



The Old Testament in Christian Proclamation

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It is my conviction that the discussion regarding the use of the Old Testament in the church fails to consider adequately what is *experienced* by Christians when they hear Old Testament texts read or preached on. That concern will serve as a motif for the following paragraphs regarding the Old Testament in Christian proclamation.

The Old Testament is the Word of God for the Christian Church. That is, it is a means by which God speaks a word of judgment and grace to the people of God. There are other functions which it may be said to have. It helps to define what the Christian faith was and still properly is, and it assists in delineating a shape for Christian life in the world. But, at the heart of things, the Old Testament serves to bring people face to face with the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, and in that encounter God speaks. Such a perspective is in decisive continuity with the Old Testament's own "self-understanding" and the New Testament authors' use of the Old Testament (see below).

In Christian circles this understanding of the Old Testament should need no argument, for we have experienced this to be the case again and again. Whose conscience has not been stricken upon hearing, "You shall not take the Name of the Lord your God in vain"? Or, who has not been assured of forgiveness upon hearing these words read or sung: "Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem...that her iniquity is pardoned"? Or, who among us has not felt the arms of God's providential care upon hearing the 23rd Psalm? Whether it be the Law, the Prophets, or the Psalms, they have served more than a preparatory or propaedeutic function; they have actually spoken an effective Word of God to Christian people: calling, exhorting, warning, judging, redeeming, comforting, and sanctifying.

So what's the problem? Let's just preach on these texts in such away that the Word of God can be heard, as we would on any New Testament text. After all, whether Old Testament or New Testament, we have to do with the one Bible of the church. Yet, in recent times, the church's preaching has tended to neglect

the Old Testament, and that massive reservoir of the Word of God has been held back and not allowed to become the river of life it has the potential of being for the church.

For most of the history of the church this has not been so. Even a cursory look will show that the church through the centuries has experienced the Old Testament as Word of God, and consequently filled its liturgies, its preaching, and its catechetics with a plenitude of Old Testament materials. The whole Bible constituted the *Christian Scriptures*, an *undifferentiated* resource for its primary tasks. As such, the Old Testament has been used largely according to patterns initiated by the New Testament writers. The latter started with the unargued premise that

their Scriptures (essentially the same as that of the Jews of the first century) were “sacred writings which are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Jesus Christ” (2 Tim 3:15). Then, drawing upon virtually every existing interpretive means available to them, Old Testament texts in profusion were used as a vehicle for interpreting *and* proclaiming God’s act in Jesus. And so the church has seemed to say for generations: If the New Testament authors did things this way, ought we not follow in their steps?

And so the church did, for centuries. But the rise of an historical approach to the Scriptures changed the picture. The Old Testament was set squarely in pre-Christian times, limited to an historical mode of interpretation, and an immense hiatus between Old Testament and New Testament was created. The struggle to bridge this gap, while remaining true to an historical approach, has occupied the scholars of the church for two centuries and more.¹

For all the insights of this new approach, it has probably occasioned much of the neglect of the Old Testament in preaching noted above. Of the many factors that could be considered, we shall note five of them. Each of these points will be used as an occasion to reflect on our basic topic.

I. THE QUESTION OF METHODS

The methods used by the New Testament authors in interpreting the Old Testament have been called into question. They paid little attention to the original contexts of Old Testament texts, and hence gave the latter inappropriate meanings, or so it is claimed. Anybody who has tried to link Hosea 11:1 and Matthew 2:15 or Exodus 17:6 and 1 Corinthians 10:4 knows something of what is involved. Yet, I wonder whether we have not been too hasty here, and that more help is available from the New Testament authors than is commonly claimed.

A. Just the fact *that* they understood the Old Testament to be the Word of God and *that* it provided crucial resources for interpreting and proclaiming the

¹For helpful discussions of the issues, see especially J. Barr, *Old and New in Interpretation* (London: SCM, 1966); *The Old Testament and Christian Faith*, ed. B. W. Anderson (New York: Harper, 1963); *Essays on Old Testament Hermeneutics*, ed. C. Westermann (Richmond: John Knox, 1963); A. H. J. Gunneweg, *Understanding the Old Testament* (London: SCM, 1978); H. Gese, *Essays in Biblical Theology* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1982); J. Bright, *The Authority of the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1967). Gunneweg is the most up-to-date full discussion, while Barr remains the most provocative and generative of helpful reflection.

Christ-event provides an indispensable starting point for us. There is a givenness here that cannot be put aside; certain claims about the Christ are made on the basis of the Old Testament, and one cannot (logically) have the claims without the basis. The Old Testament is such an authoritative resource, however, not only because the Christ event was interpreted in terms of it, but also because it determined to a considerable degree how Jesus was *experienced* in the first place. Thus, for example, the Old Testament essentially defined the questions that were (or were not) asked (e.g., a Messiah was expected).

So too for modern Christians, the Old Testament should continue to serve that function, helping to determine how the Christ-event is to be interpreted, proclaimed, *and* experienced. The nature of the Christian experience ought not be determined on the basis of the New Testament alone, and we impoverish our people if we seek to do that.²

B. In their use of the Old Testament, the New Testament authors employed exegetical methods borrowed largely from contemporary Judaism.³ Contrary to the Gnostics, the New Testament writers used publicly available canons of interpretation. This gives us permission (obligation?) to make use of whatever public canons may be available today. These canons also provide an important touching-point between the biblical and public worlds; our methods are thus intelligible, an important aspect of mission.

C. The New Testament authors used a variety of interpretive methods.⁴ The Old Testament was not used in some monochromatic fashion. This suggests that we ought not seek any single way of appropriating Old Testament material. The richness of the Old Testament demands a variety of angles of vision for proper appreciation and appropriation. This needs to be expanded in a separate point.

D. Generally characteristic of New Testament methodology is this important combination: textual adherence and hermeneutical freedom (with a Christological center). Thus, it is common to appeal to the text over against the meanderings of tradition (see Mark 7:8-13), while at the same time manifesting great freedom in combining texts (Matt 2:6) and interpreting them (Matt 2:15). There is no rigidity of method; there is even an aversion to methodological legalism. Yet there remains a basic faithfulness to the text as the departure point for interpretation. There is insistence on text-centeredness, but creativity is exemplified in appropriation.

The suggestion here for our use of the Old Testament is to be more centered on the text, while being more imaginative in our hermeneutic. It is, *finally*, the results obtained which are important and not the methods used to get them, and, in any case, the results can, indeed must, be evaluated on grounds

²J. Barr, *Old and New*, 139f., reminds us helpfully that the primary New Testament task was not to explain the Old Testament in terms of Jesus, but Jesus in terms of the Old Testament. He was the one who needed explaining; he still does, and the Old Testament continues to help us do that.

³There is a continuity in hermeneutics not only with Judaism, but with the Old Testament itself, e.g., in the use of predictive prophecy (see Deut 18:21f.) or typology (see Second Isaiah).

⁴Any list would be quite extensive, but the most important seem to be: Midrash, Targum, Peshar, typology, allegory, paraenesis, promise/fulfillment.

other than the methods used.⁵ The variety of New Testament methods, then, should be the preacher's invitation to creativity in method, not a limitation to well-traveled ruts.⁶

II. ATTENTION TO SOURCES

The historical approach has given more concentrated attention to sources of biblical books than to their final form. This atomization of the literature has tended to discourage preachers, because of the preparatory time it takes to track down this theory or that, and because it often takes too much explaining before one can get on with the sermon.

Recent literary and "canonical" studies⁷ have given renewed importance to the present form of the text. There is now scholarly permission, if you will, to work with the interpretive possibilities of the text as it stands. The literary approach in particular gives promise of being helpful to preachers.

At the same time, one ought not lose sight of the traditioning process that has preceded

the final form, not only for its insights into individual texts, but also for the possibilities it bespeaks regarding relationships between texts and Testaments. The Old Testament is seen to be the end product of a long history of many traditions, most of which had a *testimonial* character. That is, for each generation the inherited tradition functioned as an ongoing witness to God's activity, and new shapes of the tradition emerged as these generations added their own witness to that of the old.⁸ At every stage the tradition functioned as Word of God for Israel. But the old was not superseded in the face of the new, for no Word of God can become antiquated, or lose its value and import. The old remained as living Word of God *and* became part of a new coherent totality so that *together* they witnessed in a new way to God's activities.

⁵This is important to remember not least because we tend to accept for our own use the conclusions drawn by the New Testament authors regarding the Christ-event, but not all the methods used to arrive at them. On the other side, a flawless use of methods may issue in results incompatible with, say, the theological perspective of a passage.

⁶One might suggest that this is, rather, an invitation to anarchy, so that anything goes. However, as long as there are publicly available canons, well-executed, an anarchy of method would not be a bad thing (in fact, not far removed from the present state of affairs!). Even somebody like, say, Hal Lindsay, ought not be condemned for his method *per se* (though it has some esoteric aspects), but on his execution and on the results he achieves. It is true, of course, that certain methods are more productive of insight than are others. Cf. J. Barr, *Old and New*, 142: "Perhaps modern interpretation, being historical in the way no ancient interpretation was, has its possibilities for creativity enriched *but also narrowed*" (italics mine).

⁷From the canonical side, see B. S. Childs, *An Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979). From the literary side, see Robert Polzin, *Moses and the Deuteronomist* (New York: Seabury, 1980).

⁸The meaning of a text is thus never exhausted by what the originator of the original form of the text intended it to be (to the extent that that is recoverable). Cf. R. E. Clements, *Old Testament Theology: A Fresh Approach* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1978) 12: "The very demand of a truly historical criticism requires that we look at the biblical dimension of faith in all of its aspects, and seek to proceed beyond the view that works with simple monochrome meanings for sayings....A single historical context cannot, by itself, determine the meaning of a biblical text."

Thus, Genesis 2 was not set aside when Genesis 1 was added. The old story retained a distinctive character, but it was no longer simply "old." It became a part of the new to constitute a new story of creation, something more than either was individually. New contexts generate new meanings, opening up the old to new theological functions.⁹ The same point could be made regarding Isaiah 1-39 and 40-55, or the various stages of the "law of Moses," or the use of royal texts for messianic expectations, or, in the New Testament, the use of the Markan witness by Luke and Matthew.

In a similar manner one can say that the Old Testament is (often literally) contained within the New Testament; in being so blended into the new, it becomes as new as the new. Together they constitute a new coherent totality, yet without the old losing its character as Word of God. Thus, one might say that the Old Testament constitutes *both* a pre-Christian Word of God, and by virtue of the new totality, a Christian word.¹⁰ This brings us to our next point.

III. RELATING OLD AND NEW AS A PROBLEM

Perhaps most effective in the diminishment of Old Testament usage in preaching is its being anchored so solidly in the pre-Christian era, and the consequent difficulties associated with

relating it properly to New Testament realities, without denying its integrity as Word of God for its own times and places.

The issue might be sharpened when questions like these are asked: When the average Christian hears the Word “God” in Old Testament texts, what comes to mind? Is it “God before Jesus”? Do we somehow abstract ourselves from our contemporary situation and live ourselves back into some pre-Jesus time so that we hear these words as ancient Israelites? I suspect that few do. It is, for example, a Trinitarian cast of mind into which these texts are placed, whether the preacher makes that explicit or not. That God is *our* God; there has been no evolution from “one to three” over the years. The words of these pre-Christian texts have become for us Christian words.

But have we not thereby compromised the integrity of these words, giving them a meaning which they did not have in their original contexts? Or have these words *become* something more than they were originally by being placed within the new totality we call the Christian Bible (see previous section)? Indeed, even more, has this context enabled a more accurate assessment of what actually happened in the original situation? Thus, for example, we might say that *we* now realize what *Israel* did not, namely, that the God of whom they spoke *could* (if they had known what is now known) have been described in, say, Trinitarian terms.¹¹ Thus, while it might be said that we are not being “true to” all aspects

⁹The tradition may be said to be transmitted, not for the sake of preserving the past, but for the sake of providing a point of orientation for present faith and for the embodiment of future hope.

¹⁰The question of unity and diversity pertains not only to the relationship between the Testaments, but within each Testament. One ought to be prepared to discover that there are greater levels of unity between, e.g., Isaiah 40-55 and the Gospel of John than between the latter and, say, James.

¹¹It might be noted that internal to the Old Testament is the development of, say, henotheism to monotheism. But from the perspective of the post-exilic redactions, *all* texts were read from the perspective of a high monotheism.

of their understanding, *we are* being *truer* to the kind of God who was actually involved in Israel’s life, and are thus more accurate than Israel in speaking of the nature of that involvement.¹² These texts thus have the capacity of being both pre-Christian words, and by virtue of the new context *and* the nature of our experience with the God of the text, Christian words.

But how in preaching do we do justice to both: our *knowledge* of their pre-Christian origins and our *experience* of hearing them as Christian words?

There are no doubt variations in our experience at this point, so that there is no one approach to suggest. Certain texts are more immediate to our experience (say, Ps 23 over against Ps 109),¹³ hence needing little “translation;” almost any talk about the text rings true. Thus, because of the high degree of commonality of experience, one does justice to both pre-Christian and Christian simultaneously.

Other texts are less immediate to our experience for a variety of reasons (e.g., trans-cultural difference). In such cases more “explaining” is necessary before the horizons of text and hearer meet. This can take many forms, but one way is to talk *about the text*, but in language that enables it to ring true to common Christian experience (hence doing justice to both worlds). There will be no specific point of “application,” but a merging of the experience of the people in

the text with the experience of the congregation into a single “story.” An elision of worlds will have occurred. A variation on this is a one-two step approach, whereby one will first lay out the experience reflected in the text, anticipating in one’s description the commonalities with contemporary experience, and then speak of the contemporary situation in such a way that the commonalities with the biblical generation are transparent, and so that the Word of God which spoke then speaks again.¹⁴

This approach is especially helpful where the biblical historical context is sharp and clear or where the interpreter is working with a narrative or “story.” Thus, e.g., to lay the exilic situation of the people of God (in connection with, say, texts from Isaiah 40-55) alongside contemporary Christian experience makes for some unusually striking commonalities.

One general way to honor the realities of the pre-Christian world is through the careful use of language, avoiding obviously anachronistic language or concepts (e.g., Christology). A preacher need not be explicit with regard to New Testament realities for an elision of worlds to occur. The liturgical setting and the larger Christian tradition “embedded” in the community will play an important role in how a text is heard.¹⁵

¹²This would, of course, have implications for matters other than talk about God, e.g., the nature of faith.

¹³This is also true of the New Testament, e.g., the Gospel of John and the Book of Revelation. In fact, many Old Testament texts are more immediate to common Christian experience than are many New Testament texts.

¹⁴The second step need not be an explicit “application” step. It may involve only setting two “stories” side by side (or interweaving them) and letting the congregation draw the analysis as appropriate. They may see more than the preacher.

¹⁵There is, of course, a venerable tradition which has employed explicit Christological language when speaking of Old Testament realities (e.g., Luther, Bonhoeffer); though this practice is rooted in the New Testament (e.g., 1 Cor 10:4), and it is certainly not theologically inappropriate, for the second person of the Trinity was active in Israel’s life, it seems best to avoid it so that the pre-Christian context can be seen more sharply, preventing the text from becoming an allegory of our own experience, and maintaining that over-againstness which is so important for insight.

IV. DIFFICULT PASSAGES

The historical approach has prevented many difficult passages from being interpreted in a non-literal way. Thus, holy wars and curse psalms, and other such “crude and primitive” notions have had to be faced head-on. One could no longer “escape” through various forms of an allegorical approach, and the whole Old Testament has tended to suffer from neglect as a result. Yet the Old Testament has taken more than its share of neglect for such a reason, for the New Testament is filled with comparable difficulties, from a demon-filled world, to eternal punishments in gory detail, to prohibiting women a leadership role in churches.¹⁶ One ought not think that all Old Testament texts need somehow to be resurrected for general Christian preaching, and that one has to engage in special pleading or heavy-handed apologetic to see that they are. Yet, while an historical approach to such texts makes for more work than usual, it is often worth the effort, for they are often “surprise” texts that carry a fresh angle of vision on what the Christian faith is all about.

One example might be cited: the so-called curse psalms of which Psalm 109 is typical. These laments, cries to *God* to be delivered from the hands of oppressors, are rooted in the Exodus tradition and the contest with Pharaoh, and in the legal tradition (see Exod 22:22-24). In

essence, they could be said to be prayers that the judgment announced by the prophets on oppressors would be forthcoming (see Jer 5:26-29). One key is to see that these psalms are not model prayers, but occasional ones, used by those who were on their way to an ancient counterpart of Hitler's gas chambers; as such, one dare not stand in judgment over them. We probably have difficulties with these psalms in a way that, say, Namibian Christians would not, for we so seldom (if ever) are the victims of true oppression, and are in fact more often the oppressors. We have not been sufficiently attentive to the ways in which Christians have actually experienced texts like these.

V. OBSOLESCENCE

Closely related to these passages are those which speak of practices and institutions (e.g., animal sacrifices) which have been abrogated as a result of the coming of Christ. Because we can no longer allegorize our way through these texts, but must see them as the historical phenomena they in fact are, the effect has been to put many of these texts "on the shelf."

In response, it is to be noted once again that there are comparable realities

¹⁶This demonstrates that the evaluation of texts for use in contemporary theology and ethics cannot proceed on the basis of the New Testament alone (as many tend to do), for New Testament texts also need to be evaluated. Thus, this can only be done on the basis of a canon within the canon, at the center of which must be the gospel, the proper definition of which is arrived at only on the basis of both Testaments. A determination of what is "Christian," while more directly dependent upon the New Testament, is finally arrived at only with the assistance of the Old Testament. Gunneweg's discussion, *Understanding the Old Testament*, 219ff., suffers at this point.

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in the New Testament, e.g., 1 Corinthians 11 or Philemon—passages reflective of early Christian practices that were important for a particular socio-historical situation, but are no longer significant; in fact, they often *must* be set aside to be true to the gospel. Moreover, within the Old Testament itself there are developments which make earlier practices obsolete (e.g., changes in sanctuaries). In the case of both Testaments, however, such developments do not make these *texts* of no further import.

It might be tempting to suggest that these Old Testament realities are only prefigurations (or types) of New Testament realities yet to come. But that would be effectively to minimize their very important role in the life of a community as real and rich as our own and to see them only as shadows of the real thing. It is difficult to relate to shadows.

Another direction seems preferable. Such materials should be anchored firmly in Israel's history, and seen to be part and parcel of a community of faith with whom God is working to carry out his purposes. Such religious forms provide the matrix for the community's growth in faith and for the maturation of theological perspectives that continue to have considerable significance (e.g., the theology of sacrifice). Such texts are not easy to preach on, but their obvious rootedness in history and in a developing community of faith should enable significant experiential analogies to be drawn for the people of God in any age.

Thus, for example, the laws in the Pentateuch have commonly been put aside without recognizing the ways in which they often touch base with common Christian experience. Certainly Deuteronomy, often referred to as a book of "preached law" (and, one might add, a favorite of Jesus), shows the way here. We see there (and elsewhere) how a key touch point in an

old law is used to speak to a new situation. For example, Deuteronomy 15:1 picks up on Exodus 23:10-11 at the point of concern for the *poor* and gets at the heart of what the law is all about: “You shall open wide your hand to your brother, to the needy and the poor in the land” (Deut 15:11). Again, Leviticus 25:1-7 picks up on the same law at the point of concern for the *land*, and gets at another key issue: “It shall be a year of solemn rest for the land” (25:4; see what disobedience involves in Hos 4:1-3). Given the widespread concern in the legal materials for matters of justice and ecology (and other “modern” issues), one is given to wonder whether greater attention to these passages by preachers through the years would have made the contemporary church more sensitive.¹⁷

This leads to a concluding point: The sensitivity of our congregations to such issues will be dependent upon our preaching from Old Testament texts more often than we realize. The authority or value of such texts and their issues in the eyes of people so often depends on preachers having “shown it to be so” only by repeated attention. And one of the best ways to do this is not by treating the text as an object, to be taken out and trumpeted about, but by reflecting on the text as an experience of the people of God, people whose lives are so similar to our own. But, above all, the preacher should show how God pilgrimaged with this people, sharing in their limitations, complexities, and ambiguities, and promising to be with them and for them wherever they went.

¹⁷It is said that Marcion was a very wealthy man; no wonder he wanted to get rid of the Old Testament!