



The Crucified Messiah and the Endangered Promises

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I. THE NEW TESTAMENT EVIDENCE

“Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures” (1 Cor 15:3).^{*} This statement is part of the tradition which Paul had received and handed on when he first preached the gospel at Corinth. In his argument against some people who denied that there would be a future resurrection of the dead, Paul only makes use of the second part of the kerygmatic summary: “Christ was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures and he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve,” etc. The reference to Christ’s death is included because it was an integral part of the traditional formulation. Paul presupposes that not only the resurrection of Christ but also his death “for our sins” was part of the gospel preached by Peter and the other early witnesses as well as by himself.

For the purposes of this article, the most important fact is that both parts of the formula include the phrase “in accordance with the scriptures” and that “Christ” is the common grammatical subject. To most Christians at Corinth, *Christos* may simply have been a second name or an honorific designation of Jesus, but both Paul and those who formulated the tradition certainly knew that the word meant “the Anointed One,” i.e., the Messiah. It is remarkable, however, that neither Paul nor the formula which he quotes states that Jesus is the Messiah. The identity of Jesus as Christ, the Messiah, is taken for granted, so

^{*}These theological reflections of a biblical scholar have been left without footnotes. For more penetrating studies of specific themes, I may refer to my three volumes of collected essays, *The Crucified Messiah* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1974), esp. pp. 10-36 and 129-160; *Jesus in the Memory of the Early Church* (Augsburg, 1976), esp. pp. 66-86 and 99-119; and *Studies in Paul* (Augsburg, 1977), esp. pp. 121-191. The reflections in the present essay have not only been stimulated by the ongoing work of biblical scholars but also by Hans W. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* (New Haven: Yale University, 1974). In spite of a somewhat misleading title, Barnabas Lindars, *New Testament Apologetic* (London: SCM, 1961) still remains a good introduction to the doctrinal use of Old Testament quotations in the New Testament.

that the term can be used to refer to Jesus. The title received its content from the person to whom it referred, more than from any preconceived notion of what the Messiah would be like. Jesus was the Messiah who had been crucified as “king of the Jews” but vindicated by God who raised him from the dead. In view of the messianic expectations, it is no wonder that most Jews found faith in a crucified Messiah to be offensive. As a zealous Pharisee, Paul had himself persecuted those who held this faith. Only a revelation of a risen Christ convinced Paul that he had been wrong and that Peter and the other disciples were right: Jesus was indeed the Christ who had died and risen in accordance with the Scriptures.

In the letters of Paul the word *Christos* always refers to Jesus Christ, not to a general concept of the Messiah. It is in the Gospels and Acts that we find predicative statements of the type: “You (Jesus) are the Christ.” Luke even pays attention to the etymological meaning of the title and represents Jesus as the Christ who was anointed by the Holy Spirit but who, like prophets and men of the Spirit before and after him, was rejected and had to suffer. This, however, happened according to the design of God who vindicated the crucified Jesus by raising him from the dead. In Luke-Acts, the affirmation that Christ died and was raised in accordance with the Scriptures has been spelled out in the form of a proof from prophecy with two parts: (1) the Scriptures testify that the Christ had to suffer and to rise from the dead and (2) that Jesus is the Christ (see, e.g., Acts 17:3). The argument is not purely rational, however. According to Luke 24:25-27 and 44-46 it was the risen Christ himself who opened the eyes of the disciples.

Neither the summary in 1 Corinthians 15:3ff. nor those in Luke 24 or Acts 17:2-3 refer to any specific texts. We know that Psalm 110:1 was among the passages that were supposed to speak about the resurrection of Christ, and we may assume that the song about the suffering Servant of the Lord in Isaiah 52:13-53:12 was in the mind of the authors and their audience. The phrase “on the third day” is reminiscent of Hosea 6:2, and the rejection/vindication pattern had a basis in the saying about the rejected stone in Psalm 118:22. The interpretation of Psalm 116 in Acts 2:25-36 (cf. 13:35-37) illustrates how the proof from prophecy could be worked out in detail. Other possible or probable examples might be added, but what passages like 1 Corinthians 15:3-4 and Luke 24:25-27 claim is not simply that some scriptural passages referred to the death and resurrection of (the) Christ, but that what had happened was in accordance with the entire testimony of the Scriptures, and thus with the will and design of God. The first disciples were convinced that the God of the fathers who spoke through Moses and the prophets had sent Jesus and vindicated him by raising him from the dead. Even the adversaries of Jesus had, unwittingly, carried out the counsel of God. The close correlation between what was written and what happened was a presupposition for the search for scriptural testimonies to Jesus as much as a result of exegetical efforts.

The basic conviction, that the death and resurrection of Jesus had happened in accordance with the Scriptures, had the double effect that the events were understood in the light of the Scriptures and the Scriptures were interpreted in the light of the events. The procedure was not in itself any radical in-

novation. An interpretation of contemporary events and conditions in the light of the Scriptures and the corresponding actualizing interpretation of Scripture belonged much more to the essence of Jewish *midrash* as practiced both by exegetes at Qumran, who claimed that the hidden meaning of inspired texts had been revealed to them, and by the rabbis, who interpreted the texts according to hermeneutical rules. To a considerable extent, the Christians took over Jewish exegetical methods and traditions along with the biblical texts themselves. What is new in the New Testament use of the Old is due to the new events, centering on the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth as an alleged “king of the Jews,” much more than to any new exegetical approach.

The selection and use of scriptural texts varies a good deal from one New Testament author to another. The Book of Revelation contains no explicit quotations but uses biblical language and imagery in its prophetic message about the vindication of the crucified Messiah and

his persecuted followers. The conviction that the Holy Spirit, which had spoken through the prophets, had also been given to the Christians made a spontaneous use of biblical words and phrases all the more natural. It is, however, possible to discern some discrete patterns of exegesis. Allegorical interpretation played a marginal role, but both persons and events and rituals of atonement and sacrifice were understood as prefigurations of Jesus and of the events connected with his name. Besides various forms of typology, however, we find also the pattern of prophecy and fulfillment which also occurs in several varieties, one typical for Matthew (e.g., 1:23), another for Luke-Acts (e.g., Luke 24:44), etc. Jesus can also be supposed to be the speaking subject who talks in Scripture, using the first person form. In some cases, this is best understood as a form of rhetorical personification, analogous to a literary dialogue or a drama: the biblical author, or the Holy Spirit who inspired him, did not only talk about Jesus but formulated sayings which they attributed to him (see, e.g., Acts 2:25ff.). In other cases, the notion is rather that the preexistent Christ is speaking himself (e.g., Heb 2:11-13). In patristic writings theophanies and angelophanies are interpreted as revelations of the eternal Logos, but in some New Testament passages the idea is rather that Old Testament witnesses saw the glory of the crucified Christ in advance (e.g. John 12:37-41). The specific notion of promises applies mainly to utterances which are explicitly attributed to God himself, who through his word has committed himself to his people, to the patriarchs and to the house of David. By sending Christ and raising him from the dead, God has kept his word and confirmed his promise (see, e.g., Rom 15:8; 2 Cor 1:19-20; Heb 6:13-20).

This condensed survey has simply been intended to illustrate how biblical (i.e., Old Testament) passages were drawn into the story of Jesus Christ and, in a variety of ways, used in early Christian preaching and teaching. Reading and interpretation of the Scriptures made it possible for the disciples to come to terms with the scandal of the cross and to understand their own experiences at and after Easter as evidence that God had vindicated the crucified Messiah. The apologetic use of the proof from prophecy is, I think, a second move. Paul relied, at least to some extent, upon a tradition of Christological exegesis in order to demonstrate that in Christ there was no distinction between Jews and Greeks and that those who belonged to Christ were no longer under the Mosaic law,

and yet to maintain that the law was holy and remained a part of the sacred Scriptures. The Epistle to the Hebrews uses traditional testimonies as building blocks for its elaborate exegesis, depicting Jesus as the high priest who brought an atoning sacrifice and entered the heavenly temple. As time passed by, an increasing number of biblical testimonies to the crucified Christ were detected and became part of a continuous tradition. Even authors who were familiar with written gospels used such testimonies to talk about Jesus and his passion. The *Epistle of Barnabas*, Justin's *Dialogue with the Jew Trypho*, and Irenaeus' *Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching* provide classical examples.

Astonishing as it may be to us, words of the ancient Scriptures were not only used to explain the atoning and saving effects of the passion but also to describe the attitude of Jesus himself (see, e.g., Rom 15:3; 1 Pet 2:21-25 and even Heb 5:7-10). Apparently, the early Christians read Psalm 22, Psalm 69, and other psalms of lamentation, probably also Isaiah 53, as accounts of the passion of Jesus before there existed any written passion story. The passion

narratives of the Gospels are themselves coloured by reminiscences from and allusions to the Psalms and other texts. Otherwise insignificant details were retained in memory because of a more or less striking coincidence with some biblical passages (e.g. Mark 15:23, 24). The narratives are reticent about the physical pains of Jesus but highlight mockery and abandonment, like most psalms of lamentation, and under their influence. We may conclude that the interplay between events and Scriptures shaped the memories, traditions, and interpretations of the death of Jesus right from the beginning.

II. THE CRITICAL AND HISTORICAL APPROACH

The early Christian use of the Old Testament Scriptures to tell the story of Jesus and talk about his death upon the cross continued in an unbroken tradition until the time of the Enlightenment, in spite of many variations, different schools of interpretation, and occasional protests (Marcion!). For scholars, the history of this Christian, mainly Christological exegesis, is a complicated and fascinating field of study which calls for constant comparison with Jewish interpretation of the Hebrew Scriptures. Much has been done in a series of monographs and articles, but there is still a good deal to do. The more I have worked in the field myself, the more I have been impressed by the work of the ancient Christian and Jewish interpreters. Once one has got inside it, one detects both method and meaning and profound insights. To detect that, however, one must first realize that the aim and presuppositions, to a considerable extent also the tools and methods of the ancients, differed from those of the modern scholar, whether the latter deals with biblical texts themselves or with later Jewish and Christian use of them.

Under the impact of biblical criticism, scholars ask for the historical setting of the biblical writings and the sources and oral traditions which they may have incorporated, in order to understand what they meant to the original authors and their first audiences. This type of research has proceeded by trial and error but, on the whole, has been a formidable success, so that we today know a great deal more about the history of biblical times, and about the Bible itself, than did

earlier generations. Critical scholars soon detected that New Testament and later authors frequently used Old Testament texts in a way that had little, if anything, to do with their original meaning. The use of the Hebrew Scriptures as historical sources led to the conclusion that the traditional Christian use had implied an unhistorical Christianization. It could not have been otherwise. The New Testament authors had little interest in the original historical meaning. Their concern was what the Scriptures which God had inspired had to say to themselves and their contemporaries (see, e.g., Rom 4:23f.; 1 Cor 10:11). We cannot expect historical exegesis to answer their questions.

From the Enlightenment onward, biblical scholarship has freed the texts from layers of interpretative traditions and made afresh reading possible, for better and for worse. The classical apologetic argument, that Jesus was the Messiah because he fulfilled the messianic prophecies, simply does not work any longer. It presupposes that a Christian concept of “the Messiah” was first read into the Old Testament. A number of texts which Christians had used to talk about Jesus Christ did not at all relate to “the Messiah.” Many texts that did pertain to “the Lord’s anointed” had originally been royal psalms or promises to the Davidic dynasty and were only

later understood as prophecies about a future Messiah. The more serious problem, however, was that historical research demonstrated a discrepancy between the messianic prophecies and the history of Jesus, both as it was told in the Gospels and as it was reconstructed by the historians. The question of whether and in what sense Jesus had considered himself to be the Messiah became a controversial historical problem and has remained so.

Most representatives of historical criticism were at the same time Christian theologians who wanted to retain the unity of the Bible and the finality of Jesus Christ. They refused to accept the view that Jesus had wanted to be a royal Jewish Messiah but failed, a view that has little support in the sources and fails to explain the emergence of the Christian faith in the crucified Christ. The leading liberal scholars tended to read the Old Testament Scriptures as documents of the history of the religion of Israel which had reached its peak and its goal in Jesus of Nazareth. The category "Messiah" was understood as a time-conditioned expression of his singular religious significance, which was mostly sought in his teaching, in his conduct, or in his inner life and unity with God, his Father, rather than in his death and resurrection. More often than not, this type of historical reconstruction implied an element of unhistorical modernization. Fundamentalistic efforts to prove the inerrancy and historical accuracy of the Bible, however, are both futile and sterile. Moderate conservative scholars have tried to do justice both to historical research and to the classical Christian tradition, e.g., by introducing concepts like progressive revelation and history of salvation and by insisting that Jesus as a matter of historical fact had a "messianic self-consciousness," anticipated his own death, and ascribed an atoning significance to it. The danger of this approach is that it easily becomes a compromise which only reluctantly embraces the methods of historical criticism and yet is so preoccupied with reconstruction of past history that it loses the more naive, but also more free and fruitful, creativity that integrated the Old Testament into the gospel story and into the proclamation and praise of Jesus Christ.

It is hard to deny that the historical study of the Bible has had a double, apparently self-contradictory result. On the one hand, it has confirmed that the New Testament is inseparable from the Old. Regardless of how much or how little early Christianity was open to influence from syncretistic, Greek and oriental sources, the sacred books of the Jews functioned as Holy Scriptures, not simply as a background. Reminiscences and interpretations of these Scriptures are woven into the passion narratives and the entire New Testament testimony to Christ in such a way that one cannot untangle the threads without destroying the design and the whole fabric. On the other hand, biblical scholarship has amply demonstrated that there is a gap between the New Testament use of scriptural texts and the original meaning of these texts in their own historical setting. The result has been an eclipse of the classical Christian use of the Scriptures, which had been practiced from the days of the apostles till the Enlightenment. What are the consequences? Is there any way out of the dilemma?

III. A DICHOTOMY?

At this point in our reflection, it is worth remembering that in their worship the churches are still drawing upon the heritage of the pre-critical Christian interpretation or its relics. Many hymns and spirituals are saturated with Old Testament language and imagery. The exegetical and homiletical tradition from the Church Fathers through the Reformers to great preachers in more

recent times has not been completely forgotten. When an Old Testament text is read during the service, it is heard within a Christian context, and the same holds true for devotional reading. Some texts have during the course of history been loaded with a Christian content. The song of the Servant in Isaiah 53 is the most prominent but not the only example. We who are reared in the Christian tradition cannot but think of Jesus and his passion. The Book of Psalms provides a somewhat different example. In the biblical Psalms, both Jews and Christians find words for prayer, praise, and thanksgiving, and even for the cry from the depth of desperation. In Christian usage it has been customary to conclude a psalm with a doxology to the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. The devotional use may be further enriched by some familiarity with the long tradition of Christological interpretation of the Psalms and even more by the knowledge that Jesus himself, who shared our anxiety and agony, prayed to his Father with their words.

It is not necessary to add further examples, but it may be useful to recall that it is not only biblical texts that can take on new meanings in the course of their history. The meaning of a great work of literary or visual art is not exhausted by the conscious intention of the person who created it or the understanding of contemporaries. Especially a classical work takes on an independent existence of its own. It does not only call forth manifold emotional reactions and ideational associations but can also mean new things to new generations. The performance of an old drama is a creative act of art, and it is, for example, possible to stage a Greek tragedy in such a way that it addresses a contemporary conflict or problem. In a crisis, under a dictatorship or a military occupation, a text, biblical or not, may spontaneously be heard as a word that speaks to the actual situation and even as a reference to specific persons, to the delight of

some and the annoyance of others. It is even more common that ancient stories take on a figurative or symbolic significance. The wide use of Ulysses and Exodus typology are sufficient examples. In the course of history a text may even permanently take on a fuller and deeper meaning than what its author(s) were aware of, as has been the case with the declaration that “all men are created equal.”

Under the influence of trends in literary criticism and general hermeneutics, the focus of biblical scholarship has to some extent shifted. The pioneers of biblical criticism were preoccupied with the sources that referred to historical events and/or reflected the history and the mentality of the ancient Israelites. Contemporary scholars more often pay serious attention to the ongoing tradition, collection, redaction and shifting understanding of, for example, the stories about the patriarchs, the Exodus, and the conquest of the promised land, or the beginnings of the monarchy. Even the laws, psalms, and prophetic oracles had a long history of the interval between their first origin—perhaps in a specific situation—and their present shape as parts of the canonical Scriptures. The process of re-interpretation did not start after the biblical books had received their canonical form and status; it already contributed to their formation.

The Christian use of the Scriptures can be understood as a continuation of this ongoing process of re-interpretation and as an extreme case of the more general phenomenon that texts may be filled with new meaning in the course of their history. As the Christian reading of the Scriptures was informed by the radically new faith in a crucified Messiah, the Christ Jesus, it also meant a new departure. The result was that the Hebrew Scriptures became the Old Testament of the church. This appropriation of the Jewish Bible by the sect of the Nazareans and, later, by the

churches of the gentiles made an enormous impact upon later history and has a great historical interest of its own. It has turned out to be a gross anachronism to read this Christian understanding back into the Scriptures themselves, considered as an outcome of and sources for the religious history of ancient Israel and early Judaism. At the same time it has become clear that in the devotional life of the Christian community popularized treatments of Israelite religion in its Near Eastern context provide a poor substitute for the use of the Old Testament in the classical Christian tradition. The historian has no difficulty in understanding and appreciating both the historical and the devotional approach. The question today is how far the church can live with a dichotomy between the two approaches. Some knowledge about original settings and meanings can easily be incorporated into devotional reading. The crucial question, however, is a theological one. I may put it this way: Can we still with good historical conscience maintain that there is a close correspondence between God's action in Jesus Christ and God's intention as it was previously made known in the books of the Law, the Prophets, and the other writings? What is at stake is, in other words, the promises of God, more than the problem of specific messianic prophecies. The issue has traditionally been treated under the heading "promise and fulfillment." The problem with this is that the crucifixion of Jesus would seem to contradict rather than to fulfill the promises of the Old Testament Scriptures, read within their own historical context. It may be more fruitful to adopt a somewhat different point of view and ask for the correspon-

dence between faith in the crucified Christ and the common biblical theme of God's endangered promises.

IV. THE STORY OF GOD'S ENDANGERED PROMISES

Like the Hebrew Scriptures, the Gospels do not use any special word for "promise." Yet the concept of God's promises is present already in Mark's summary of the preaching of Jesus: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand" (1:15). The message that the kingdom of God is at hand is spelled out in a number of sayings and parables which have been preserved in the Gospels. It implied that the time had come when God would do what he had promised. What happened in the ministry of Jesus was evidence that God had already begun to do so (see, e.g., Matt 11:4-5). Jesus did not, I think, proclaim himself to be the Messiah; the Messiah was not expected to do so. Yet he acted and spoke with an authority that made both adherents and adversaries think that he might possibly be the Messiah who was to come, or a false pretender. If that had not been so, it would not have been historically understandable that he was handed over to the Romans and crucified as an alleged king of the Jews. The death of Jesus meant that the hope of the disciples that God would keep his promise, as it had been reaffirmed and restated by Jesus, was frustrated. That is both what the Gospels tell and what is likely to have happened.

The nature of our sources makes it much more difficult to say anything about what Jesus himself experienced. I do not think that the historian can say anything about his self-consciousness and his intentions apart from his actions and his passion. But I see no reason to doubt that Jesus intended to teach and to do the will of God and that he also discerned the will of God in what happened to him, even though that meant that he had to be accused, mocked, and crucified as an alleged king of the Jews. The evangelists, especially Mark, tell that Jesus was himself greatly distressed and in agony (Mark 14:32-36; 15:34). I do not claim to have solved the

controversial question of the messianic self-consciousness of Jesus, but I know of no more satisfactory answer to it than the words from the hymn in Philippians 2: “He became obedient unto death, even death on a cross.”

However that may be, the appearances of the risen Christ convinced the disciples that God had vindicated the crucified Messiah and, by implication, that God had confirmed his promises and done what he had said. The declaration of Psalm 110:1, “Sit at my right hand,” is not by chance one of the most common and, I think, earliest testimonies to God’s vindication of the crucified Messiah. The story of the passion and resurrection of Jesus is at the same time, albeit in a veiled form, the story of God’s endangered promise and its reaffirmation. If we read the story under this perspective, we discern a climactic variation of a theme (or a “plot”) which in many variations recurs in a number of stories in the Scriptures. Here I can only mention some of them.

The book of Genesis tells that God promised Abraham to give him the land and to give him a son and many descendants, but it also tells that these promises were more or less constantly endangered. Abraham had to live as a stranger who only acquired a piece of land for a burying place. The promise of

offspring was threatened on more than one occasion (see Gen 12:10-20; 21). Sarah was barren and Abraham grew old. At the last trial it seemed that God would himself make his promise void, as he told Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, but the story concludes with the most solemn reaffirmation of God’s promises (22: 15-18). As the story told in the Bible goes on, the theme of God’s endangered and reconfirmed promises reappears again and again. The story of the Exodus provides ample examples from the oppression of Israel in Egypt through the reluctance of Moses and the constant murmuring of the people to the sin with the golden calf, the desire to return to Egypt, and death in the wilderness. The existence of Israel in the promised land is equally threatened, in times of prosperity as much as by hostile attacks: “Jeshurun waxed fat, and kicked;...then he forsook God who made him” (Deut 32:15). The history of Israel may be read as a story of how God remained faithful to his promises, even though these promises were constantly in jeopardy because of the unfaithfulness and evildoings of his own people, more than because of its enemies (see, e.g., the summary in Deut 32, or Neh 9).

The story of the nation was intertwined with the story of the monarchy. The promise to David and his house holds a key position in the deuteronomistic work of history, but we are also told about David’s great sin and all the troubles which threatened his reign. The power and the glory of Solomon are described with superlatives. Yet at the end, we learn, his politicking love of foreign women almost made the promise to David void and resulted in the division of the kingdom. From then on, the story of the endangered promises goes on until the fall of Jerusalem, the destruction of the temple, and the end of the Davidic monarchy. After that, royal psalms and promises to the house of David became meaningful in a new way, as prophecies that one day God would raise up a new, righteous king and thus bring peace and salvation to his people. New messianic prophecies reaffirmed the promise.

The Bible recounts the history of Israel and Judah in a selective and highly stylized manner, but even when it mixes fact and fiction it does so with a staunch realism, without any idealization. No other nation than Israel has told its own history with so much self-criticism; yet

the books of the prophets contain oracles that even more severely and in greater detail castigate the kings and the people, its priests and its prophets of bliss, for luxury, unrighteousness, and oppression of the poor, false security, and lack of true faith. Amos and other prophets after him foretold the coming doom in such a way that the words of God which came to them would seem to make God's promises null and void. In the final redaction the prophetic books have been composed in such a way that the harsh words of judgment are followed by promises of a coming restoration. This did to some extent blur the cutting edge which the oracles of doom had in their original setting. The later emphasis upon God's reaffirmation of his endangered promises did, however, have some basis in the message of the prophets themselves, e.g. in the proclamation of Isaiah that a faithful remnant would be saved.

Many psalms which voice confidence in God's faithfulness in the midst of afflictions and agony may also be read as variations of the theme which I have here, in a shorthand fashion, called "God's endangered promises." The most

obvious example is Psalm 89, a royal psalm which the early Christians did not fail to pay attention to. It is, however, not necessary to go into details. My general point has been that it is possible to read large portions of the Old Testament as a story about God's endangered and reaffirmed promises. It makes literary and theological sense to do so, and if we do, even the New Testament use of the Old falls in line, much better than if we adopt a strictly historical approach. It was not only due to a more or less arbitrary reinterpretation and reapplication that the ancient formula maintained that Christ had died and been raised "according to the Scriptures." Both the way in which the early Christians read their Bible and the way in which they told about Jesus were informed by the basic conviction that God had vindicated the crucified Messiah and that in doing so he had reaffirmed the promises which he had given to his people as well as Jesus' own message that the kingdom of God was at hand. Borrowing a famous theological term, I dare to put it this way: The story of the crucified and vindicated Messiah is the recapitulation of the old and multifaceted story of God's endangered and reaffirmed promises. This might have been an edifying conclusion, but history continues and so must our reflections.

V. THE CONTINUATION OF THE STORY

The early Christians related the promises of God to their own experience, not only to what had happened to Christ. Inspired utterances, prophecy, glossolalia, and acclamations, also experiences of joy and exultation and of wisdom and power, were seen as evidence that God had poured out his Holy Spirit, as he had promised to do in the last days. When not only Jews but also gentiles turned to Christ, this was further confirmation that the time of fulfillment had dawned. The Jews, however, to whom the promises belonged, did in general not accept the apostolic preaching. That made Paul raise the question if, possibly, the word of God had failed (Rom 9:6; cf. 11:1). By means of careful combination and interpretation of selected texts, Paul was able to show that what had actually happened conformed to the intention of God as stated in the Scriptures, concluding that God's promise to his chosen people remained valid, even though the ways of God were inscrutable (Rom 9-11). Later Christian theologians came up with a much simpler solution. They took the promises of the Old Testament to refer to Christ and the church but applied all indictments of the sins of ancient Israel to the Jewish people. Testimonies to the

crucified Messiah and testimonies against the Jews became two sides of the same coin.

The church was, however, also faced with an internal problem which some scoffers raised by saying: "Where is the promise of his coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all things have continued as they were from the beginnings of the world" (2 Pet 3:4). We do not know how many Christians were frustrated and became skeptics because the promised parousia did not occur; most may have been satisfied with the answer given in 2 Peter. For centuries, the church of the crucified Christ endured persecutions, boasting of its martyrs. But when Constantine gave the church peace and a privileged position, the events were hailed as the dawn of a new age and a fulfillment of the promises. The church historian Eusebius of Caesarea was the most eloquent spokes-

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man of this point of view. By and large, later historians of the church followed in his steps. Popular books on church history still tend to celebrate the triumph of Christianity and to gloss over the dark sides. It has become increasingly difficult to do so.

The Christian empire outlawed and extirpated pagans much more vehemently and consistently than the pagan authorities had ever persecuted Christians. Jews were tolerated but had to suffer legal discrimination and violent harassment. From the age of Constantine onward, theological controversies became entangled with state politics as well as with ecclesiastical politicking. The result of this was the separation of the churches outside the Roman Empire from those within it. Later followed the Arab conquest of countries where Christianity had flourished, and the atrocities committed by crusaders in the name of Christ and under the sign of the cross. Eastern Byzantinism and Roman papacy were two variants of Christian triumphalism. In inner agony, and faced with ecclesiastical misuses, the Reformers trusted the promises of God and confessed that "one holy church is to remain forever." But the Reformation resulted in new divisions and wars among Christians. In state churches rank and class stratified the Christian community as much as the civil society. There is no need to continue the list of scandals which have tainted Christendom.

Some words must still be added about post-Enlightenment theological liberalism. The general trend was to abandon the argument from fulfilled prophecy in favor of a concept of Christianity as the universal and superior religion, in comparison with which paganism and Judaism represented inferior stages of religious development. No less than theological conservatism, however, this new version of Christian triumphalism could go hand in hand with political imperialism and economic exploitation, colonialism abroad, and racism at home. In retrospect we realize this, but only after two world wars and much criticism both from without and from within Christian churches all over the world. The Holocaust may be the most important single factor. While Christian theologians and churches cannot be held to be directly responsible for the lies and the crimes of the Nazis, they do carry an indirect responsibility because of what they had said, done, and tolerated. After Auschwitz it has become morally as well as historically impossible to continue the centuries-old way of reading the Bible and the history of the church as if all promises and blessings belonged to the church while words of judgment pertained to the Jews.

If we face the dark aspects of the history of Christianity and the present state of affairs in the divided churches, the theme of this essay becomes a matter of existential concern. It has

become difficult to harmonize the historical and social realities with the picture of the church as the people of the new covenant, the holy temple of God, and the body of Christ. One may attempt to withdraw from the realities in favor of the concept of an invisible church, or an abstract essence of Christianity, or one among the many portraits of the “historical Jesus.” But such options make it even more difficult to come to terms with the writings of the New Testament. These writings were addressed to young and oppressed minority churches, and we cannot expect them to speak directly to the problems, the social and political responsibilities, or the burdens of guilt that have been accumulated through centuries of history. In a strange way, however,

the Old Testament Scriptures offer assistance in our present predicament. There we learn to read the story of the people of God as a story of losses as well as of gains, a story of corruption and reforms, of false security and lacking faith, the story of a rebellious people which God in his mercy has not totally abandoned. Such is also the history of the church, a continuation of the story of God’s endangered promises. Thus we can learn to look at the history and present reality of the church without becoming triumphant, but also without skeptical despair. God remains the sovereign Lord who castigates his people, but he remains faithful to his promises which he reaffirmed by vindicating the crucified Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth. Would it be too much to say that the Old Testament in our day helps the church to come to terms with its own identity and with the writings of the New Testament?