



## The Old Testament: A Heresy Continued?

HEMCHAND GOSSAI

Our Savior's Lutheran Church, New Ulm, Minnesota

Let's face it. We have a problem when it comes to the use of the Old Testament in the church. We have found a variety of ways of overlooking or de-emphasizing or simply dismissing the Old Testament and its inherent value for the church. It is true that there are a fair number of troublesome texts in the Old Testament, many of which we would be hard put to use, let alone justify. Texts such as Proverbs 23, which endorses and encourages corporal punishment for a child, or Proverbs 5, 6 and 7, which describe women in a most derogatory manner, create much difficulty for the church. And, as if this were not enough, large sections of the Pentateuch which focus on dietary laws and the different types of offerings and sacrifices only serve to arouse Marcionite tendencies in many Christians.

The church, for the most part, is content with having the Old Testament simply "being there." But others who have encountered deeper difficulties have actively sought to eliminate the Old Testament altogether from the Christian canon. In so doing, they have decisively extinguished any glimmer of usefulness which was thought to have been there. One of the problems encountered in the church with regard to the Old Testament is the fact that the Old Testament is not seen to be the Word of God. Where this is the perception of the minister, it is inevitably transmitted to the laity. The attitudinal problem does not stop here but is reflected in the fact that in the church's lectionary there is no continuity in the readings of the Old Testament in the way there is for the Gospel and Epistle lessons. The Old Testament is used primarily in support of the New Testament. Yet, it goes on. Not only are Old Testament texts by and large neglected in preaching, but often they are omitted altogether from lectionary readings. So generally, then, it is a question of omission or misappropriation.

There is an apparent distrust of this body of literature which happens to be the sacred text of Judaism, which for many Christians is an "alien religion."<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>See Adolf von Harnack, *Marcion* (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs, 1921).

This distrust, however, is not something unique to the contemporary church; in some ways the church has inherited it and has chosen to continue this distrust in covert ways.

### I. MARCION AND HARNACK

The first important critic of the use of the Old Testament in the church, and the one whose name is synonymous with rejection of the Old Testament, is Marcion.<sup>2</sup> Marcion suggested that the God of the Old Testament is entirely different from the God of the New. Marcion's primary and perhaps only aim was to show the validity of his view of the Old Testament. For

him, there was no question of continuity between the two testaments. He made a clear distinction between the Creator God of the Old Testament and the God of Jesus Christ in the New Testament. Naturally, canonicity and continuum were irrelevant precisely because, if the God of the two is different, then that takes care of the fundamental connection between the two. In his polemic against the Old Testament, Marcion set the scene for other scholars. It was his position which precipitated the many and varied reactions to the Old Testament which we have today.

Some sixty years ago, Adolf von Harnack, in his definitive work on Marcion, presented clearly not only Marcion's view but built his own case against the Old Testament, using Marcion as a foundation. What preoccupied von Harnack was the canonical stature of the Old Testament. He speculated that much of the criticism which is leveled against Christianity today takes as its departure the Old Testament. Von Harnack has nothing against the Old Testament in and of itself; for what it was worth, it may even be purposeful literature, but that purpose was not in relation to the New Testament. Perhaps the most fitting place for the Old Testament would be in the Apocrypha, where it would be functionally more effective.

One is not entirely sure whether von Harnack was aware of the impact of his views. He was, of course, espousing these views at a time when his words served to generate quite bitter and deep anti-Semitic feelings among the inciters during the time of the Third Reich. Von Harnack suggested:

To reject the Old Testament in the second century was a mistake which the church rightly repudiated; to retain it in the sixteenth century was a fate which the Reformation could not yet avoid; but to continue to keep it in Protestantism as a canonical document after the nineteenth century is the consequence of religious and ecclesiastical paralysis....[T]o sweep the table clean and honor the truth in confession and teaching is the action required of Protestantism today. And it is almost too late.<sup>3</sup>

This kind of polemic in and of itself was important and called for notice by biblical scholars, but perhaps even more significant was von Harnack's appeal to those outside the church, those who were constantly seeking any artillery to use against the Jews. What was particularly useful to those who would misappropriate von Harnack's argument was the theological and ecclesiastical basis on which his rejection was founded.

<sup>2</sup>A. H. J. Gunneweg, *Understanding the Old Testament* (London: SCM, 1978) 219.

<sup>3</sup>A. von Harnack, *Marcion*, 127, 222.

## II. DELITZSCH: PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

As much as Von Harnack's view provided fuel for growing anti-Semitic feelings, particularly among those outside the church, perhaps even greater damage was done by Friedrich Delitzsch.<sup>4</sup> Delitzsch was the son of Franz Delitzsch, the prominent conservative German Old Testament scholar. Though both von Harnack and Delitzsch argued for the same end, their struggles were shaped and motivated by entirely different experiences and reasons. Delitzsch raised many questions, which for him posed some difficulties in the acceptance of the Old Testament as part of the Christian canon. For Delitzsch, the Old Testament was dominated by

inconsistencies, contradictions, and an immoral thread that runs throughout. Kraeling notes that Delitzsch considered the Old Testament as a book “full of fraud and immorality that had damaged the moral fibre of Christendom and should be no longer read as sacred literature by Christians.”<sup>5</sup> One of the primary influences on Delitzsch was the seemingly endless image of a God who is callous and merciless. Can this God, who participates in the slaughter of a people, as described in Joshua, be the same God of the New Testament, the God of Jesus Christ? To Delitzsch this was not possible.

What gave Delitzsch’s argument against the Old Testament such force was the fact that his objections were born out of practical considerations, which could easily be perceived by other members of the laity. One might say that Delitzsch’s objections were from the grassroots. His aversion to the Old Testament might be encapsulated in these words:

The Old Testament is full of deceptions of all kinds: a veritable hodge-podge of erroneous, incredible, undependable figures, including those of biblical chronology; a veritable labyrinth of false portrayals, misleading reworkings, revisions and transpositions, therefore also of anachronisms, a constant intermixture of contradictory particulars and whole stories, unhistorical inventions, legends and folk tales—in short, a book full of intentional and unintentional deceptions, a very dangerous book, in the use of which the greatest care is necessary.<sup>6</sup>

There is undisguised disdain and contempt for the Old Testament by Delitzsch, and his attitude further spills over in the teaching of anything associated with the Old Testament in theological schools. But the questions raised by Von Harnack and, in particular, Delitzsch, while having much resonance with today’s society, are not the ones which have made an indelible mark on contemporary scholarship and the church. In this regard, the names of Schleiermacher and Bultmann are in the forefront.

### III. SCHLEIERMACHER: JUDAISM AND HEATHENISM

It goes without saying that Friedrich Schleiermacher is one of the greatest

<sup>4</sup>Friedrich Delitzsch, *Die grosse Täuschung* (2 vols.; Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlagsanstalt, 1920-21).

<sup>5</sup>Emil G. Kraeling, *The Old Testament since the Reformation* (New York: Schocken Books, 1955) 150.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, 158.

theological minds in modern history. It is no surprise, therefore, that his views on the Old Testament have made an indelible mark on biblical scholarship and the church.<sup>7</sup> Schleiermacher believed that there was a place for the Old Testament, but it was not in the realm of the Christian church. He developed an early version of the notion of “promise and fulfillment” as a way of describing the relationship between the Old Testament and the New Testament. However, rather than uniting the Old Testament and the New, for Schleiermacher “promise and fulfillment” separates the two. For the Jews, whose faith is grounded in the Old Testament, and the “non-believers,” who have no relation either to the Old Testament or the New, Christ is the same. Thus he argues, the Jews are as far removed from Christ as are the “non-believers.” This is one way of

suggesting that Judaism and the Hebrew Bible is as far removed from Christianity and the New Testament as is any other religion and its scripture.

Moreover, Schleiermacher argues that Christian doctrine is generally not based on the Old Testament, and what little is based there is not worth keeping, since it creates more problems than it solves. What then should be done with the Old Testament? Schleiermacher does not go quite as far as Marcion in abandoning the Old Testament altogether, but he does say that the Old Testament should not be used for Christian teaching. What then is the role of the Old Testament? The Old Testament, he suggests, should be seen at best as an appendix to the New Testament.

#### IV. BULTMANN: THE OLD TESTAMENT AS *Vorverständnis*

For Rudolf Bultmann,<sup>8</sup> on whom we now focus, the role of the Old Testament is very complex. He sees the Old Testament as having an important role to play in the life of the church. However, he points out clearly and forcefully that the Old Testament is not revelation for the Christian, nor is it the Word of God. What then is its function? According to Bultmann, the Old Testament serves as *Vorverständnis* (pre-understanding) for the New Testament. In this regard it is useful, though it is not indispensable. Accordingly, he suggests that “the pre-understanding...of the Gospel which emerges under the Old Testament can emerge just as well within other historical embodiments of the divine law.”<sup>9</sup> Thus, because the Old Testament is only a pre-understanding, it has severe limitations on its role within the church. As a way of helping with the understanding of the New Testament, the Old Testament might be used for pedagogical reasons. The church cannot rely on it for any other reason, precisely because all its demands on the individual are seen to be obsolete. To make the Old Testament central or even indispensable for the church is to make the pre-understanding into a final understanding. Bultmann’s view may be summed up thus:

<sup>7</sup>For his views on the Old Testament, see Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1928).

<sup>8</sup>For a helpful summary of his views on the Old Testament, see Rudolf Bultmann, “Significance of the Old Testament for the Christian Faith,” *The Old Testament and the Christian Faith*, ed. Bernhard W. Anderson (New York: Harper & Row, 1963) 8-35.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, 17.

The Christian proclamation cannot and may not remind hearers that God led their fathers out of Egypt, that he once led the people into captivity, and brought them back again into the land of the Promise, that he restored Jerusalem and the Temple and so on. Israel’s history is not our history and in so far as God has shown his Grace in that history, such grace is not meant for us.<sup>10</sup>

So, the modern church is left with a potpourri of ideas regarding the Old Testament. Attempts to reverse some of the views expressed here by making the Old Testament the primary Scripture in the church serve only to complicate matters further.<sup>11</sup>

#### V. CONTINUUM OF BIBLICAL TRADITION

How then is the Old Testament perceived in the church? Some see it as a reading for

Sunday worship, often as a complement—but perhaps more often as a contrast to the New Testament lessons. Can it, like the New Testament, be seen to be an indispensable part of the Christian Bible, as holy, inspired, as containing the promises of God, the same God of the New Testament, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ?

What we face in the church today, with respect to the value and use of the Old Testament, is decidedly more dangerous than Marcion's design. For Marcion, the rejection of the Old Testament as an integral constituent of the Christian Bible meant also in effect the discounting of a significant part of the New Testament. This becomes clearer when it is reckoned that the New Testament uses much of the imagery and vocabulary of the Old Testament, and interprets events in the Old Testament in the light of events of the New Testament era. The church, alive to the unacceptable nature of Marcion's thesis, rejected his arguments. Today, however, the indifference to the value and relevance of the Old Testament leads to the interpretation of the New Testament in a vacuous state.

The issue of the continuum between the Old Testament and the New leads inevitably to the question of canon. Inspiration, revelation, and promise and fulfillment are all brought in question when the canon of the Bible is taken apart. That the particular message of the New Testament gospel is perhaps more meaningful to some Christians is no reason why the other segments should be neglected or rejected. The insight of Friedrich Baumgärtel is helpful here. He suggests that "the Christian seeks to understand the Old Testament because he already loves it as the witness of the word of God."<sup>12</sup> This method of viewing the validity of the Old Testament is perhaps not the most scientific available, but in any event, the Old Testament is seen here to be in direct relation to the

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., 31.

<sup>11</sup>See in particular Wilhelm Vischer, *The Witness of the Old Testament to Christ* (London: Lutterworth, 1949). Vischer goes entirely in the opposite direction when he says, "Strictly speaking only the Old Testament is Scripture, while the New Testament brings the good news that now the content of Scripture—the meaning of all her words, her Lord and her fulfiller—has appeared bodily" (p. 8).

<sup>12</sup>Friedrich Baumgärtel, "The Hermeneutical Problem of the Old Testament," *Essays on Old Testament Hermeneutics*, ed. Claus Westermann (Atlanta: John Knox, 1963) 139.

message of the New Testament and having legitimate scriptural efficacy in its own right. In contradiction to this view, Alfred Jepsen contends that "there is no such thing as an 'Old Testament' except as a part of the Christian Canon."<sup>13</sup> The fundamental problem with this view is that it dismisses the possibility of the validity of the Old Testament in its own virtue. That the Word of the Old Testament can *only* be understood for the church in the light of the New Testament is to resort to what Gunneweg calls the "pseudo-solution"<sup>14</sup> of the allegorical approach. The Old Testament is indeed apart of the Christian canon (a significant part), but it has a message of its own, while simultaneously shedding light on New Testament matters.

Of its own accord, the Old Testament is capable of reminding us of God's revelation to his people Israel. It shows us clearly God's involvement in history on behalf of his people. In this respect, in and of itself, the Old Testament is authoritative. Brevard Childs reckons that "the decisive force at work in the formation of the Canon emerged in the transmission of a divine word in such a form as to lay authoritative claim upon the successive generations."<sup>15</sup> This "divine word" of which Childs speaks did not die with the Christian era, but, as in the generations of the

Jews, it continues to function for Christians, though clearly on a different level because of Christ. The New Testament with its message and promise of God in Christ helps us to understand in a new light the Old Testament and the message found there. But the Old Testament also has a reciprocal function in that it lends considerable insight into the understanding of the New Testament, in terms of themes, vocabulary, imagery, and world view preserved in the Old Testament. Terence Fretheim correctly notes 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.”<sup>16</sup>

## VI. INTERPRETATION AND PROCLAMATION

Christians have continued to seek knowledge in an ever-changing world, with new issues which affect and shape their lives. This quest for meaning and understanding, for clarification and for new and refined knowledge has led to interpreting and reinterpreting their present experiences in the light of contemporary scientific knowledge, the various traditions which have been inherited (including the Christian tradition), and the Bible. This ongoing engagement on the part of Christians, seeking knowledge which would relate and perhaps even

<sup>13</sup>Alfred Jepsen, “The Scientific Study of the Old Testament,” *Essays on Old Testament Hermeneutics*, ed. C. Westermann, 250. Cf. also Hartmut Gese, “Erwägungen zur Einheit der Biblischen Theologie,” *Von Sinai zum Zion* (Munich: Chr. Kaiser, 1974) 11-30. Gese continues Jepsen’s line of argument by arguing that the Old Testament has its integrity only in relation to the New Testament.

<sup>14</sup>A. Gunneweg, *Understanding the Old Testament*, 219.

<sup>15</sup>Brevard S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979) 60.

<sup>16</sup>Terence Fretheim, “The Old Testament in Christian Proclamation,” *Word & World* 3 (1983) 227.

give meaning to their experiences means necessarily that the Bible (both Old Testament and New Testament) becomes vital and indispensable; it is subject to continued criticism in the light of changing experiences and values. This is where the interpretation of the Old Testament in the New Testament is of absolute importance. Gunneweg goes as far as to suggest that, “it would be no exaggeration to understand the hermeneutical problem of the Old Testament as *the* problem of Christian theology.”<sup>17</sup> Whether or not it is *the* problem of Christian theology is debatable, but nevertheless it is significant.

It is a kind of paradigm of an on-going process by which inherited traditions are reinterpreted in the light of present experiences. There is no doubt that in many instances the historical setting of an Old Testament text is different from the New Testament context to which it is applied (as evidenced by many examples in the Gospels and the Pauline corpus). However, a New Testament writer’s reinterpretation of an Old Testament text, need not necessarily supersede the original sense in the Old Testament. The Old Testament can be interpreted in its own right, outside of the New Testament’s use of it. Having said this, however, I need to make it clear that I am not suggesting that New Testament interpretation be overlooked.

A few examples might be helpful at this point. The Deuteronomic legislations are in effect a reinterpretation of the Covenant Code found in the book of Exodus. Deuteronomy does not merely repeat these themes but reinterprets them in the light of the prevailing conditions. However, this renewal of the Covenant Code in Deuteronomy does not supersede the words of

Exodus; rather, both accounts must now be reckoned with. There are many other instances of interpretation, such as Ezekiel's reversal of the "sins of the fathers upon their children" or the prophet Joel's reversing Isaiah's "beating of swords into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks" to suit the historical context of his time. Still in the Old Testament, we witness Job's unrelenting challenge of the retribution theory, indicating clearly that something which was thought to be axiomatic within Israel's tradition was not beyond being disputed. These examples of reinterpretation of Old Testament texts within the Old Testament itself serve to lend an insight into the constant reinterpretation which is necessary; these examples, however, do not begin to exhaust the incidence of such reinterpretations.

In the case of the New Testament, there is even a greater preponderance of Old Testament texts which have been reinterpreted particularly in the light of the momentous and climactic occurrence of the Christ event. Most of these are well known. However, there are also other examples of Old Testament texts which have been reinterpreted by New Testament writers. One example will suffice here. In I Timothy the writer reinterprets the "fall" event of the Old Testament as away of arguing polemically against women (2:11-15). Because of the "fall," women are perceived to be inferior to men. We are not sure of the rationale behind such an argument, but in the wake of contemporary concerns and a reawakening concerning the role of women in our society, this interpretation of the "fall" is unacceptable. This is one clear instance in which the New Testa-

<sup>17</sup>A. Gunneweg, *Understanding the Old Testament*, 2.

ment reinterpretation of the Old Testament does not supersede the latter, but rather the Old Testament serves as a corrective to the New Testament.

More often than not, experience dictates the nature of the interpretive task. This experience may be molded from traditions which have been inherited or by new factors within church or society. The fact that the Bible in general and the Old Testament in particular can be appropriated by a variety of bodies throughout history is indicative of the "aliveness" and relevance of the biblical Word over time. Various methods of interpretation have come to light in recent years,<sup>18</sup> and while many of these have found favor in scholarly circles, they have certainly not exhausted the methods at the church's disposal. This fact is that, as long as the church exists, and Christians of various walks of life—with all of their uniqueness and individuality—seek to interpret the biblical Word (both Old and New Testaments) in the light of their experiences, new methods will evolve.

While the notion of "promise and fulfillment" is an inadequate theological construct for determining the relationship between the Testaments, it is nevertheless a useful construct in discussing the central aspects of both Old and New Testaments. In and of itself the "promise and fulfillment" idea produces for the believer a source of promise. Thus, in every instance where there is "promise and fulfillment," whether within the Old Testament and New Testament separately or together, there is promise to the believer.

While Christians need to hear the promise of God's caring love, culminating in the death and resurrection of his Son, Jesus, the manner in which this message is clothed is very important. For the elderly widow who has just lost her husband the message in the gospel might be the assurance of God's continued care for her and the promise of eternal life, or, perhaps the gentle

care of Jesus which he so often demonstrated when confronted with pain and sorrow. It may be that the episode in which Jesus weeps on hearing of Lazarus' death will be comfort enough. On the other hand, for a young person from a "third world" country, living in squalor and poverty, and faced with a seemingly endless quest for justice and a decent life, the gospel may be clothed in the words of the prophets and their preaching regarding injustice and the oppression of God's people. That is to say, the Old Testament may contain God's Word for people in such a situation. It may be that the biblical mandate regarding the care of God's people, and the hope of freedom and deliverance, is precisely the element of hope which is necessary at this point.

Whatever the pastoral situation, there is no doubt that the Christian Bible, both Old and New Testaments, is not only relevant but indispensable in its entirety.

<sup>18</sup>Cf. T. Fretheim, "The Old Testament in Christian Proclamation," 224-225.