the Christian will form from each detail to our Lord as he reads.

This treatment is not a matter of foisting an entirely new meaning on the original, quite unrelated to its historical context. It requires the most careful and accurate exegesis of the passage as an indispensable preliminary and guide to its Christian interpretation. It takes the original meaning as a type or rough draft of Christ's redemptive work and uses it as a pointer to new riches in Him. It is such reading of the Old Testament undertaken in the presence of our Lord that prompts the remark, "Did not our heart burn within us, while He talked with us by the way, and while He opened to us the scriptures?"

[1] See S. H. Hooke in *The Student Movement* for October, 1946, p. 7.
[2] G. E. Phillips, *The Old Testament in the World Church*.
[3] This tendency mars G. E. Wright's otherwise excellent book, *The Challenge of Israel's Faith*. Cf. p. 22.
[4] *The People and the Presence*, p. 86.
[5] *Our Faith*, p. 10.
[6] *The Psalms*, Vol. 1., p. 250.
[7] Quoted from a forgotten source by H. H. Rowley, *The Rediscovery of The Old Testament*, p. 16.
[8] *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, p. 200.
[9] *The Way of Atonement*, p. 10.
[10] For the concentration of Exodus-type in Isaiah, see Phythian Adams, op. cit., p. 15.