



The Old Testament and the Christian Gospel

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The same prophet who said, “remember the former things of old” (Isa 46:9) also said, “Remember not the former things” (43:18). Couldn’t he make up his mind? Second Isaiah’s dilemma won’t go away. Should we remember the former things (i.e., the Old Testament) or not? In its councils, documents, and practice, the church has confessed the Old Testament to be the written Word of God. Yet it’s never been quite that easy. From Marcion to Bultmann, there have been other voices which have denied the Old Testament the status of living Word of God for Christian people. And this is not merely an academic or historical debate. Parishes wouldn’t stand for the omission of a New Testament lesson and/or gospel reading in their public worship; something would be wrong. But give us a baptism, a long anthem, or a few extra announcements and, even now, in many congregations we’ll take a razor to the Old Testament lesson with nary a thought of losing something essential to worship, much less to life itself. The reason is simple, though it can be expressed in a variety of complicated hermeneutical arguments: the Old Testament doesn’t say anything about Jesus.

So what are we to do? This is where, it seems to me, many discussions of the place of the Old Testament in Christian life and ministry come to grief. In their very attempts to lift up the Old Testament, they give away the store. In one way or another, the argument is made that the Old Testament is needed to prepare the way for the New Testament and to protect it from distortion. Now that claim is true; it could be and has been profitably developed. But the trouble is that the statement includes a tacit admission that the Old Testament does not occupy the center. Its importance is to inform and protect the center (which is the New Testament gospel of Christ), but its own witness to the center is only prophetic or indirect.

The German homiletician, Rudolf Bohren, for example, argues that the Old Testament is needed to protect against the spiritualization of the message of the New Testament. In its concreteness, in its tie to a particular history, in its unbreakable prophetic link to the New Testament through identifiable words and

texts, it prevents the gospel from becoming unattached to this world and this life and the specificity of God’s work in history.¹ Elizabeth Achtemeier is more colorful in making a similar point. The Old Testament, she says, protects us from “*Reader’s Digest* religion”—the popular, acculturated, bloodless, and indeterminate faith that masquerades as American Christianity.²

John Bright takes a different tack. The Old Testament, he argues, addresses a B.C. humanity—people as they are without Christ. It gives us an unadorned, mercilessly accurate picture of the human race and, because there is still this B.C. life in all of us, the Old Testament

addresses us as well, as people on the way to Christ.³ Wolfgang Trillhaas agrees: “Even if it were possible for the Old Testament sermon to provide us with nothing other than a picture of human beings without illusions, that would be enough.”⁴

These are all important and accurate affirmations. The Old Testament, through its essential historicity, protects Christianity from becoming a philosophy about Jesus. It keeps our noses rubbed in the reality of creation and reminds us that there is, in God’s name, something to be said about all things, not just “religious” things. It brings us face to face with the uncompromising message of the prophets and their insistence that worship and social ethics are two sides of the same coin. It stimulates our thought with the practicality of the wisdom literature, assuring us that biblical religion and scientific method are not incompatible enemies. It offers the gift of the Psalter and the realization that the voice of human response is an integral part of the presentation of biblical theology.

Again, the difficulty, in my opinion, with these important statements is not that they are false, but that they say too little. They are, in a sense, “Yes, but...” sentences. Yes, the church’s mission is to proclaim life and salvation in Jesus Christ, but, without the Old Testament, we are in danger of distorting that message into a spiritualized, disembodied, other-worldly, and a-historical gospel (which then is no gospel at all).

What is the alternative? Clearly, it is not to attempt to honor the Old Testament by denying or compromising the centrality of Christ and the gospel of liberation from sin, death, and the power of the devil. That could be a result of an emphasis on the Old Testament, in itself, without maintaining the tension of reading it through the cross. Setting aside the lens of the gospel when reading the Old Testament, yet still according it the full authority of the Word of God, can produce the sectarian and legalistic distortions we know so well—the willingness of a Jehovah’s Witness, for example, to die rather than to receive a blood transfusion, and the willingness of a white South African to kill to protect his or her position as a member of a covenant people, chosen and established by God to build a theocratic community on the African continent. Let us hasten to recognize that the same kind of idolatrous readings (i.e., seeing the text as

¹Rudolf Bohren, *Predigtlehre* (Munich: Christian Kaiser, 1980) 120.

²Elizabeth Achtemeier, *The Old Testament and the Proclamation of the Gospel* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1973) 35-44.

³John Bright, *The Authority of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1975) 234-241.

⁴Wolfgang Trillhaas, *Evangelische Predigtlehre* (Munich: Christian Kaiser, 1964) 86 (my translation).

divine, but without the spirit of Christ) can be done also by us and also with New Testament texts, so we dare have no smugness here. We need the constant reminder that to bring life, the Scriptures, including the Old Testament, must be read through Jesus Christ. As one who spent his whole life explicating the clear sense of the Old Testament on its own terms, Gerhard von Rad surprised many with his claim that “there is no sentence in the Old Testament that we do not have to interpret anew” by the “Spirit of Christ.”⁵ But he is obviously correct. The question is whether or not we must thereby import an alien center to the Old Testament or relegate it to the “Yes, but...” periphery of Christian proclamation.

By now it is obvious that I want to deny both of these. I want to claim that the Old

Testament bears witness not to important peripheral issues *for* the Christian faith, but to essential central issues *of* the Christian faith—and that it does so even when read in its clear historical sense. On the other hand, I do not mean to say that this witness is self-evident. Other intelligent and pious people, especially within the Jewish community, read the same texts without this sense. My reading is shaped by my Christian confession (while at the same time always at work re-shaping that confession by the norm of Scripture itself).

How is such a position possible? At least two things must be said, one deriving from a Christian (and biblical) doctrine of God, the other from a reading of the texts themselves.

First, it is the testimony of Scripture that God is One and the confession of the church that God is Three-in-One. God has always been One and Three-in-One. God moves in history, to be sure, but this does not mean, either in Scripture or in the church's teaching, that a unitarian God became binitarian on Christmas and trinitarian on Pentecost. The obvious conclusion then is that wherever the Scriptures speak of God, whether in New Testament or Old, they bear witness to God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. To say this is to say nothing new. Christian people do not generally ask whether a biblical text is from the Old Testament or the New. They hear the Bible as Word of God and assume that they have been addressed by God with a word of hope or challenge which means to speak to them.⁶ They believe that the God they encounter in these texts is the Father of Jesus Christ.⁷ Yet the Christian doctrine of the Trinity needs occasional repetition, since popular talk often limits the God of the Old Testament to the role of God the Father—the First Person of the Trinity, the Creator (forgetting that in the church's confession it is God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, who is the Creator).

It might be thought that such a trinitarian confession is dangerous to the Old Testament's own self-understanding, since people at that time knew nothing of this teaching. Properly employed, though, the doctrine allows the Old Testament to be itself. Although a trinitarian perspective may invite us to

⁵Gerhard von Rad, "Ancient Word and Living Word," *Interpretation* 25 (1961) 12.

⁶Cf. Terence E. Fretheim, "The Old Testament in Christian Proclamation," *Word & World* 3 (1983) 223-237.

⁷Cf. Walther Zimmerli, "Von der Gültigkeit der 'Schrift' Alten Testamentes in der christlichen Predigt," *Textgemäss*, ed. A. H. J. Gunneweg and O. Kaiser (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1979) 188.

seek christological ramifications of the work of God in the Old Testament, it frees us from the need to "rescue" the Old Testament by finding Jesus under every bush or to "redeem" an Old Testament sermon by pulling Jesus into the last paragraph. If God is indeed always and everywhere one and always and everywhere triune, then whenever I bear faithful witness to the God of Scripture—Scripture as it stands and as it reads in its true historical sense—I bear witness to Christ. It is not the word "Jesus" which makes a sermon Christian; it is its faithfulness to Scripture and to the Christian confession of Christ and the gospel. This does not mean we should play silly games—let's see how often we can preach without mentioning Jesus—but it does mean that all artificial and arbitrary connections between the testaments are rendered unnecessary. It also suggests that there is not just one acceptable way to speak of the relationship between Old Testament and New, not even the important notion of promise and fulfillment. It is not only Old Testament words of promise which are christological. Where the Old Testament speaks of God,

it speaks of Christ and we are set free to say what it says (though never, of course, released from the task of interpretation, in the light of the gospel, for the present situation).

The second basis for my assertion that the Old Testament bears witness to the center of the gospel is the simple reading of the texts themselves. What do I mean? We will look in vain for the word “Jesus,” and even those texts which the church has traditionally understood to point most directly to the coming Messiah must first be granted a historical reading which takes seriously their significance for the community in which they were originally spoken. But precisely within that original community the texts announce the breaking in of the kingdom of God. It is not the case that they only look for something which is to come, thus giving the Old Testament simply a preparatory function. According to their own clear witness, which we have recognized to be the Word of God, they speak of deliverance and renewal, life and faith, hope and love in their own Now. This is not proleptic healing; it is healing. This is not future forgiveness; it is forgiveness. This is not salvation with an eye toward...; it is salvation. The people of the Old Testament knew themselves to be addressed with the promise and challenge of God’s Word in their own day. It was not given to them merely so that they could be custodians of it until the day of Jesus, when it would make sense. When Second Isaiah speaks of the renewal of the world by the breakthrough of God, he expects something to happen in his own day. And he is not disappointed. With a radical shift of political realities, God intervenes and releases his people from captivity. Others may have been disappointed. They didn’t see the final transformation of creation itself, leaving behind pain and evil forever—but neither have we. Their problem of “already/not yet” in describing the work of God is no more difficult than our own. It is no accident that Second Isaiah is called an evangelist. In speaking of the renewing, life-giving work of God, he speaks of Christ. Where God delivers, Christ is at work. And the Old Testament witnesses everywhere to a delivering God. It speaks of the center.

Now, of course, these Old Testament texts look beyond themselves as well—sometimes deliberately, sometimes apparently not. No Word of God is ever finished. It is always there, giving life to yet another generation, pointing to and waiting for the fulness of the final establishment of the kingdom. But saying

this does not diminish the reality of the present deliverance and the real presence of God therein. The real presence of God includes the work of Christ. So, once again, we are freed to read the texts for themselves, allowing them to inform our understanding of what God is about on their own terms, rather than forcing them into a particular confessional mold to make them Christian. While it is a Christian confessional position which shapes my reading of the texts, it is that same position which allows me to read the texts for what they want to say.

One problem: If all this is going on in the Old Testament, why do we need Jesus? It’s a fair question. The first answer is a negative one. We don’t need Jesus to show us a new way of salvation—gospel instead of law. Salvation by works of the law is not the Old Testament’s teaching. It may have been an abuse of the Old Testament on the part of some people, but that is no surprise. It is still taught by many as an abuse of the New Testament. We don’t need Jesus to save us from an Old Testament God of wrath. There is wrath in the Old Testament, the hidden God which drives us to Christ, but this is not a phenomenon of a particular historical period. It still exists. The dialectic of law and gospel is not resolved by a move from one chronological

period to another.

So, what do we gain in Jesus? One thing, of course, is knowledge. In Jesus Christ we see most clearly the nature of God. Virtually nothing of what I have written would be possible without knowing God in Jesus. There would be no trinitarian confession and no Christological insight with which to focus my reading. Although the Old Testament everywhere bears witness to Christ, I can only see this after having seen Jesus. It must all be re-interpreted; but, since God is God, it is all there.

Ultimately, to be sure, we need Jesus because God sent Jesus. Jesus is more than the solution to an equation we have set up. We would never have predicted Jesus because of our need. He comes as gift and surprise. His coming announces that something is afoot within God himself. More is at stake than simply our knowledge of God. In Christ is the fulness of God. This means, on the one hand, that in Christ everything of which the Old Testament speaks finds its completion. On the other hand, it means that God is newly and totally committed here. The New Testament is genuinely new—for us and for God—yet without denying the validity and actuality of the Old. Despite all the hints about the role of the suffering mediator and the many references to the suffering of God in the Old Testament, it is only in Jesus that we learn the way of the cross—that, even for God; the defeat of death is through death. The radicality of that New Testament understanding is not incompatible with the Old Testament—far from it—but it is finally illuminated and actualized only at the cross, and from there it colors everything we say and do. Further, in Christ, what had been a debate in principle about the resurrection of the dead becomes ratified in a particular event. The resurrection catches up all the Old Testament victories of God, but its connection with the cross prevents a triumphalistic theology. It is seeing this marvelous resolution of several possible readings of the Old Testament which, in Pauline terms, lifts its veil and lets it proclaim the gospel of Christ.

Well now, so what? What's better about this understanding, this claim that the Old Testament partakes of the center rather than merely defining the

periphery? I have already said that I think it is more faithful to our own confessions and to the text's own self-understanding. That's the main point, but beyond that, it affects fundamentally how we understand our relationship to those wonderful and different elements of Old Testament literature—the unwashed reality and diversity of its characters, the social commentary of the prophets, the thoughtfulness of the wisdom teachers, the human voices of the Psalter, the connections with creation. These are no longer “Yes, but...” issues. They are not just important peripheral items. Their task is not to protect the center, but to enlarge it.

So it is no longer a matter of saying: We must proclaim the gospel of salvation in Jesus Christ—and, oh, by the way, that has social implications. It is rather to say that there is no gospel without a radical social edge. It is not enough to say that after we tell you about Jesus as your personal Savior we will talk about some ethical ramifications for the environment. There is no faithful talk about Jesus which does not know him as cosmic Creator and which does not tear down any wall we try to build between the religious and the secular, the spiritual and the physical. It is not enough to say that it is possible to be both a Christian and a scientist, since the two realms really answer quite different questions. There is no revelation of God which does not mean to be in conversation with the whole world of human understanding. It is insufficient to say

that we have to speak only of God's initiative, leaving the place of human response to post-salvation spontaneous goodness. The God of Israel works in a dialogical relationship with people, who pour out words of lament and praise—an insight which must and will inform our understanding of God's work in Jesus.

The concerns and insights, the gifts and revelations, the women and men of the Old Testament are brought onto center stage, not to show off for their own sake, but because God has put them in the script and it is the only script we have. They add their voices to the whole Word of God for the sake of the gospel. It is up to us to hear those voices, to study and learn from them, and to teach them as faithfully as we can.