



The Old Testament in Christian Proclamation: A New Testament Perspective

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In today's Christian pulpits, Old Testament texts play a minimal role. In view of the enormous influence those texts have had on our theology and liturgical heritage, their scriptural status in our Bibles, and the time invested in Old Testament studies at colleges and seminaries, that seems strange. The situation cries out for redress. Professor Fretheim is surely correct in the previous essay when he insists that consideration of the matter must include examination of what is experienced when Christians hear passages from the Old Testament. I have chosen to focus on that question as well, but from the vantage point of the New Testament, with special emphasis on Paul's letters.

Krister Stendahl once suggested that Christianity was born as a dispute about the interpretation of Israel's Scriptures. The suggestion is a helpful way to view the New Testament. The New Testament intends to offer an authoritative reading of the Old. Its distinctive interpretations, however, developed only gradually within the larger framework of a lively and varied Jewish interpretive tradition that had already decisively shaped a view of God and the world. The confession of Jesus as Messiah was possible only within a tradition that spoke of messiahs. Jesus was experienced as savior and deliverer within a specific heritage. It is hardly accidental that Jesus' followers sought to make sense of his career by employing terms derived from the Scriptures.

Jesus' career, however, ending with his death and resurrection, was as disruptive for his Jewish followers as it was revealing. The death of the "King of the Jews" on a Roman cross graphically sums up the career of one who was constantly at odds with his own tradition. Most Jews refused to believe that Jesus was the promised one. Interpretation of the sacred writings occurred in a setting in which there were disagreements. And they were not minor. By the end of the first century, the emerging rabbinic community had determined that interpretations offered by followers of the crucified Christ were dangerous to the survival

of their community and probably irreconcilable with their view of the Scriptures.¹ The alternative views came to be labeled "Christian" and "Jewish"; those Jews who believed Jesus to be the Messiah, together with a vast group of gentiles, had to sever all ties with other members of their family. Though both groups believed in the same God and defended their views by appeal to the same group of sacred writings, their disagreements were so fundamental that a parting of the ways become inevitable.

Few of us today worry about such problems when preaching on Old Testament texts. We

have come to regard Israel's Scriptures as our own. We read with the conviction that we are children of Abraham, members of Israel, though we are gentiles. There is little justification for such a view anywhere in the New Testament. The expression "new Israel" does not occur; nowhere is a gentile "Christian" church viewed as a replacement for an "old" Israel. On the contrary, gentiles were from the beginning a problem. Few Jews disputed the right of gentiles to be saved, but even Jews who confessed Jesus as Messiah had difficulty sitting at table with gentile brothers and sisters in Christ, since the law forbade such fellowship. There is not an agreed-upon scriptural justification for such social intimacy within the church among New Testament authors, though it soon came to be normative in practice.

And while such matters were being discussed within congregations, there were long, agonizing struggles about strained relations between Jews who believed Jesus to be the Messiah and those who did not. Jewish unbelief, rooted in traditional interpretation of the Scriptures, forced Jewish Christians to "examine the scriptures...to see if these things were so" (Acts 17:11). Questions arose largely from within the Jewish community and were discussed by appeal to the Jewish Scriptures.

Nineteen hundred years of gentile Christian tradition cannot obscure the fact that alternative views of the Old Testament still exist among Jews who view the writings as their Scriptures. The merit of historical criticism is that it has forced us to take seriously the gap between the Old and New Testaments, as well as the gap between the time of their composition and our own time. Those distances are not simply chasms to be bridged or separate horizons to be merged.² The historical distance underscores the particularity of the biblical texts. We are not free to make of them whatever we choose, picking out what suits our fancy. The collection of writings we call the Old Testament exists apart from us, even if its "scriptural" character is a function of the church that reads it as authoritative. That collection first belongs to Israel, the People of God, whose distinctiveness is bound to the will of a single God who called Abraham and

¹The struggles within the Jewish community that eventually led to the exclusion of Christian Jews have been the topic of many studies. See J. Louis Martyn, *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel* (New York: Harper, 1968) and Wayne Meeks, "Am I a Jew?," *Christianity, Judaism, and Other Graeco-Roman Cults*, ed. Jacob Neusner (4 vols; Leiden: Brill, 1975) 1.163-186. For discussions that move into the second and third centuries, see the two volumes edited by E. P. Sanders, *Jewish and Christian Self-definition* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980-81).

²For a helpful discussion of contemporary hermeneutics and a source of language about "merging horizons," see the article by Patrick Keifert, "Mind Reader and Maestro: Models for Understanding Biblical Interpreters," *Word & World* 1 (1981) 153-158.

chose Israel alone to be his own (Amos 3:2). The history of Christian antisemitism and the horrors of the Holocaust provide ample evidence of our ability to make the past say what we want. It is a strange and dangerous hermeneutic that allows Christians to view themselves as God's elect and to use Israel's Scriptures against Jews.

How can we respect the particularity of the Old Testament in our preaching? The task is difficult in a society that is embarrassed by singularity, a society that has made toleration the gospel. It is even more difficult within a Christian tradition that has made of the biblical God with a name too sacred to be spoken a universal principle and has applied to itself that special designation, "People of God." If the world is scandalized by our insistence that in Christ God

was reconciling the world to himself, we should be no less scandalized by God's choice of Israel.

Israel's story tells of a God who from the first was involved with human history. The first covenant God makes is with Noah (Gen 9), and all human beings are involved in that covenant. His response to the brokenness of the human family (Gen 11), however, is to send a husband and wife named Abraham and Sarah into the future with promises of a great land and people which will offer blessing to everyone. Israel's vast literature, spanning more than a millennium, contains bits and pieces that may be appreciated by themselves. One does not need to be an Israelite, for example, to understand Sarah's laughter in Genesis 18:12 or the terrible dilemma Abraham faces when commanded to offer Isaac as a sacrifice. We understand the stories as human beings, as mothers and fathers and children. Many of Israel's stories and traditions were, in fact, borrowed from surrounding cultures. The point, however, is that the small fragments mined from various quarries have been used to create a mosaic whose total impression is the focus. Israel's teachers, sages, and prophets borrowed whatever they needed from surrounding cultures to depict a world created by a gracious God who chose Israel to be his own and sealed the choice with a covenant marked by circumcision and the Torah. What makes the collection "scriptural" for us is not individual stories or commands. Much of the material, at least with regard to content, could be derived from other ancient civilizations. The Old Testament is special because it is about the God who raised Jesus from the dead. And that God chose Israel.

Israel's Scriptures become ours not because of some inherent necessity in those writings, but because of a "New Testament" in Christ's blood, shed for all. As gentiles, we are included among God's elect only because God did a new thing. Only in light of the cross of Christ can we be addressed as members of the household of God (Eph 2:19). And that act changes things. It makes of Israel's Scriptures an "Old" Testament. When we gentile Christians read the 39+ books as a preface to the story of Jesus, they become something different.

No one understood the problem more clearly than Paul.³ In his experience, living "blamelessly" under the Jewish law did not drive him to despair, but it also did not fit him for the Kingdom of God or lead him to Christ (Phil 3:6).

³For the most current and the most helpful discussion of Paul and Judaism, see E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977).

On the contrary, Paul insists that zeal for the Law drove him to persecute followers of Jesus (Gal 1:13-14; Phil 3:2-11). No one who knew the Scriptures would have recognized Jesus as the Messiah.⁴ Jesus did not liberate Israel from Roman oppression; he died on a Roman cross. Even more serious, the form of that death placed Jesus under the curse of God's own law (Gal 3:13, quoting Deut 21:23: "Cursed is anyone who hangs on a tree."). It was blasphemy to assert that God had raised Jesus from the dead, thus proving that he was the Messiah by installing him in the heavenly court.

Paul also sensed that such a gospel threatened the carefully monitored distinction between Jew and non-Jew, thus undermining the whole conception of God's covenant with Israel as his elect. He was convinced, as a zealous Jew, that there was something irreconcilable about life under the Torah and faith in Jesus Christ. When Christ appeared to Paul, the new apostle did not change his mind about that irreconcilability or about the scandalous nature of Jesus' Messiahship. He changed sides, carrying the gospel to gentiles. Israel's God, he preached, had

vindicated his Son the crucified Messiah, thus offering redemption to all, both Jew and non-Jew, on the same basis. He knew the message was “a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God” (1 Cor 1:23-24). Baptism enacted the new reality:

For as many of you were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. (Gal 3:27-28)

With Christ’s resurrection, Paul insists, God has altered the rules. God has made a new covenant through the cross of Christ. He now justifies the ungodly, whether Jew or gentile, on the basis of faith in Christ. The covenant of circumcision no longer describes the structure within which children of God are to live. The distinctions essential to the covenant are no longer valid: “For neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation” (Gal 6:15).

The issue is not whether the Old Testament contains “grace” or “gospel” in some sense. The question is how God is experienced as gracious and how his word is experienced as “for us.” The Old Testament tells of a God who chose Israel. Sinai stands at the center of a view of God and the world. The exclusivist thrust in the Old Testament is not mere provincialism; it is a response to a God who has mercy on whom he chooses. Gentiles experience God’s saving grace only through faith in Christ. The claim is also exclusive, but in a different sense. In Christ, all other distinctions are unimportant, even the difference between the circumcised and the uncircumcised. The Christian “gospel” is necessarily at odds with a Jewish view of grace rooted in our Old Testament.

What distinguished Paul from Marcion was his insistence that the God revealed in Israel’s Scriptures is the God who raised Jesus. He claims Israel’s Scriptures for those in Christ and argues even his most radical views from the

⁴The constellation of “messianic” texts within post-biblical Judaism normally included 2 Sam 7:10-14; Isa 11; Psalm 2; and Num 24. See Nils Dahl, “The Crucified Messiah,” *The Crucified Messiah* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1974) 10-36.

sacred texts. In Galatians 3, he offers support for his view that the Galatians may not practice circumcision. The Torah itself, he argues, saw itself as provisional, a “custodian” until the coming of the promised one.⁵ Now that Christ has come, we are no longer under a custodian (Gal 3:23-26). The implication of his argument is that Israel’s heritage and scriptural tradition are neither exposed as false nor universalized. The Torah remains a structure of life which God gave through Moses to Israel. It was not a mistake. But now God’s righteousness has been revealed apart from the law (cf. Rom 3:21), and the Torah is shown to be a “custodian.”

Paul’s views are complex, and it is important to recognize that he formed them in the process of reading the Old Testament as a Christian, not apart from exegesis. Unlike Jews, he can distinguish between Torah as a way of life and Torah as Scripture. The way of life, which God commanded Israel, is now “old”; its provisionality becomes clear in Christ. Paul still has great respect for the integrity of that way of life, however. He insists that if the Galatians adopt circumcision, they are obligated to keep the whole law (Gal 5:2-6). The Torah is not

universalized by removing the features that tie it to Israel. And precisely for that reason gentiles in Christ must respect both its integrity and its provisionality.

Our views of the Old Testament as the word of God should be shaped by Paul. He takes the writings seriously as descriptive of a way of life alien to those in Christ. And he does not pick and choose among the 613 commandments and ordinances that make up the law. One either lives as a Jew, or one does not. Since the coming of Christ, the Torah as a way of life is no longer available to us as gentiles, not even if we regard the Torah as Scripture. At some point we must experience the Old Testament as a word of God that is not for us. It addresses promises intended for an elect in which we are not included. As gentiles, we have never been and can never be elected by God in the same way as the circumcised. We experience the grace of God only in Christ; through him the promises of God are “for us.”

This has been a lengthy, if sketchy, preface to two suggestions about the preaching from the Old Testament from the perspective of the New:

1. *Christian preaching must respect the historical and theological particularity of the Old Testament.* One advantage of preaching on texts from the Old Testament is that much of the material is readily accessible to us as human beings. The Psalms continue to provide words for the deepest hurts and anger as well as language for praise and thanksgiving. We can see ourselves with little difficulty in stories about Abraham and Sarah, Jacob and Laban, David, Elijah, and Jeremiah. Historical study of the texts should prevent us, however, from blunting the overall thrust in our desire to find a word for ourselves. The overall story is about a God who chose Israel. At some point we ought to experience this word of God as an affront; we should feel left out. When God seals his covenant with Abraham in Genesis 17, we are excluded. When we read Ezekiel and recog-

⁵Paul’s complex argument in Galatians 3 is discussed by Nils Dahl in “Contradictions in Scripture,” *Studies in Paul* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1977) 159-177.

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nize how little place gentiles had in his vision of the future, we should not miss the offense. Israel’s writers had no illusions about their worthiness. They recognized that their hope lay in the hands of a God who was merciful because he chose to be. As gentiles, we ought to recognize that we have even less claim on God.

The point is made with magnificent clarity in Matthew 15:21-28. In this story a gentile woman comes to Jesus for help. His response to a non-Jew is notable:

He answered, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” But she came and knelt before him, saying, “Lord help me.” And he answered, “It is not fair to take children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.” She said, “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master’s table.”

Only at this point does Jesus grant her request. We have for so long regarded the Old Testament as our Scriptures that her reaction seems inconceivable. Yet it is the only proper response to a story of salvation so shockingly particular and that depends so totally upon the will of a God who shows mercy only because he chooses to do so.

The temptation is always to reduce God to the status of some universal principle. But no

one has ever been saved by a universal possibility—a god who might be merciful or indifferent. The gospel’s particularity is also its glory. God has acted, and we need not speculate about what he might do or might have done. He elected Israel to be his own, and now his righteousness has been revealed in Christ, apart from law, a saving righteousness that is for both Jew and Gentile.

2. *Preaching from the Old Testament must acknowledge the continuing problem of a Jewish community that does not accept Jesus as Christ.* Few pastors know a great deal about Judaism or Jewish interpretation of the Old Testament. Such matters have not been an important part of seminary education. Those who study the Old Testament read commentaries and monographs written primarily by Christians. Such practices arise from a profound anti-Semitism. We have tended to operate as if Judaism no longer existed. More and more congregations celebrate Passover as if it were a Christian festival. Recent history will not let us forget, however, those heirs of Abraham and Sarah who do not accept Jesus as the yes to all God’s promises. That much has been seared into our collective conscience by the Holocaust.

The problem was different for most New Testament authors. The evangelists, for example, wrote for audiences with a strong Jewish-Christian core.⁶ They dealt with matters from the perspective of that core, foremost of which was the refusal of the majority of God’s elect to accept Jesus as the Messiah. So long as Jewish Christians were a prominent feature of the early church, the agonizing reflection could at least remain within familiar traditional bounds. God had pre-

⁶The case is argued in works on John by Raymond Brown and Louis Martyn; on Matthew, by W. D. Davies; on Luke, by Jacob Jervell and David Tiede. In my dissertation on Mark, *Messiah and Temple* (SBLDS 31; Missoula: Scholars, 1977), I have made some suggestions about the Jewish element in the community for whom the Gospel is written.

served only a remnant before. Even if small in number, Jewish Christians could argue that God had kept his promises to Abraham in Christ. They were the proof.

When the separation between “Christian” and “Jew” became more formal, however, a new question arose. Though he wrote earlier, Paul asks the question on behalf of all later generations of believers: Has God rejected his people (Rom 11:1)? Some Christians today seem ready to answer yes, using the term “New Israel” to refer to the gentile Christian church. One might argue from Israel’s own Scriptures that God had the right. The litany of rebellion in Ezra’s or Daniel’s prayers to God, as well as the prophet’s fierce attack on a corrupt society, provide cause. Yet like the prophets, Paul refuses to accept the logic of such arguments:

What if some were unfaithful? Does their faithlessness nullify the faithfulness of God? By no means! Let God be true though every man be false. (Rom 3:3-4)

In Romans 9-11, Paul struggles with a problem Christians can neither solve nor escape. How can God cast off his own people? Israel’s refusal to accept God’s Christ has placed it outside the household of faith. Paul cannot accept the conclusion, however, that God has changed his mind about the election of Israel in favor of some new group. For if God has changed his mind about his elect, giving up on his promises to Abraham, what guarantee is there that he will not change his mind about others whom he has made beneficiaries of his love? Election would

mean nothing. Status before God would depend upon convincing God of our worthiness. That is no gospel.

Paul was unable to solve the problem. Neither can we. Our preaching ought to respect the problem. There is no justification in the New Testament for speaking about an alternative track for Jews, as though Jesus were one option among others. There is no separate Messiah for gentiles, just as there is only one God of both Jews and gentiles. But neither does Paul write Israel off, arguing that God has now replaced his elect with a new people. Though Jesus' death and resurrection have now eliminated the need for the Torah as a custodian, Israel still continues to live under the Torah. Paul leaves the matter where it must be left, in the mystery of God's providence, confident that one day God will find a way to include his elect among those saved in Christ. Israel's hope, as ours, rests with a God who keeps his word.