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The Old Testament in the Christian Church

ROBERT J. OWENS

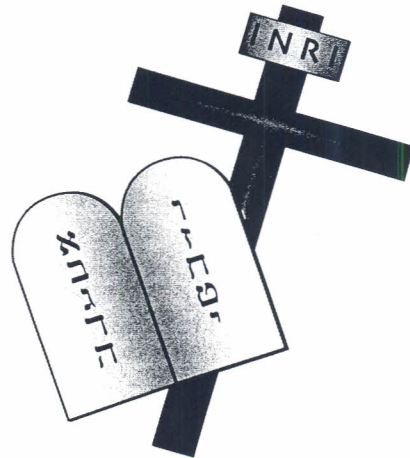
Reflecting on the troubled history of the Hebrew scriptures in the Christian Church, I recently remembered the experience of a senior student at our seminary some years ago. He had been asked to preach and lead the Sunday morning service in a small rural Christian Church during the absence of its minister, and he had chosen to preach on a passage in the book of Jeremiah. After the service he was distressed to be pulled aside by two of the church leaders and told rather harshly that theirs was a *New Testament* church and that preaching from the Old Testament had no place in a New Testament church.

Many in the Stone-Campbell tradition will recognize such a misguided attitude as stemming from a distortion of Thomas and Alexander Campbell's emphasis on the distinction between the Mosaic and Christian dispensations. Their polemic in the nineteenth century was largely against the tendency of Reformed (Calvinist) churches to equate the Old and New Testaments as authoritative in the same immediate way for Christians. In such writings as the "Sermon on the Law" (1816/1846), the goal was to clarify the unique normativeness of apostolic teaching for the church.¹ But it was all too easy for some of their successors to simplistically conclude that the Hebrew scriptures had no place in the church, except perhaps as the artifact of a defunct religion.

While we lament such a misunderstanding, we must nevertheless face squarely the question of the legitimacy of the Hebrew scriptures within the Christian biblical canon. Many Christians find major problems with the Old Testament, from the theologian Marcion in the second century to the harried modern minister whose congregation complains that the Old Testament is too hard to understand and seems irrelevant to their lives.²

Through the centuries, Christian difficulties with the Old Testament have tended to cluster into three major categories:

1. **Legalism.** Whereas Christianity celebrates being saved by grace through faith, a huge corpus of some 613 commandments occupies much of the Pentateuch of Israel. These standards of covenant life for Israel occupy a major place in both the foreground and the background of many of the Old Testament writings. They are presented, not as impossible ideals, but as concrete requirements that can and must be obeyed as a condition of the covenant blessings.
2. **Nationalism.** Whereas Christianity glories in its message of salvation for all people throughout the world, the religion of the Old Testament centers on one nation-state or ethnic group, and much of the



literature is quite blunt about Israel's special status—in contrast to the other nations—as the divinely chosen people. This exclusivism is softened only slightly by some more universal perspectives in the later books.

3. Preoccupation with this world. Whereas eternal life through the resurrection of Jesus Christ is absolutely central to the Christian faith, only one or two late passages in the Hebrew Bible speak clearly of a life after death. For most of its history, Israel had no doctrine of any individual life after the grave. Such concepts as salvation and shalom (peace) meant the goodness of divine blessing this side of the grave.

Most Christian difficulties with the Old Testament fall under one of these headings. Together they simply highlight the fact that all of the Old Testament is pre-Christian in time, and much of it seems sub-Christian in spirituality. It seems altogether helpful to be straightforward about these difficulties in our teaching, whether in the college and seminary classroom or in the church. A straightforward approach serves to validate students' honest but often unvoiced negative reactions to many Old Testament texts, which they might otherwise think to be merely a mark of their own spiritual inadequacy. But more than that, it provides an opportunity to clarify the rich relationship between Holy Scripture and Christian tradition.

Marcion's move to expunge the Old Testament from the Christian Bible was a crisis for the infant church. He was eventually defeated by Tertullian, Irenaeus, Hippolytus, and others. Some of their arguments are still convincing today; some are not. But the collective mind of the church came to the conclusion that the Hebrew scriptures should not be discarded. The eventual consensus was that the Hebrew scriptures would be retained but would have a secondary status as the "Old" Testament and would not simply be merged with the apostolic books that constituted the New Testament.

Therefore, our Bible does not begin with Matthew, but with Genesis, and in almost all printed Bibles a clear separation occurs between the last book of the Old Testament and the first book of the New Testament. (Think how much more convenient it would be to have all the books together in a single, alphabetically ordered collection.) Why is this? The answer is simple: Tradition. It is what has been handed down by the church from the earliest centuries. Today, even if a church is troubled by the violence of Joshua or the skepticism of Qoheleth, it does not have the option to remove those books from the biblical canon. The tradition of the universal Christian church will not permit that. To put it positively, the broad tradition of the church says that the Old and New Testament books—and only those books (excepting the deuterocanonicals)—have a unique, divinely imparted authority and capacity to teach the truth of salvation. So read them, the church says; keep at them even if they are difficult and off-putting, for something essential of the word of God may be found there. Remember that the grand affirmation of scripture in 2 Tim 3:16–17 is speaking of the Old Testament writings.

Facing the difficulties of the Old Testament can thus provide opportunity for helping people see that church and Bible are bound together. As Carl Braaten has expressed it:

Where there is no church, there is no Bible and no need for it. That is why the Bible can only be studied as Holy Scripture within the context of the church. Minus the fact of the church, the Bible is only an arbitrary collection of ancient documents, essentially on a par with other collections. The Bible is what it is acknowledged to be as such only where the Word is preached and the sacraments are administered. . . . The Bible forms the church, and the church has the Bible. The church is in the Bible and the Bible is in the church. The

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church produced the Bible and the Bible produces the church. Scriptures witness to the church, and the church witnesses to the scriptures.³

Talking openly about the church's historic wrestling with the difficulties of the Old Testament can make it easier to help people understand this tight connection between scripture and church.

One of the things that should flow from this understanding is a renewed appreciation of participating in as large a circle as possible in our conversation with the sacred text. This weekend a number of us have mentioned important things we have learned from formally unschooled persons who were at the same time devout and intelligent Bible readers. Indeed, I too can say that many times a Sunday Bible study class has broken open something to me that my independent exegesis had missed: the church with the Bible, the Bible with the church. And if we can expand our circle of Bible study companions even wider to include contemporary Asian and African and Hispanic Christians, the Victorians, the sixteenth-century Reformers, the great medieval commentators, and the patristic writers of West and East (including the Syriac-speaking church), how much richer will be the fruits of our study. Many persons in the contemporary church, left to their own sensibilities, might discard the Old Testament. The fact that they and we cannot do so may help us remember the deep linkage between scripture and the tradition of the church.⁴

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Back to the problem itself. Some solid theological principles bind the Old Testament to the New Testament and to the lived Christianity of any age. When asked why we hang on to the Jewish scriptures, we can say more than simply, "Tertullian tells us so." First, the God whom Jesus called Father, to whom he prayed, and whom he sought to obey was none other than Yahweh of the Hebrew Bible. John McKenzie puts it crisply: "It was not necessary for the disciples to ask Jesus, as the Israelites asked Moses, 'What is His Name?'"⁵ Not with some previously unknown deity did Jesus identify himself, but with the God of the Jewish scriptures. Furthermore, Jesus and the apostolic writers who followed him freely quoted the

Old Testament as an authoritative source of divine truth pertaining to the gospel.

Second, it is only the scriptural story of Israel that provides a context for understanding such titles of Jesus as Savior, Messiah, and Lord. Remove the earliest Christian confessions from that framework—separate the New Testament from the Old—and those confessions can be made to say radically different things from what the earliest Christians meant by them.

It is the history of Israel that sets Jesus apart from all culture-heroes, king-saviors, cosmic men, and mythological bearers of life; or, in more modern terms, from political saviors, economic prophets, scientific sages, military heroes, psychotherapist bearers of life. It is remarkable, it is even sharply surprising, when one reflects that only as the Savior of Israel can Jesus be recognized as none of these other things.⁶

This is simply a more specific application of what Alexander Campbell framed more generally: "All the leading words and phrases of the New Testament are to be explained and understood by the history of the Jewish nation and God's government of them."⁷

Third, the apostolic church understood itself to be nothing less than a continuation of the covenant people, Israel, as presented in the Old Testament. The phraseology may differ somewhat from place to place—"inward Jew," "Israel of God," "the branch grafted onto the vine," "the true Israel," and so on—but these all

reflect the basic conviction that the church of Christ stands in solidarity with the chosen people of the Old Testament.

These principles that bind the Hebrew Bible to the apostolic faith call for the church to read the Old and New Testaments in continual dialogue with one another. If our Lord was the fullest and clearest revelation of God there could be, then the features we see in him should sensitize us to things we might otherwise miss in the Old Testament. For example, the love and self-givingness of God that is revealed so strikingly in the gospel message can enable us to see the vulnerability and self-sacrificing aspects of Yahweh in the Hebrew scriptures, divine characteristics that are present but not so pronounced there. The reading moves in the other direction also. By definition, the incarnation in the Christian gospel is a stunning explication of the divine immanence: God is personal, focused in his being, knowable, close. Continual exposure to the holiness of the predominantly transcendent God of the Old Testament, the wholly other, is necessary if we are to grasp the full astounding significance of this incarnation. It helps us realize *who* and *what* was embodied by that Nazareth carpenter. Taking the Old Testament seriously in its own right can also help us keep a grasp on trinitarian orthodoxy. God the Father did not cease being God the Father when God the Son became incarnate of the Virgin Mary.

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The identity of the God who is revealed in both Testaments invites a balanced scriptural diet: the New Testament gospel dramatizes his having come close in the incarnation, and the Hebrew scriptures show him especially to be other, holy, creator of all, sovereign over all reality. This, of course, is a matter of emphasis, not an absolute difference between the Testaments. Although there is no direct reference to Jesus in the Old Testament, Yahweh is portrayed there as involving himself intimately in human history in countless ways. And in the New Testament, there is no failure to uphold the majestic transcendence of God, whose saving rule over all world history has begun in Christ.

The Old Testament history of Israel as the context for defining Christ also has a practical corollary. It is not to detract from the New Testament to observe that when isolated, it is more susceptible to being hijacked by alien ideologies. Not only in modern times have wayward groups tried to redefine Jesus into something quite far from the apostolic confessions, but today we have Jesus the liberationist guerilla fighter, Jesus the greatest salesman, Jesus the perfect Jungian therapist, Jesus the Marxist reformer, Jesus the anti-“heterosexist,” Jesus the white supremacist, and so on.

As already noted, the subject matter and the key words of Jesus’ own sayings, many of the challenges and questions raised by his contemporaries, the most important terms used to characterize his unique identity (Messiah/Christ, Savior, etc.)—all these come from the Hebrew scriptures. To read the Old Testament, to be conversant with its grammar and its key ideas, is to gain an access to the Jesus of the New Testament writings that cannot be had any other way. This is true not just linguistically but also in the deeper sense of gaining entry into the appropriate worldview, having one’s mind textured by what Alexander Campbell called “the sacred dialect.” It is not to deny at all that the gospel transcends and often even subverts the concepts of the Old Testament. Recall, for example, how the Israelite ideas of “king” and “promised land” are turned inside out in the New Testament. But even the transcendence and subversion are grasped best by one who is at home in the ancient scriptures.

That is not at all to say that a person must know the Old Testament (or the New, for that matter) in order to have true saving faith in Christ. But the church needs to understand Jesus as the Messiah (and Savior and

Suffering Servant) of *Israel* as the baseline for communicating the gospel to those who have had no contact with the sacred story. It is *as* the Messiah of Israel—not *despite* his being the Messiah of Israel—that Jesus Christ is the Messiah for the whole world in every age.

To see that the church is a continuation of the life of Israel is also to open ourselves to be instructed in several new ways by the Old Testament. First, that image enables the Christian to know that the Christian life and the life of the church is a part—a culminating part, indeed, but still a part—of a wondrous long story of divine providential care of the world that began long ago. Walter Brueggemann, among others, has again summoned us to see the importance of memory in biblical faith, in a way evocative of Gerhard Von Rad. The skeletal framework of the Old Testament, for Brueggemann, is the often-repeated confession that remembers the mighty acts of God in the ongoing experience of Israel.⁸

A promise was made to our fathers and mothers in the midst of great precariousness.

God delivered Israel from slavery to freedom with a great show of power that defeated the greatest political power of the time.

God led Israel in the wilderness, a place of precarious pilgrimage, and there he nourished and sustained his people.

God brought Israel to the good land that he had promised.

Second, to rehearse this Old Testament story of the mighty acts of Yahweh as the preparation for Jesus Christ is to make it almost impossible to reduce Jesus to a mere tool of private psychological self-help. It is to make it nearly impossible to think of God as the God only of my church, this church. It is to make it nearly impossible to think that what happens in my little corner of history is the center of things. And it is to become grounded in the knowledge that the gospel is not simply an “ambulance” that God suddenly dispatched to clean up an unforeseen emergency in human history. Rather, my story of faith is part of a long, great story of salvation that began “before the foundations of the world” and encompasses the entire planet.

That centuries-long narrative of Israel moved from Mesopotamia to Syria to Palestine to Egypt to Palestine again, and finally, back to Mesopotamia and to the entire Mediterranean world. Because it is a story, not a philosophy, what is on offer from God in Christ is not a place to sit, but an open-ended journey, like that of Israel, that is headed for a destination and will involve me in risk and change and probably some failure and sin. But even my failure and sin need not terminate my story of faith, because God in his grace can move it forward as he moved Israel forward and brought hope and newness even out of disaster. This is only part of what it means to know ourselves as a branch grafted onto the older vine.

There are many smaller practical values of the Old Testament for the church that could be mentioned. J. Philip Hyatt published an especially suggestive list that includes such things as providing a correction against exaggerated individualism; guarding against a false asceticism; calling attention to the preciousness and beauty of the natural world; and prompting reflection about social justice.⁹ The divine creation of the world also is dealt with more fully in Old Testament texts. A major contribution that should be highlighted is the Old Testament’s marvelous book of prayer and hymnody, the book of Psalms. There is no New Testament Psalter, for the simple reason that the apostolic churches found in the Hebrew Psalter beautiful and compelling lyrics for the expression of their own worship as Christians. Rick Marrs speaks of the importance of the psalms in his paper elsewhere in this volume.

It is probably evident already that this discussion assumes that the ultimate authority of the Old Testament as well as of the New depends on its witness—direct or indirect (and it may be very indirect in places)—to Jesus Christ, who lived, died, and rose again for the world’s salvation and who lives through word and Spirit in the world today. The Christian church reads and preaches from the Old Testament in the light of the gospel of its Lord, who was and is the fullest and clearest revelation of the word of God. We reverently but carefully study the different documents of the Old Testament, always appraising their congruence

to the gospel and to what the early church fathers called the "rule of faith." But we exercise all caution not to squeeze the Old Testament into a Christian mold that it does not fit, because it is only as the scripture of ancient Israel and postexilic Judaism that it is also the precious scripture of the church.

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NOTES

- 1 Compare Thomas Campbell, *The Declaration and Address of the Christian Association of Washington [PA] (1809)*, proposition 4: "That although the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are inseparably connected, making together but one perfect and entire revelation of the Divine will, for the edification and salvation of the Church, and therefore in that respect cannot be separated; yet as to what directly and properly belongs to their immediate object, the New Testament is as perfect a constitution for the worship, discipline, and government of the New Testament Church, and as perfect a rule for the particular duties of its members, as the Old Testament was for the worship, discipline, and government of the Old Testament Church, and the particular duties of its members."
- 2 A. H. J. Gunneweg contends that the problem of the relationship of the Old Testament to Christianity "is the problem of Christian theology." A. H. J. Gunneweg, *Understanding the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978), 2.
- 3 Carl E. Braaten, *Principles of Lutheran Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), 22.
- 4 By church tradition here, I am of course not referring to every idea and practice that ever surfaced anywhere in the world church. Rather, I mean those basic, structural doctrines and practices that have been seen as constitutive of the apostolic faith wherever trinitarian Christianity has existed. This is close to that common core of the faith that Vincent of Lérins (fl. a.d. 400s) had in mind when referring to "what has been believed everywhere, always, and by all." C. S. Lewis coined the phrase "mere Christianity" for this; some modern theologians favor the expression "the Great Tradition."
- 5 John McKenzie, *A Theology of the Old Testament* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday Image, 1974), 337.
- 6 John McKenzie, "The Significance of the Old Testament for Christian Faith in Roman Catholicism," in *The Old Testament and Christian Faith*, ed. Bernard W. Anderson (New York: Herder & Herder, 1969), 109.
- 7 Alexander Campbell, *The Christian System* (1835), 119.
- 8 See his discussion of the "primal narrative" in Walter Brueggemann, *The Bible Makes Sense* (Winona, Minn.: St. Mary's, 1977), 45–52.
- 9 J. Philip Hyatt, "The Place of the Old Testament in Christian Faith," in *The Renewal of the Church: The Panel Reports*, ed. W. B. Blakemore, vol. 2, *The Reconstruction of Theology*, ed. R. G. Wilburn (St. Louis: Bethany, 1963), 60–61. Everett Ferguson also offers a list of the values of the Old Testament that focuses more sharply on matters of personal religion in his essay "Christian Use of the Old Testament," in *The World and Literature of the Old Testament*, ed. John T. Willis (Austin: Sweet, 1979), 365–73. No one interested in this topic should overlook the excellent statement, "Concerning the Old Testament," that was produced by the Second Vatican Council in chapter 4 of the *Constitution on Divine Revelation*. See W. M. Abbot and J. Gallagher, eds., *The Documents of Vatican II* (New York: Guild, 1966).