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FOREWORD

Although the phrase “crisis of authority” has developed almost the status of cliché, the phenomenon to which it refers is nonetheless very real. We are clearly living in a time when the foundational values of Western civilization have eroded to a dangerous degree. This development, auguring the descent of a new Dark Age, presents the church with both a challenge and an opportunity. The challenge is that Christians no longer may merely assume that the momentum of Western Christendom will continue to provide an environment favorable to Christian faith and life. The church is challenged to re-examine and perhaps totally to rebuild a foundation capable of supporting free and faithful lives.

Yet, the erosion of traditional values also offers the church an opportunity to commend Christian faith to those who, in Isaiah’s words, “grope for the wall like the blind.” In unparalleled fashion, the present situation calls for the church to demonstrate the relevance of Christian faith. These essays are presented toward the end of encouraging Christian reflection regarding the many issues associated with the loss of authority in the wider society and in the church.

Michael R. Weed, Editor

THE AUTHORITY OF THE OLD TESTAMENT FOR CHRISTIANS

By Paul Watson

When Christians read in II Timothy 3:16 that “all Scripture is inspired by God and is profitable...,” we certainly understand “Scripture” to include the thirty-nine books we commonly call “Old Testament.” But in what way or ways these books are “profitable” for “doctrine” or “instruction” we are much less certain.

This uncertainty about the Christian use of the Old Testament is nothing new. Marcion, the first major heretic of the Church who was expelled from Rome c. 144 A. D., settled the issue for himself and his followers by rejecting the Old Testament entirely. Marcion did this in large part because of his reading of the Old Testament’s picture of God as a jealous, wrathful Being responsible for the Creation of this imperfect world. While no such radical solution is explicitly suggested in Christian circles today, the Old Testament generally suffers from “benign neglect,” which may amount to an implicit rejection of it:

Before we hastily pick up stones to cast at this “heretic,” let it be said that the questions raised by many Christians today about the Old Testament betray a sympathy for Marcion, whose attractive teachings gained a considerable popular following in the second century and even later. The God of the Old

Testament, we still hear today, is a God of wrath, the stern, severe Judge whose judgments fill men with terror; on the other hand, the God of the New Testament is a God of love, the kind and merciful Father who treats his children with patience and forgiveness. Or, it is said, the God of the Old Testament is understood anthropomorphically as a kind of glorified human being; the New Testament, however, abandons such theological naiveté and affirms that “God is a Spirit.” The God of the Old Testament is a warlike Being who satisfies Israel’s nationalistic pride by slaughtering his enemies; the God of the New Testament, by contrast, is not bound by nationalistic limitations but is concerned for the universal brotherhood of man.¹

Even when we try to use the Old Testament in our teaching and preaching, we do so gingerly and with a high degree of selectivity. The prophetic passages pointing to the coming of Christ are selected, while the great body of prophetic material on such topics as social justice, nationalism, and worship are passed over. Except for an occasional quotation from Proverbs, the wisdom material is generally left untouched. And in the more popular narrative material, the full humanity of many of the characters--Abraham’s duplicity over Sarah, Joseph’s smugness, Joshua’s militarism, David’s lust, Ezra’s chauvinism--leaves us vaguely uncomfortable.

Two Protestant Approaches to the Old Testament.

In the development of Protestant Christianity, two broad approaches to the Christian use of the Old Testament have emerged. The first, represented by Lutheran theology, stresses the discontinuity and contrast between Old Testament and New. This view would emphasize that with Jesus and the Gospel, something radically new was happening in human history. God was entering history in a bold and unsuspected new

way. Thus when the voice speaks from the cloud at the Transfiguration, “This is my beloved Son, Listen to him,” the clear implication is that the old voices are to be quieted while this new, clear, authoritative voice of the Son is to be singularly followed.

Other New Testament material would seem to support this view. For example, the Pharisees, who are the best heirs of the Old Testament tradition, are rejected in the gospels and “publicans and sinners” accepted in their place. When Hebrews 10:1-4 speaks of the Law as a “shadow” and of the imperfection of the sacrificial system, it is only being realistic and honest about the superiority of the New over the Old. But the primary support for this general assessment of the Old Testament is taken from the apostle Paul. Both in his personal conversion from Saul the Jew to Paul the servant of Jesus Christ and in his writings (e.g. Gal. 3:13: “Christ bought us freedom from the curse of the Law”), Paul would seem to be stressing the break between Old and New.

What then, one may ask, is the worth or place of the Old Testament in this view? Those who stress the discontinuity between Old and New would not, like Marcion, deny the canonicity of the Old Testament. But, they would say, the Old Testament shows man his limitations, even under the best of conditions; while the New Testament shows man his possibilities, in Christ, even under the worst of conditions. In the words of one prominent advocate of this view, we must read “Old Testament history as a history of failure, and so of promise.”² In other words, the Old Testament may be enlightening; but only the New Testament is redemptive.

The second basic Protestant approach to the Old Testament stresses the continuity

and similarity between Old and New. This approach, typically held by Protestants in the Reformed traditions, sees the New Testament as God's second covenant with mankind. It is a universal covenant; and as such it supersedes but does not invalidate the first covenant. The key word perhaps for this view is "fulfillment"; and a key passage is the statement of Jesus in Matthew 5:17, "Do not suppose that I have come to abolish the Law and the prophets; I did not come to abolish, but to complete" (NEB).

Other New Testament support for this view is not hard to find. Jesus in many passages depicts his words and deeds as being in true continuity with "the Law and the prophets" (as opposed to the words and deeds of the Pharisees). Many quotations from the Old Testament are cited in the New to point to Jesus as the One who had been anticipated from of old. The apostles argue in Acts that the early Christian community is not a new religion but the logical continuation of Judaism. Even Paul, cited so frequently by adherents of the "discontinuity" view, can say, "If you thus belong to Christ, you are the seed of Abraham, and so heirs by promise" (Gal. 3:29).

In this view, therefore, the New Testament does not signal a new beginning that represents a repudiation of the old way, nor is it a correction to a breakdown or failure on the part of the old. It is rather the expected, intended outcome to the story of redemption that began with God's call of Abraham. Indeed, God's story is one story with two parts: It begins with Abraham and continues throughout the Old Testament in part one, and it ends with Christ and the Church in the New Testament in part two.

The Old Testament and the Restoration Movement

It is not the purpose of this essay to evaluate these two major Protestant approaches to the Old Testament, except to say that each approach has both strengths and weaknesses. What is of greater concern is the way the Old Testament has been viewed and used by those of us in the Restoration Movement. It seems a fair generalization to say that in the Restoration Movement neither of the two views outlined above has predominated to the exclusion of the other. Some specific ways in which Old Testament texts have been appropriated include the following:

A. Type/Antitype. In this approach, an event (or a series of events) or an institution or even a person prefigures in some way a New Testament counterpart. This “prefiguring,” however, is not even hinted at in the Old Testament itself but only is made clear with the appearance of its New Testament analog. One example is that of the Tabernacle prefiguring the church. Another, used by Paul himself in 1 Corinthians 10:1-5, has the Exodus prefiguring baptism and the rock from which God provided water for Israel prefiguring Christ. This type/antitype approach has the value of appropriating the Old Testament materials in a fresh, new way for the Christian faith. But it also has two serious drawbacks. The first is the almost inevitable tendency to ignore the original meaning and significance of the Old Testament text and to fail to hear it fully in its own historical setting. The second problem is a lack of controls. How does one keep this method in check and keep it from soaring into fanciful speculation? Thus, this approach

needs to be used with great restraint.

B. Fulfilled Prophecy. Frequently the prophetic books of the Old Testament are combed to find predictions of some event in the life of Jesus or, less frequently, of the church. Of course, the New Testament regularly cites the prophetic literature in just this manner (e.g., the gospel of Matthew). Thus, for example, the early church could hardly read of the Suffering Servant in Isaiah 52:13-53:12 without thinking of Jesus. Yet here again restraint must be exercised. Perhaps the greatest danger is the temptation to de-historicize the prophets by interpreting them solely as predictors of the future and thus failing to hear them as spokesmen to their own generations. Closely related to this danger is the tendency to be arbitrarily selective in choosing for preaching and teaching only those prophetic texts which can be taken as pointing to Christ.

C. Moral Examples. Another common use of the Old Testament is as a storehouse of character-figures, both good and bad, who can be called upon for sermon illustrations. Think, for example, of how often poor Uzzah (II Samuel 6:1-11) has been cited as an example of the swift and sure retribution of God for disobedient humanity. As with our first two examples, the New Testament can and does use the Old Testament in just this way, e.g., citing Elijah as a man of fervent prayer (James 5:17). Yet here also there are pitfalls to avoid. One such danger is the same de-historicizing tendency seen before. To return to Uzzah: It may not be inappropriate to cite Uzzah as an example of the punished lawbreaker. But if this is the only way we use II Sam. 6:1-11, we have not heard the full message of that passage as regards David's effort to bring the ark to Jerusalem. Indeed,

one could well argue on the basis of vss. 8 ff. that the passage has at least as much to do with David's anger toward and fear of God as it does with God's anger towards Uzzah, if not more.

D. Eternal Principles. Not unlike the "moral examples" approach, the "eternal truths" approach would cite those Old Testament passages (particularly in Proverbs) which seem to encapsulate eternally valid statements of divine truth. Thus, "He who spares the rod hates his son" (Prov. 13:24). New Testament precedents for this approach can be cited also, e.g., Jesus' quotation of Deuteronomy 8:3 that "Man shall not live by bread alone" (Matt. 4:4). But one can no more use the proverbial or legal material recklessly than he can the historical or prophetic material, as seen in our previous examples. This means, for example, that the wisdom statements were not meant to be taken only as isolated nuggets of truth but also as part of a larger system of good and righteous living which demanded that the "wise man" know which aphorism to employ on which occasion or in which situation. Thus the good or wise father must not only discipline his children but must also be generous to them (Prov. 13:22).

Observations and Suggestions

The very fact that no one single method of interpreting the Old Testament has prevailed in the Restoration Movement is almost surely a credit rather than a liability. This, together with our commitment to "the whole counsel of God," should enable us to use the Old Testament more frequently and more appropriately than in the past. To that

end, the following suggestions are offered.

1. First and foremost, we must always bear in mind that the Old Testament is Scripture. Exactly how it is Scripture and thus authoritative for us may challenge our thinking; but that it is Scripture cannot be debated.

2. This in turn means that the Old Testament must be used, and used frequently and regularly, as Scripture. This has such specific and practical implications as the selection of Bible school curricula and sermon texts. Our reading of the Old Testament and thus our familiarity with it must be increased.

3. Studying and seeking to understand the Old Testament in its own historical particularity is also important. This we have tried to do to a great degree with the New Testament, learning about Roman politics and Greek philosophy and Jewish customs in an attempt to understand the New Testament more fully. The same effort must be made with the Old, even though this takes into view a much greater span of history than that of the New Testament. Such an effort will enable us to appreciate the Old Testament texts in their original setting and will help guard against the de-historicizing of these texts noted above.

4. Similarly, we need to become more familiar with the various types of literature in the Old Testament. As the period of history represented is longer, so the literary types are more varied in the Old Testament than in the New: historical narrative, legal injunctions, prophetic speech-forms of a wide variety, wisdom sayings and dialogues,

devotional poetry, apocalyptic visions, and the like. Appreciation of this literature as literature will contribute to our understanding of it as Scripture.

5. Finally, we need to come to these Old Testament texts afresh, listening carefully and closely and expecting to hear God speak therein. This means not only hearing the Old in light of the New, but also hearing the New in light of the Old. It also means that no part or parts of the Old Testament may be singled out for our hearing to the exclusion of the rest. No major characters - Abraham, Moses, David - to the exclusion of the entire cast. No limitation of any type of text--prophetic, wisdom, narrative, legal, poetic, or whatever--to the exclusion of the rest.

These suggestions are certainly not intended to be definitive. But it is hoped that they will be suggestive and will stimulate us to listen anew to those ancient Hebrew writings as being in fact the inspired word of God.

Footnotes

- ¹ Bernhard W. Anderson, ed., *The Old Testament and Christian Faith* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), p. 3.
- ² R. Bultmann, "Prophecy and Fulfillment," in *Essays on Old Testament Hermeneutics*, ed. C. Westermann (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1963), p. 75.

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