



The Unity of the Testaments

DUANE A. PRIEBE

Wartburg Theological Seminary, Dubuque, Iowa

I. UNITY AS A PROBLEM

Talk about the unity of Scripture has become increasingly problematic. Biblical exegesis has opened our eyes to the diversity and theological plurality of both the Old and New Testaments. Ernst Käsemann has argued effectively that different theological tendencies and even irreconcilable theological differences in the New Testament provide a continuing source for denominational differences.¹ Our horizon for interpreting Scripture and the Christian faith has been broadened and enriched by our awareness of this diversity, and few would welcome a return to older, more confining pictures of the unity of Scripture. People gladly speak about the diversity of Scripture, even when they struggle to understand its unity.²

The problem of unity between the Testaments is even greater. Both Jews and Christians look to the Old Testament as Scripture, and Jewish and Christian scholars agree extensively about the meaning of Old Testament passages. The Old Testament and the New are studied in separate disciplines. To what extent, then, is the Old Testament primarily to be read as a non-Christian book?

The problem of the relationship between the Testaments is not new. The New Testament writers already knew that the message of Jesus Christ required reinterpreting "Scripture." The antitheses of the Sermon on the Mount contrast God's will with the letter of the Mosaic law (Matt 5:21-48). Contrary to what Moses seems to say, Paul argues that people are righteous and find life through faith, not on the basis of the law (Gal 3:10-14, 19-20), and he applies what Deuteronomy says about the law to the message of faith rather than the law, (Rom 10:5-9; cf. Deut 30:11-14). Nevertheless, while Christ is the end of the law (Rom 10:4), and while the law cannot be fulfilled on the basis of works, the law is

¹Ernst Käsemann, "The Canon of the New Testament and the Unity of the Church," *Essays on New Testament Themes* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982) 95-107.

²E.g., Paul D. Hanson, *The Diversity of Scripture: A Theological Interpretation* (Overtures to Biblical Theology 11; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982); James D. G. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament: An Inquiry into the Character of Earliest Christianity* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977).

fulfilled when those who have been set free from the law by Christ live in faith and love (Rom 1:30-32; Gal 5:1-6, 13f.). Hebrews also interweaves elements of continuity and discontinuity when it speaks about the old covenant and its sacrifices as a shadow of the new, while the old is made obsolete by the new and passes away (7:1-19; 8:5-7, 13).

In the second century, Marcion rejected the Old Testament and argued that the wrathful

Jewish God was a different god than the loving Father of Jesus Christ. The church, which rejected Marcion as a heretic, sought to deal with the Old Testament in two ways. First, Christians distinguished between Jewish ceremonial laws and the moral law, exemplified in the Ten Commandments. Only the moral law applied to everyone. Second, by using methods of spiritual interpretation, they read the Old Testament as a book that spoke about Jesus Christ and taught the doctrines of the Christian community. When Luther rejected allegorical exegesis and affirmed the literal, historical meaning of Scripture, he still believed the Old Testament, read literally, spoke about Jesus Christ.

However, Luther's emphasis on the authority of the literal, historical sense of Scripture has been coupled with more powerful methods of historical interpretation over the last two centuries. As a result it has become increasingly clear that the literal meaning of the Old Testament is quite different from the meaning Christian tradition has found there. The study of the Old Testament was separated from the study of the New Testament, and both were carried out independently of the task of formulating Christian doctrine, and even with an anti-dogmatic accent.

While historical criticism has deepened and enriched our understanding of the biblical message, it has also reopened the question of the role of the Old Testament as a Christian book. Adolf von Harnack argued that we should no longer retain the Old Testament in our canon of Scripture, even though the church was right in rejecting Marcion in the second century.³ Nevertheless, the Old Testament provides the necessary background for understanding Jesus and the New Testament, and others have used a variety of approaches to interpret the Old Testament as a book that belongs to the Christian community as well as to Judaism, for example, through typology or promise and fulfillment.⁴ There have also been some recent approaches to a biblical theology that would include both Testaments.⁵

Historical criticism has rendered both promise and fulfillment and typology problematic as ways to relate the Old Testament to the New. Typology brings Christian meaning to the Old Testament from outside by finding

³Adolf von Hamack, *Marcion: Das Evangelium vom fremden Gott* (2nd ed.; Leipzig: J. C. Hinrich, 1924) 217, 222.

⁴For a handy collection of various approaches, cf. *Essays on Old Testament Hermeneutics*, ed. Claus Westermann (Richmond: John Knox, 1963); *The Old Testament and Christian Faith: A Theological Discussion*, ed. Bernhard W. Anderson (New York: Harper & Row, 1963).

⁵E.g., Hartmut Gese, *Essays on Biblical Theology* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1981) and his essay, "Erwägungen zur Einheit der biblischen Theologie," *Vom Sinai zum Zion: Alttestamentliche Beiträge zur biblischen Theologie* (Munich: Chr. Kaiser, 1974). For a summary of the history of the question, cf. Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Die biblische Theologie: Ihre Geschichte und Problematik* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1970).

analogies to Christ in the structure of Old Testament events or cultic practices. Similarly, Christians see the Old Testament as prophecy largely by finding there what they already know about Jesus Christ. However, taken literally, the Old Testament promises of salvation—for example, the promise of a society of peace and justice—have not been fulfilled, and what Christians have seen as the fulfillment is not what was promised.

Rudolf Bultmann has proposed that Israel's history can be seen as promise in the miscarriage of Israel's inner-historical hopes.⁶ Just as the experience of judgment under the law

directs people to salvation in Christ, the failure of Israel's history to realize the hope anticipated in the concepts of the covenant, the kingdom of God, and the people of God points people beyond the possibilities inherent in history to God's transcendent, eschatological saving action. The idea that the Old Testament is prophecy as a history of failure has not met with overwhelming affirmation, especially among Old Testament scholars. But it certainly contains an element of truth. Gerhard Ebeling suggests that the Old Testament is open toward the New in the unresolved tensions that arose from Israel's history and in the promise of a new covenant. Conversely, the Old Testament remains necessary to preserve the specific newness of the New Testament.⁷

II. HISTORY OF TRADITIONS AND ESCHATOLOGY

Other possibilities are opened by the history of traditions and by hermeneutical reflection on the significance of the context for the meaning of a text. The meaning a particular text has is a product of the interaction between the words of the text, the context in which it is read, and the horizon of meaning the reader brings to the text. When a text is written it is free to seek out new contexts, and it gains a life of its own in which its meaning is somewhat independent of that intended by the original author.⁸ Read in new historical contexts, the text gains new dimensions of meaning. Thus a written text has an open-ended history of meaning.

Gerhard von Rad's interpretation of the theology of the Old Testament has shown that such an open-ended history of meaning is an element in the formation of Israel's historical, prophetic, and cultic traditions.⁹ Israel's traditions formed a context of hope and expectation, or of threat and judgment, within which new historical events were experienced as God's work. For example, the prophetic message of judgment was an interpretation of Israel's earlier traditions and provided the context within which Israel experienced the Babylonian exile as God's judgment. Israel's traditions, in turn, were reinterpreted in the light of new experiences of history. Thus, the Pentateuch is the product of

⁶Rudolf Bultmann, "Prophecy and Fulfillment," *Essays on Old Testament Hermeneutics*, ed. C. Westermann, 50-75.

⁷Gerhard Ebeling, *The Study of Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978) 34-35.

⁸Cf. Paul Ricoeur, "Philosophical Hermeneutics and Theological Hermeneutics," *Studies in Religion* 5 (1975) 8, 20.

⁹Gerhard von Rad, *Theology of the Old Testament* (2 vols.; New York: Harper & Row, 1962-1965).

the entire course of Israel's history until the Babylonian exile as that history was experienced in the context of the patriarchal, exodus, and Sinai traditions. The earlier events and traditions acquire meaning backward from their future. They are no longer what they once were.

From the standpoint of the history of traditions, Israel's sacred writings, as interpreted by first century Judaism, provided a complex context of promise, hope, and expectation within which Jesus came and was understood by followers and opponents. Conversely, those traditions were set in a new horizon of meaning when they were read in the context of Jesus' ministry, death, and resurrection by the early Christians. Thus, Hartmut Gese sees the New Testament as the conclusion of a process in the history of Israel's traditions that is essentially a unity.¹⁰ This revelatory process, fulfilled in Jesus' death and resurrection, can only be understood as a whole.¹¹

Wolfgang Pannenberg also uses Gerhard von Rad's approach to Israel's history of traditions to interpret God's self-revelation in history.¹² While an event has immediate meaning in its context in the history of human traditions, the meaning of any event also includes its future. Ultimately it can only be understood in the context of the whole of history. Pannenberg thinks that within the horizon of Jewish apocalyptic expectations and Jesus' message of the kingdom of God, Jesus' resurrection is the prolepsis of the end of Israel's history and of all human history. Thus Jesus is the ultimate future from which all events, including Israel's history, derive their fullest meaning.

Changes in the literary context, like changes in the historical context, also introduce new dimensions of meaning. Written texts preserve a piece of the past intact, like an archaeological artifact. Nevertheless, in the history of Israel's traditions, written texts gain new literary contexts as well as being read in new historical contexts. For example, we can understand what a prophecy of Isaiah said in its original historical context. But we read Isaiah's words in a biblical book that includes oracles from a prophetic tradition that originated with Isaiah and extended over two hundred years. The book of Isaiah, in turn, became part of Israel's sacred writings, which included the Pentateuch, historical books, other prophets, psalms, and wisdom literature. This collection was translated into Greek and eventually became part of a Christian canon of Scripture along with the writings of the New Testament. In each of these new contexts, a passage gains new dimensions of meaning.¹³ A particular passage or book acquires meaning backward from its future as it is set in the context of broader, more complex literary unities. Christians read Isaiah as part of a book that speaks about Jesus, and they read Paul's letters as part of a book that includes James and the Pentateuch. The canonization of Scripture creates a unity by establishing the literary context within which the parts are read. The way exegesis

¹⁰Hartmut Gese, "Erwägungen zur Einheit der biblischen Theologie," 14.

¹¹Ibid., 30.

¹²Wolfgang Pannenberg, "Introduction" and "Dogmatic Theses on the Doctrine of Revelation," *Revelation as History*, ed. W. Pannenberg (New York and London: Macmillan, 1968) 3-21, 125-158.

¹³A first step toward canonical exegesis is represented by Brevard S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979); cf. esp. pp. 69-83.

defines the context within which it sees a passage influences the meaning it finds and itself creates a new context within the exegetical tradition.

III. THE HISTORY OF MEANING AS OPEN-ENDED

Historical events, traditions, and written texts, then, have an open-ended history of meaning. In the course of time they become more than they once were, or, conversely, the meaning they had for people could vanish. For Christian faith this retroactive "increase" in meaning has its focus in Jesus Christ. The ultimate future that gives meaning to all history has appeared in his coming, death, and resurrection.¹⁴ Three New Testament examples illustrate how events receive meaning retroactively by being seen in the light of Jesus' death and resurrection.

First, Mark begins his narrative of Jesus' passion with the story of the woman who anoints Jesus with costly ointment (14:3-9). The people present reproached her for wasting the ointment, which could have been sold to help the poor. Jesus, however, comes to her defense:

“She has done a beautiful thing for me....She has anointed my body beforehand for burying. And truly, I say to you, wherever the gospel is preached in the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her” (14:6, 8-9).

If we try to imagine what the woman might have had in mind, one thing is clear: she probably did not think she was anointing Jesus for his burial. Perhaps the bystanders were right and what she did was a foolishly extravagant act done on impulse. But Jesus gives her action meaning by relating it to his death, and by doing so he makes it part of his identity and part of the gospel. Jesus does not abandon her to the judgment of others or to the limits of her own intentions. But he takes the reality of what she has done and redeems it, making more out of what she did than she could imagine or hope.

Second, according to John, the Jewish leaders were worried about the danger that the Romans might destroy the temple and the nation as a result of the following Jesus was attracting (11:45-53). Caiphas, the high priest, said, “It is expedient for you that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation should not perish” (11:50). Caiphas clearly meant that Jesus’ death would help avoid trouble from the Romans. However, John interprets Caiphas’ statement as a prophecy “that Jesus should die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad” (11:51-52).

Like the woman who anointed Jesus with ointment, Caiphas’ words acquire new meaning backward from their link with Jesus’ death. The woman acted out of positive interest, Caiphas spoke out of hostility. But like the

¹⁴Two observations should be made. First, while we can understand the meaning of events, traditions, and people’s lives more deeply when we see them in their relationship to Jesus, as long as the history of this world continues we do not understand fully the meaning they have in Christ. Second, while I have stated the point in terms of time and resurrection, the same point could be made in relation to any of the ways Christians have sought to express Jesus’ ultimate significance for human life and history in relation to God.

woman’s deed, Caiphas’ words are redeemed, not negated, through their connection with Jesus’ death. They *become* prophecy in a way Caiphas could never have imagined. What Caiphas said becomes part of who Jesus is for us and what his death means, even as Jesus’ death makes Caiphas’ words what they are.

Third, John interprets the strange saying about destroying the temple and rebuilding it in three days in a similar way (2:13-22). While the origin of the saying and its initial meaning are no longer apparent,¹⁵ John says that after Jesus’ resurrection the disciples remembered what he said and that he spoke of the temple of his body (2:21f.). Here Jesus’ own words derive their meaning backward from their connection with his death and resurrection, as does the woman’s deed and Caiphas’ prophecy. At the same time the saying sets Jesus’ death and resurrection in the context of eschatological themes associated with the temple.

What do we see in these examples? First, Jesus’ ministry, seen within the horizon of first century Judaism, provides the context within which his death and resurrection took place and was understood by people, although from different viewpoints. Conversely, Jesus’ ministry becomes what it is only when it is seen in the context of his death and resurrection. Second, the story of who Jesus is includes the stories of people who came into contact with him, whether they were friends or opponents. Those people belong to Jesus’ identity and the meaning of his death

and resurrection. They are part of his historical, bodily reality. In turn they become who they are through the way in which their lives, deeds, and words become part of who Jesus is in the light of his death and resurrection.

Third, who these people are is not simply absorbed into Jesus. They become who they are in their difference from him, even in their opposition to him. We can see the difference between what they said and did and what they became in Christ, even where the original meaning of their words and deeds is not clear. That is also true of Jesus' own words and deeds. Fourth, their words and deeds are transformed and redeemed, not crushed or negated by God's judgment, through the way they become part of Jesus' identity. Even Caiphas' words became prophecy, and Jesus' execution became the event of salvation for sinners. In such events the justification of the ungodly and the creation of life out of death becomes a bodily reality in human history.

IV. JESUS CRUCIFIED AND RISEN AS THE MEANING OF HISTORY

Jesus and the people who are part of his story become what they are backward from the light cast on them by his death and resurrection. The story of Israel's

¹⁵In Mark the saying is ascribed to Jesus by false witnesses and by those who mock him at the foot of the cross (14:57-59; 15:29f.). In Acts something analogous is ascribed to Stephen by false witnesses (6:13f.). The saying about the destruction of the temple in Mark 13:2 is related to the eschatological expectation of the end of this age. Perhaps the saying about the destruction and rebuilding of the temple was also an eschatological saying that spoke in temple imagery about the end of this age and the dawn of the new age brought about in some way by Jesus' activity. Cf. the material in Rudolf Bultmann, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1971) 125f., esp. p. 126, n. 1; Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John* (Anchor Bible 26; New York: Doubleday, 1966) 119f., 122f., 123f.

page 269

history and their religious and prophetic traditions also become what they are backward in the light of what God has made of them in Jesus. This process is not foreign to Israel's traditions. Israel's religious traditions were oriented to history. They were traditions of promise and anticipation that remembered God's actions in the past in a way that directed them toward God's action of judgment and mercy in the future. In this way Israel's history was opened toward the future promised by God. Their historical and prophetic traditions provided the context in which new events were experienced as God's action, and those events transformed the way the traditions were remembered. The meaning of events, themes, or prophecies was not fully defined by the past but remained open for what they would become in the future. The original historical meaning is only one dimension in a history of meaning.

Isaiah, for example, originally promised that Jerusalem would be delivered from the Assyrians. It would not be destroyed. A century later, in Jeremiah's day, it was the false prophets who promised that Jerusalem would be delivered and not destroyed. In their original historical sense, Isaiah's words could no longer be remembered as God's word in the exile and beyond, even though they once were God's word. Instead, Isaiah's prophecies were remembered as the beginning of a history of prophecy that included the exile and the return from exile. In that context words that promised deliverance in Isaiah's day became the promise of new deliverance, and promises spoken to historical kings became promises of an eschatological king.

In the course of time, some ambiguities in the meaning of Israel's history with God were resolved, and some interpretations of Israel's traditions proved to be inadequate, or even wrong.

It is much easier to distinguish the true and false prophets in retrospect. But even false prophets, who fell under God's judgment, are remembered: in Jeremiah, for example, in order to give profile to Jeremiah's message. In that way they become part of Jeremiah's message, as do the kings and leaders who opposed him.

Ultimately the memory of Israel's past history with God provides language in which the prophets speak of a new saving event that goes far beyond anything God has done in the past and anything Israel could imagine, whether they speak of a new creation, a new exodus, or a new covenant (cf. Isa 43:15-21; 48:3-8; Jer 31:31-34). The memory of Israel's history with God provided a context of hope and expectation that ultimately moved toward eschatological promises that transcended the boundaries of historical possibility.

This horizon of hope, embodied in Israel's sacred writings, as they were interpreted in first century Judaism, formed the context within which Jesus lived, died, and was raised. In that horizon, the early Christians experienced Jesus as the eschatological figure in whom God brought the history of promise to Israel to its fulfillment. The crucified Jesus is the risen Lord, whose rule will be manifested at the end of history. Indeed, the end of history, toward which Israel's history pointed, has appeared in Jesus Christ. Jesus, then, discloses the meaning of Israel's history with God. He belongs to the identity of Israel's God and to Israel's identity as God's people. Furthermore, as the one through whom and toward whom all things have been created (Col 1:16), Jesus Christ is the future of all history and all creation. In him Israel's history attains its universal

page 270

significance as the revelation of God for all humanity. Jesus discloses the meaning of all human history, and all human history becomes part of his identity as it is united with him through the church's universal mission.

Is Israel's history then a provisional stage in the history of God's revelation? Once the new has come in Jesus, do we still need the old? Many features of the Old Testament seem to offer a primitive, limited horizon. The prayer that Babylonian babies would be dashed against the rocks (Ps 137:9) or the savage brutality in many places of the Old Testament contrast sharply with Jesus' command to love our enemies because that corresponds to the activity of God (Matt 5:43-48).

In reality, the story of Israel's history with God is part of the story of Jesus. Jesus could not be who he is for us apart from his place in the course of Israel's history. Jesus' identity includes Israel's history. Even in a Hellenistic context the meaning of Jesus' activity, death, and resurrection could only be articulated by interpreting the Old Testament. The lives of individual Israelites—prophets, kings, and ordinary men and women—their sufferings and achievements, their sins, their prophecies of judgment and salvation, their psalms and wisdom, and their cult all are part of Jesus' identity. The whole range of Israel's historical, human reality and experience—undecorated and unspiritualized—becomes part of who Jesus is. Through the way it is historically related to Jesus and becomes part of his identity, this human reality is transformed and redeemed. The relationship between Jesus and Israel's history is parallel to that between Jesus' death and resurrection and the deed of the woman who anointed him with ointment, and Caiphas' prophecy.

V. JESUS AS THE FUTURE OF ALL HISTORY

What is at issue for us in the relation of Jesus to the Old Testament? In the conflict with

Marcion and with Gnosticism, the early church correctly recognized that what is at issue ultimately is the relation of Jesus to our historical reality as such. Is Jesus merely a stranger from another world, who touches our history without ever becoming part of it? Is salvation possible only if we are removed from our historical, bodily reality? Does God's presence in Christ negate who we are? In Jesus Christ does our life and history, our sins and weakness, our suffering and pain, or our successes and achievements count for nothing—as something having no lasting significance? That would mean that God's relationship to our history is only one of judgment.

The New Testament story of Jesus does not end with his death and resurrection. Jesus' history, which constitutes who he is, includes the life of the Christian community and the mission of his messengers. Jesus is not only the future of a limited segment of human history. He is the future of all human history. Through the church's mission, Jesus incorporates into himself a wider and wider range of human history and culture. In the process, new dimensions of who Jesus is and what God's saving work in him means unfold. Those who believe in Jesus and those whose lives are touched by him in a variety of ways become apart of his identity—a part of the body of Christ. The same retroactive, transforming power touches other traditions and other strands of human his-

tory, like the world of Greek philosophy and culture, in a way that parallels his impact on Israel's history. Jesus has a future, but he also is the future. The future of our whole reality is not other than Christ, but it is the coming of Christ.

That means that we also are like the woman who anointed Jesus or like Caiphas. Who we are, what we do—our life and history receives its ultimate meaning backward from what Christ makes out of us by his mercy in the future. What we will be in him largely remains a mystery for us. But the future has appeared in Christ, and we can orient our life and history toward its ultimate future by orienting it toward Jesus Christ in faith. We can live with the mystery of who we are in Christ in the confidence that Jesus does not negate who we are, but he transforms the reality of our life and makes more of us than we can dream or imagine. He does so in the way in which he makes our lives part of his identity and part of one another's lives in the unity of his body. That takes place within the fabric and texture of our human history with its sins and shortcomings as well as its success and accomplishments. Christ justifies us by creating something new out of our human reality and thus redeeming it, as he did for sinners and outcasts when he made them part of his identity.

An analytical approach to Scripture that isolates texts from their broader literary and historical context in order to see their meaning in their original historical setting has made important contributions to our understanding of Scripture. That is a part of the Christian appreciation of our unique historical reality. But taken alone, such a procedure isolates passages and events from the reality of their history. Our lives also would be greatly impoverished if who we are and what we do were limited to our original intentions and were torn from the context of God's justifying power in Jesus Christ.