THE AIM AND PRESENT POSITION OF OLD TESTAMENT STUDIES[1]

THE title of this lecture requires some qualification and explanation; so it will be as well to start by making clear what is its purpose and scope. It might, of course, be said that those who study the Old Testament do so with a variety of aims and that is perfectly true. You have your linguist pure and simple who studies the language of the Old Testament not as a means to an end—viz. the better understanding of the Scriptures—but as an end in itself, because he happens to be interested in Hebrew as one of the Semitic group of languages. The Old Testament may be studied because of an interest in its literary qualities; it may be regarded, as Lowth and Herder regarded it in the eighteenth century, as an expression of the genius of Israel and judged in accordance with the rules of aesthetics. Again, the Old Testament may claim the attention of the historian as one of the most valuable sources which has come down to us from the Ancient East and its evidence may be used by him for the reconstruction of a past the primary interest of which for him is scientific. By other scholars, whose special interest is in the science of religions, the Old Testament will be viewed as offering abundant material to illustrate religious belief and practice and to make possible a comparison with the corresponding beliefs and practices found among other peoples. There are those who study the Old Testament because they believe that God speaks to men through it, and, of course, this supreme aim need not exclude other aims such as I have mentioned. There are those who study it from some purely academic point of view and without any feeling at all that they are treading on holy ground. I remember the shock it gave me when I discovered that the great German scholar, Paul de Lagarde, one of the foremost authorities on the versions of the Old Testament, was at the same time one of the apostles of German paganism, a predecessor of Hauer and Rosenberg. Yes, one might speak of the *aims* of Old Testament studies.

[1] Opening Lecture of Session 1943–44 at New College, Edinburgh.

What I have it in mind to discuss with you, however, is what should be the dominant aim in studying the Old Testament when one considers such study in the framework of a theological curriculum and as an integral part of it. It is a question which the teachers in the Old Testament Department of a college like this have good reason to ask themselves, because their own interest in the Old Testament may well be varied in character. It is probable, for example, that a professor of Hebrew is interested in the study of Oriental languages for their own sake, but he must learn to subordinate that perfectly legitimate, if not for him indispensable, interest, when he is expounding the Old Testament to theological students. If I may speak to the students in my audience, what is it that your Old Testament teachers should really be trying to do with you when they get you upstairs in the Hebrew classroom? Well, I hope none of you supposes that their primary aim should be the achievement by you of a theological degree. If a student is unable to take the degree more or less in his stride then he should not try to take it at all. Nor should it simply be the acquisition by you of knowledge in an interesting field of study. What your Old Testament teachers should be seeking to do is to co-operate with you in something which is closely integrated with all the rest of your theological work. Even when they are taking you through the beggarly elements of the Hebrew language, they should never lose sight of the fact that you are theological students, though, of course, they will not think it part of their duty to discourage any student who begins to evince an interest in the language for its own sake! In short, I would ask you to believe it possible that your teachers have given even more thought than you can have yet done to the question of what is relevant to your future work as ministers and what is not.

I have undertaken to say something too about the present position of Old Testament studies. Once again it is essential that I should limit myself severely even at the cost of presenting you with a very incomplete picture of what is going on. In the short time at my disposal it would obviously be impossible even to summarise the up-to-date results of the multifarious researches of Old Testament scholars. I should like to say a little about certain selected bits of investigation, but I shall not trouble overmuch about the balance of my account. My main

intention is to try to convey to you, if I can, some impression of a change which seems to be coming over Old Testament studies in certain quarters, a change of outlook and emphasis which appears in the writings of men whose standing entitles them to be taken seriously. Like most changes of the kind, it is coming gradually, and many students of the Old Testament seem as yet to be unaffected by it, though few, I imagine, will be found to be entirely hostile.

This change need not mean that the kind of questions scholars have commonly been asking and seeking to answer about the Old Testament will cease to be asked and answered. It need not mean that the scientific study of the Old Testament will be discouraged. That indeed would be a grave misfortune. We owe too much to the innumerable investigators in past generations who have served the Church in many ways so well. But the change does mean that men are beginning to ask questions of a somewhat different kind from those which have been customary for long enough. The whole problem of the relevance of the Old Testament to the Christian, which, I fancy, has troubled the layman and the working minister much more than it seems to have done many scholars, is now being faced with the utmost seriousness. The contemporary attack on the Old Testament in Germany has no doubt had something to do with this. Certainly Old Testament scholars woke up much more quickly there than they have on the whole done here. Men are asking themselves to-day with a new intensity what is meant by exegesis of the Old Testament. With what kind of presuppositions, if any, should one come to the Old Testament? Is there such a thing as strict scientific objectivity? Should it make any difference, when a man expounds the Old Testament, whether he is a Christian or not and, if so, what precisely is the difference? If a man writes a book about the Old Testament should it be impossible to tell whether he is a Christian, a Jew or a Mohammedan?

Now I think you will realise by this time that the two parts of this lecture are very closely connected. This change of interest which is already well over the horizon and is bringing a stir of new, eager life into the study of the Old Testament is simply due to the fact that men are raising in the most fundamental way the question of what is the ultimate reason why the Old Testament is worthy of study. What is the supreme

aim which the Christian scholar should set before himself in this field of investigation?

I hope you will not think it out of place if at this point I speak for myself as a responsible teacher of the Old Testament. During the past number of years I have become increasingly aware of the fact that I was speaking from within the Christian Church about a book the true understanding of which was necessary if the Church was to think correctly about herself and if the proclamation of her message was to be worthily made. I have been profoundly disturbed by the symptom that so many ministers seem to find it difficult to preach from the Old Testament and that so many, when they do use it, not seldom misuse it. I am convinced that part of the blame must lie at the door of those of us who profess to teach the Old Testament to men in course of preparation for the ministry, that in some way we must have been failing to give the necessary guidance. On the other hand I am equally convinced that part of the blame rests on men who in some cases come up to the theological college with a grotesquely inadequate knowledge of the Bible and never honestly try to remedy the defect. But I also know that there are many who know the Old Testament well but are oppressed by this curious sense of its irrelevance. The teacher ought to feel a very deep responsibility towards such men. The supreme aim of my own teaching, however imperfectly I realise it, is to try to help men to solve this problem which is bound to face them in their preaching ministry.

The title of my Inaugural Address here eight years ago was " The Necessity of the Old Testament for the Christian Church " and it is that phrase which springs unbidden into my mind still as I ask myself what should be the aim of Old Testament studies. It is simply to seek so to understand the Old Testament for oneself and expound it to others that the reason for this necessity will become clearer and control men's use of the Old Testament in meditation and teaching and preaching. Let me repeat that this does not in the least mean that the student of the Old Testament need jettison his scientific conscience. While I welcome with the utmost heartiness the new emphasis of which I have spoken, it is one of my fears that men will imagine that it is going to mean an easier time for the exegete, that now at long last Davidson's Hebrew Grammar and Kittel's Hebrew Bible and Briggs, Driver and Brown's Lexicon and

the International Critical Commentary *et hoc genus omne* of scholarly paraphernalia can be safely heaved overboard. No, I do not think our work is going to be easier, but I do think that, when the ultimate questions are asked and wrestled with, the whole task comes to seem much more worth while.

Not the least of the fortunate circumstances which attended my own career as a student was that I had the privilege of sitting at the feet of a superlatively great expositor of the Old Testament, the late Professor Adam Welch. Eight years ago it meant more than I can say that he was sitting listening to me and now all those who were his pupils feel that life is the poorer for his passing. I think it is safe to say that no one who ever sat in his classroom was left in any doubt as to the tremendous importance of the Old Testament. I doubt if he ever discussed in class the kind of questions that men are asking now; certainly the answer to many of these questions or the clue to their answer was to be found in what he said. I do not therefore feel that it will be an unwarrantable digression from my theme if I try to tell you in a few words what were some of the things that we learned from him.

One of the least regrettable aspects of the Wellhausen revolution in Old Testament criticism was the fact that it threw the prophetic movement in Israel into strong relief and directed the attention of numerous scholars to that strange succession of enigmatic figures who constitute the chief glory of Israel's religious story in Old Testament times. Among the fruits of the Wellhausen theory in this country were Robertson Smith's *The Prophets of Israel* and George Adam Smith's *Isaiah*. Now, as an interpreter of the prophets Welch takes a very high place. In his first book on the Old Testament, viz. his Kerr Lectures, entitled *The Religion of Israel under the Kingdom*, there are several chapters on the Eighth Century Prophets which are still of extraordinary value, forming as they do the nucleus of some of his subsequent lectures to his students. He made the prophets come to life and stand before us as vivid personalities with a message primarily indeed for the men of their own time but reaching beyond them to us who read their words to-day. Welch had few equals in knowing how to wrestle with an ancient passage of Scripture until its relevance for the man of to-day became manifest. And yet, as he himself admitted later, there was one grave defect in that early book which

detracts from its usefulness to-day, unless one knows how to supplement it.

Though for long Welch had felt that there was something seriously wrong with the Wellhausen theory, he had not been able to see his way through to an alternative point of view, and, in the book to which I have alluded, there was a failure to appreciate the importance of the cult for any assessment of the true meaning of Israel's religion. In his subsequent work Welch went on to supply the necessary corrective. The great advantage which he had as a Biblical expositor compared with men of the type of Wellhausen was that, having had the oversight of a congregation for many years, he knew from personal experience just what are the characteristics of a religious community, what are the dangers which menace it, how the religious life is induced and how it is maintained. And so in his teaching and in his books Welch helped us to understand the corporate religious life of Israel as a people called by God to be a Church. We learned to recognise the tension between king and prophet which was brought about by the fact that Israel existed under this double aspect of a people which was also God's people, and we learned also to understand that priest and prophet were working at essentially the same problem, that of maintaining Israel's loyalty to God, until the prophet raised still profounder questions than the priest, and opposition and misunderstanding ensued. But through it all we were kept aware of God as the great Actor in this strange history and we understood that it was His purposes which gave meaning to the whole.

To those who are familiar with the history of Old Testament scholarship Welch is, of course, mainly associated with his challenging theory about the Code of Deuteronomy and the conclusions which resulted therefrom. But whether that theory is ultimately accepted or rejected, Welch's great legacy is that he handed on to his students something of his own profoundly religious view of the Bible, a sense of the disturbance which the Old Testament sets up in human life because it makes men aware of a God, Who, though it was Hebrews who first spoke about Him, is the Living God with whom we too have to do. We learned to understand that the prophet was not a prophet by virtue of his genius but because God had laid His hand upon him, that like the Apostles he was a man sent to proclaim a message which God had put into his mouth. But it was primarily

to his own people that he was sent and, like the priest whose fellow-labourer he was, he was to be understood with reference to a religious tradition which went back at least as far as Moses, if not farther still. We were never allowed to forget that in this tradition and the religious life which it fostered there was something unique, something which was not permitted to disappear in spite of the most tragic and often repeated apostasy, something that was never completely overwhelmed by the things which Israel borrowed from her neighbours but which acted as a transforming agent to transmute these foreign elements into something of value for Israel's own peculiar religious life.

Of course, there was much else that we learned from Welch, but I have chosen to lay emphasis on these elements in his teaching because they served to prepare me at least for those developments in the study of the Old Testament which are characteristic of the situation to-day. He prepared me to find in the Old Testament not just ideas about God which men reached and the religious practices, some of them very strange and alien, of a long-past age, but something quite concrete that God was doing in His world, the history of something which was so fulfilled by Christ that for us Old and New Testaments belong together in a union of which we may rightly say, " What God hath joined together, let not man put asunder ".

Now, when I look round the contemporary scene to see what Old Testament scholars are saying and writing, I notice that, amid an extraordinary diversity of opinion on matters of detail, there is a decided increase of interest in the Hebrew and Jewish cult and the various institutions associated with Israel's community life. For example, scholars like Gunkel and Mowinckel have had their successors in their enquiry after the *Sitz im Leben* of the Psalms, who, like them, have found it in the various occasions provided by the Temple cult. It is true that there has been an undue tendency to find in the pre-exilic Hebrew cult affinities with the rituals and accompanying mythologies of the neighbours of Israel. It is not surprising that men should be more impressed by the resemblances than by the differences at a time when a wealth of new comparative material is pouring in from the discoveries made at Ras Shamra and from other quarters. But what is of most importance is that our attention is being directed to the concrete facts of the way in which Israel worshipped God. Important as the religious

ideas of the prophets are, we get things all wrong if we just skim them, so to speak, off the top of the Old Testament and suppose that the rest can be safely neglected.

In this increasing emphasis on the cult we are beginning to get a much clearer idea of how the Old Testament originally came together and to subserve what aims its books were composed and eventually included in the canon. In the most recent Introduction to the Old Testament, that by Artur Weiser of Tübingen, there is a remarkably successful attempt to find the solution of the problem of the Pentateuch along these lines.

A further, though connected, point is that in the modern study of the Old Testament the tendency is not so much to chop up bodies of narrative and law and prophecy into little bits and leave it at that, as to ask the more interesting question why things came to be put together. There is manifest a certain impatience with much that has been done in the name of Biblical criticism—an impatience which is not always justified since the problems the critics tried to solve remain—and a conviction that the time has come to ask ourselves what the Old Testament really says in the books as they lie before us to-day. To busy oneself with J, E, D and P is all very well and there are some questions about the Old Testament we can only answer in this way, but the Book of Genesis remains with the tremendous thoughts which its " compiler "—save the word!—put into it. In this great book is disclosed what it felt like to be a Hebrew girded and guarded by the God of the Covenant, with his face set like Abraham to a beckoning future, standing clear-eyed like Joseph in a world where there was much to daunt one's faith, sinning and struggling and rising again like Jacob. And, as we read, we know that this picture is not irrelevant to ourselves, that the road that Abraham walked on is the road that leads to Christ and that our pilgrimage may begin upon it, it may be at Bethel or at the fords of Jabbok.

Another and very significant portent which no one who surveys the recent literature on the Old Testament can fail to notice is the fact that at long last, after an extended period during which the approach to the Old Testament by the vast majority of specialists was almost exclusively historical, books have again begun to appear with the title *Old Testament Theology* in which the emphasis has been laid on the fundamental unity of the Old Testament point of view, though, of course, the

changes which history brings have not been lost sight of. The evolutionary treatment of the Old Testament by the writers of the so-called historical school was apt to leave one with the impression that, if the religion started from very crude and primitive beginnings and became gradually spiritualised, one could afford to take the results of the development in their final form, say in the advanced ethical monotheism of the Old Testament, or even pass over the whole of the Old Testament and content oneself with the issue of Israel's thought and experience after it had suffered a sea-change in Christianity. If the Old Testament is merely related causally to the New Testament then it might be argued that the earlier stages could be ignored except in so far as it might be a matter of academic interest to trace them. Further the tendency was to assume that, if an idea or a custom appeared early, then one might expect to find men working away from it as time went on. For example, if in early times the religious unit is the people rather than the individual, then the evolution must be towards religious individualism, especially as it would fit in nicely with the modern insistence on the rights of the individual. And so the climax of the evolution in the Old Testament was found in the individualism of Jeremiah and Ezekiel pointing forward to the supreme climax in Christianity.

Now, the new understanding of the Old Testament which seems to be on the way starts with the assumption that in all the diversity of the Old Testament material and in spite of all the evidence of change throughout the centuries, there is an underlying unity of conception which points to something quite fundamental in the structure of Israel as the people of God. The very use of the expression " people of God " suggests that the truth about the Old Testament is not that it records a development from a collective to an individualistic way of conceiving religion, but that, from start to finish and right on into the New Testament, the whole record is dominated by the thought of a people of God as a concrete entity under God's guidance and control. This people, I repeat, has a peculiar structure which is expressed in various ways and is embodied in various institutions. Inasmuch as this people owed its creation to God and was indebted to Him for its continued existence, it is possible to detect a pattern of history repeating itself in a most significant manner and in such a way that the later stage

reveals the meaning of the earlier and the earlier controls the meaning of the later.

Among the newer books the most comprehensive and satisfactory is undoubtedly Eichrodt's *Theologie des Alten Testaments* which represents a conscious attempt to break with the purely historical approach. Eichrodt looks for a single unifying conception to which he can relate the various elements in Old Testament religion and finds it in that of the Covenant between God and Israel which constituted Israel as the people of God. Now, the important thing to notice is that in the Covenant we have a reality of Israel's life which was destined to be fulfilled and transformed in the fulfilment, yet in such a way that it is in the light of what preceded that we have to understand the meaning of the fulfilment. There is a mystery involved in the earlier stage which is unveiled in the later and this mystery is creative, bringing into existence forms of receptivity which contain the promise of what is to come. To put it in another way we may say that the fulness of God's redeeming grace to Israel is never to be measured by the degree of Israel's understanding of that grace at any one time, since it is the same God Who creates the form and the fulfilment.

To take another example, there is a fundamental paradox involved in Israel's religion perhaps from the very beginning. The belief in the Election of Israel, which, there is good ground for holding, goes back to Mosaic times, implies that Yahweh *became* Israel's God, that a God Who was more than Israel's God—witness His transcendent power over the forces of nature —had chosen to associate Himself in a very peculiar way with Israel and dwell intermittently or permanently with them. It is the paradox of the far and the near God. This belief in the Tabernacling Presence is the theme of a recently published book by Canon Phythian-Adams, who argues that this belief was not something from which Israel worked away towards a universalistic thought of God. The paradox remained active in Israelite thought and pointed forward to a gracious fulfilment of what we are tempted to regard as completely outmoded, because we fail to see in it the creative hand of God preparing the way for the coming of His Christ. When the Hebrews carried about the Ark and erected the moving Tabernacle in the wilderness they were doing something which is not to be dismissed by us as no more than a curious piece of primitive

religious practice. They were witnessing to something which was real and infinitely precious in the relationship of Yahweh and His people Israel, something which was fulfilled when, as the Prologue to the Fourth Gospel puts it, *ὁ λόγος σὰρξ ἐγένετο καὶ ἐσκήνωσεν* (*tabernacled*) *ἐν ἡμῖν*. Later the Tabernacle was replaced by the Temple, a less appropriate symbol of the relationship between Yahweh and His people with its dangerous suggestion of localising in one place. Once again are we not entitled to say that it is not good enough to dismiss the Temple as if it were no more significant for us than, say, the Temple of Esagila at Babylon? Do not let us be too eager to suppose that, when the prophets on occasion denounced the Temple and the cult associated with it, they meant more than they actually did mean. The trouble was that Israel was confusing the symbol with the reality and turning the mystery of God's indwelling in Israel into something as self-evident as the stones out of which the Temple was constructed. And so there was need of Ezekiel's terrible vision when he saw the Chariot of the Divine Presence departing from the Temple in the direction of the Mount of Olives. But once again we see that the belief which Israel cherished in the indwelling presence of God in the Temple did correspond to a gracious reality which the Temple symbolised, however imperfectly. God was the Holy One *of Israel*; the whole paradox is in that familiar title. And so the Old Testament institution of the Temple found its fulfilment in the reality of the New Israel which was itself the Sanctuary of the Holy Spirit of God—not so much in the sense that each Christian is the temple, though that thought is found, but in the sense that the fellowship of believing Christians is blessed by the Indwelling Presence. This is not evolution but fulfilment.

In a very able and interesting little book called *The Relevance of the Bible*, Professor H. H. Rowley uses a helpful figure to explain the relation between the two Testaments (pp. 82f.):

> "The two Testaments are one, therefore, not in the sense that they duplicate a single message. Were that the case either could be dispensed with without serious loss. They are one in the sense in which the parts of a musical cadence are one. Without the final chord it is incomplete, a process which does not reach its goal; on the other hand, the final chord, however beautiful it may be as a chord, is robbed of its full significance without the chords that should precede it. The two Testaments are one in that together they form a single whole. To vary the figure while still finding it in music, the New Testament is the final

movement of the sonata, gathering up in its recapitulation the strains of the exposition, but making them new by weaving them afresh and adding to them, and fully intelligible only in the light of what has gone before it."

Professor Rowley's point can be illustrated by the way in which Jesus seems to have woven together the separate strands of the Son of David, the Son of Man and the Suffering Servant of the Lord and represented Himself as the fulfilment of these hopes and dreams of His people—a fulfilment which transcended them all. In the same way the New Testament writers took the various kinds of sacrifice and found in Christ the fulfilment of one and another of them. In all this kind of interpretation we have to exercise due caution and there will be constant need for the scientific conscience of the scholar to guard against extravagances of fanciful exegesis. But what I do contend for is that, when the New Testament writers read their Old Testament—usually in the Septuagint version, it must be confessed—and said again and again in the amazement of discovery the equivalent of Peter's famous "This is that" when faced by the miracle of Pentecost, they were saying something which on a broad view was essentially and profoundly true. In spite of criticisms which must be passed I think that authors like Father Hebert in *The Throne of David* and Canon Phythian-Adams in his various books and articles have been doing pioneer work of extraordinary importance, and I would draw attention to the fact that from the New Testament side there is a notable movement to co-operate with Old Testament scholars in a task the importance of which for the future of the Church cannot easily be exaggerated.

It would not be right in this connection to omit a reference to the exegetical work of Wilhelm Vischer, the best known expositor of the Old Testament belonging to the Barthian school of thought. Many of his insights are most valuable and we can learn much from him. I think, however, that he sometimes falls into the mistake of treating the Old and New Testaments too much on a level and further of finding types of Christ in artificial ways. But it would be a real misfortune if what is defective in Vischer's work were allowed to obscure the service he and his theological friends are rendering in contending for what may be called the contemporaneousness of the Old Testament. It is men who think as they do who in our day have stood up to the massed might of a neo-paganism

against which the great majority of the intellectuals in the Universities of Germany were unprepared to engage in battle.

I am not advocating obscurantism nor do I wish to decry human reason. What does seem to me irrational is for someone to object to my presuppositions on the ground that I should not have any, while failing to see that he has presuppositions of his own. If we do not come to the Old Testament with Christian presuppositions then what are we to say to the Jew who is readier than he has been for centuries to enter into friendly dialogue with us?[1]

When a couple of centuries ago or so scholars claimed the right to treat the Old Testament like any other book and proceeded to act on this right, they did something which has led to great and valuable discoveries for which we shall remain in their debt. They have their successors and the work will go on and we shall do well to give heed to its results. But there comes a point when the critic, if he is wise, has to pull himself up short and remind himself that, though he may treat the Old Testament as an ordinary book for certain purposes and, it may be, reduce it to the semblance of a scrap-heap, he cannot hope in this way to penetrate to the ultimate mystery of a book which has its unity not in itself but in God. I always come back to this myself, that, when on the Emmaus road in the gathering dusk three travellers walked together and one of them expounded the Scriptures to the other two, so that their hearts burned within them, the men were not listening to a misinterpretation, and there must be something far wrong with our handling of the Old Testament if it never reproduces the experience of the burning heart.

NORMAN W. PORTEOUS.

New College, Edinburgh.

[1] *See* Lev Gillet, *Communion in the Messiah* (Lutterworth, 1943), reviewed in *The Evangelical Quarterly*, Vol. XV, p. 234.