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THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE OLD TESTAMENT FOR THE CHRISTAIN FAITH

Senior Essay

**In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Bachelor of Divinity**

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Atlanta, Georgia

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CONTENTS

STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

INTRODUCTION

THE BIBLE CONSIDERED

How the Bible became divided into two Testaments (Old and New)

THE UNITY OF THE OLD AND NEW TESTAMENTS

One God idea in both

Covenant idea in both

Faith in both

Judgment in both

PROMISE AND FULFILLMENT

One God a new revelation

History as fulfillment

Law and Gospels

Jesus as the Eschatological Deed

THE OLD TESTAMENT STILL SPEAKS

In historical and theological understanding

In conflict with paganism

In the task of renewal

Summary

Bibliography

STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

The purpose of this paper is to describe the special place of the Old Testament for the Christian faith. The writer is of the opinion that the Christian Faith (New Testament) can only be interpreted, rightly, when the Old Testament is considered. The writer hopes to indicate some events which will prove his beliefs. The writer is convinced that the Old Testament is indispensable for understanding the Christian faith.

INTRODUCTION

The question of the value of the Old Testament for the Christian is not new. It cannot be denied that the Old Testament has sometimes lowered the religious ideas and degraded the practices of Christians. Theology and ethics, faith and life have sometimes retarded intellectual progress and blocked the advance of science. And it has sometimes caused people to lose their faith in religion because they could not reconcile its teachings with the accepted truths of college and seminary. Why then should we not put it away altogether, remove this incubus which imposes, in addition to all the havoc it has been doing, so much hard study on the theologian and the minister? What a relief it would be to get rid of it altogether! We cannot do this because, in spite of all its drawbacks, the Old Testament is far too valuable for the Christian to discard.

We need it for a true understanding of Jesus. It was his Bible. He was rooted in it. He used it for his spiritual life, he derived strength from it in temptation and light on the deepest problems of his life. He learned from it the greatest truths, he loved its stories, he sang its psalms, and on the cross itself he broke into the cry of despair of one of them. He lived in the Old Testament, to him it was the bread of life. How shall we fully understand or assign to him aright his place in history, as the culmination of the great line of prophets, whose highest hopes and ideals he fulfilled, whose messages he clarified and deepened and enlarged: the prophet of Nazareth, the final revealer of God-- if we do not know the Old Testament? How shall we truly understand

the records of the evangelists and the teachings of his disciples and especially of Paul? A knowledge of the Old Testament is therefore bound up with the central task of the Christian minister. He must know Christ in order to bring men to a saving knowledge of him; and he cannot know him as he ought, if he does not study the Old Testament in which Christ is rooted.

In addition to the above reasons, G. Ernest Wright, in his book, GOD WHO ACTS, has given us many reasons why the Old Testament is valuable to students of the Bible. According to Wright, one of the functions of the Old Testament in the Church has always been its role as a bulwark against paganism. That is to say, the Church has received an enlightenment from the faith of Israel which has enabled it to see that entrance into the Kingdom of Christ cannot be found among the religions of the world, but solely in the faith of Abraham and his seed, of which we are heirs in the Church of Jesus Christ. It is by the spectacles of the Old Testament that our eyes must be focussed upon the light of Christ; otherwise that light will be blurred and we shall not see it correctly.

It is not suggested here that the use of the Old Testament will automatically solve all of the problems facing the Christian Church! Yet it is suggested that the misuse and disuse of the Old Testament have deprived the Church of its Bible. The New Testament is not itself a Bible; it is a small body of literature filled with all sorts of presuppositions which have little meaning to the uninitiated. It is the Old Testament which initially broke radically with pagan religion and which thus forms the basis on which the New rests. For the Christian, Christ is the key to the central contents of the Old

Testament, but at the same time it is the Old Testament which provides the clue to Christ. It is small wonder, then that when a Christian seriously seeks to explain and expound his faith over against another religion, his initial and basic arguments are drawn from the Old Testament, for it is the latter which has been a chief bulwark of the Church against paganism.

THE BIBLE CONSIDERED



The word "Bible" is not a biblical word. The Old Testament writings were in the hands of the men who wrote the books of the New Testament, but they do not call these writings the Bible; they name them the Scriptures, the Holy Scriptures, the Sacred writings, or else they refer to them under the names that were given to specific parts of them, as the Law, the Prophets, or the Psalms. Our word Bible comes from a word which began to be applied to the sacred writings as a whole about four hundred years after Christ. It is a Greek plural noun, meaning the books, or the little books. These writings were called by this plural name for about eight hundred years; it was not till the thirteenth century that they began to be (formalised) familiarly spoken of as a single book. This fact, of itself, is instructive. For though a certain spiritual unity does pervade these sacred writings, yet they are a collection of books, rather than one book. The early Christians, who honored and prized them sufficiently, always spoke of them as "The Books", rather than as "The Book", and their name was more accurate than ours.

With some qualifications the Bible may be understood from a threefold perspective: the literary record of an historical phenomenon, a book of testimony and the medium of the Word of God.¹ As a historical phenomenon the Bible is basically the history of a long series of redemptive acts of God.² Thus it constitutes a revelation of God in history.³ And to the extent that it testifies to the

1 R.B.Y. Scott "How I Interpret The Bible" Interpretation V:321

2 John Bowman "The Bible as Revelation" Theol. Today I:458

3 C.H. Dodd The Bible Today (New York, 1957)p. 14

saving grace of God in history it is authoritative;⁴ its testimony is basically this, that history is understood on no other basis than that of confessing in faith that God the redeemer of men is working out his gracious, just and wise purpose on this earth.⁵ And this testimony is, as is implied, not to the Bible as a record of past deeds, but the testimony to the Bible as the medium through which we are confronted by the God of history.⁶ It is in this confrontation, or the divine-human encounter, that the Bible is regarded as the Word of God; that is, through the scriptures God, in the existential moment of decision, addresses His creatures. And the Word is reached through the "words," and the saving faith to which we have alluded is not mere faith in the Bible as "the Word of God," instead it is faith that the Bible witnesses to God in His Word. "Saving faith," writer Dr. Edwin Lewis, "is faith to him to whom the Bible witnesses."⁷ Thus, as the Word of God, "the Bible is a personal book"⁸ in that it confronts the obedient with the word of God through the Holy Spirit.

EMERGING OF THE OLD AND NEW TESTAMENTS

It is at this point that we shall give some attention to the names Old and New Testaments. The names Old and New Testament are Bible words; that is to say we find the names in our English Bibles, though they are not used to describe these books . . . Paul calls the old dispensation the old covenant; and

4 Samuel Terrien "The Old Testament and The Christian Faith" Religion in Life XVI:265

5 Floyd V. Filson "Methods in Studying Biblical History" Journal of Biblical Literature LXIX:5

6 Scott McCormick "The Bible as Record and Medium" Interpretation XII:294

7 Edwin Lewis "The Emancipation of The Word" Relig. In Life XVIII:553

8 Elmer Homighausen "Communicating the Christian Faith" Theology Today I:500

that phase came into general use among the early Christians as contrasted with Christian dispensation which they called the new covenant; therefore, Greek - speaking Christians used to talk about "the books of the old covenant," and "the books of the new covenant," and by and by they shortened the phrase and sometimes called the two collections simply "Old Covenant" and "New Covenant." When the Latin - speaking Christians began to use the same terms, they translated the Greek word "covenant" by the word "testament" which means a will, and which does not fairly convey the sense of the Greek word. And so it was that these two collections of sacred writings began to be called The Old Testament and the New Testament.⁹

THE UNITY OF THE TESTAMENT

The wise reader is ever aware of the great themes which run through the Bible and impart to it a unity despite its diversity. Throughout, God is One who reveals himself to men and who desires their fellowship. He reveals himself in history and through persons, until he finally reveals himself as one who is both God and man. In both Testaments it is the same God who is revealed, and this above all else gives unity to the Bible. At the same time it must be recognized that much in the Old Testament is superseded in the New, and there are ideas of God in the Old Testament which are not to be approved. For though both Testaments bring us Revelation of God, the revelation came through men who could not always apprehend it in its fulness.

⁹ Much of the above information is based on a presentation given by Da. Swain, at U C Y M, Lake Geneva, Wis. 1961.

Just as light is modified by the glass through which it passes, while none derives from the glass itself, so revelation whose sole origin is in God is modified and often marred by the personalities through which it comes. That is why the perfect revelation could come only through the perfect Man, and why the incarnation was already implicit in the self-revealing purpose of God.

In both Testaments God is revealed as compassionate and saving. He has compassion on Israel in her Egyptian bondage, and on men who were in the deepest bondage of sin. It is believed that from the earliest pages of the Bible it was revealed that fundamentally sin is disobedience to God and that by its very nature it curses man. Throughout the Bible God is concerned to save men from sin, but in the New Testament we have the supreme expression of that concern when God in Christ stooped to take upon himself the curse of sin, that by the sacrifice on the Cross deliverance might be wrought. The saving character of God was revealed on a new level at Golgotha.

Again, in both Testaments religion is seen in terms of covenant, and the covenant is the response in gratitude for the deliverance that has been accomplished. When Israel was saved from Egypt she went to the sacred mount and there pledged herself in covenant to the God who had saved her. The deliverance was the unconstrained act of God, whose initiative in grace is the same throughout the Bible. So in the New Testament the Cross is freely accepted by him in whom the character of God is perfectly revealed, and it becomes the organ of our salvation, laying upon us its constraint to find ourselves in the new covenant. In Old Testament and in New the covenant calls for obedience. It is not a bargain but a pledge. That Israel was often faithless to the covenant

does not alter its essential character. Her obedience consisted in the cherishing of the revelation that had been given to her in the context of here deliverance and in reflecting the will of God in all her life. In due time she was instructed by the prophets that her faith was not for her alone. She has been chosen by God that through her he might reach all nations, and her election involved her mission.

Another theme which runs through the Bible and belongs to its unity is faith. Faith is something more than belief and God. When the Israelites stepped on to the sand left by the receding Red Sea, they showed more than belief about God. And Christian faith is more than an intellectual persuasion. It is the abandonment of ourselves to Christ, something that carries us into him, so that henceforth we live in him and he in us, as the vine and the branch live in each other inseparately.

In both Testaments the theme of judgment figures. Yet the judgment of God is ever tempered with mercy. His mercy is shown in his patience and in sending his servants the prophets to warn and to reclaim. It is shown, too, in the sparing of the remnant.

PROMISE AND FULFILLMENT

In this discussion the place of the Old Testament in the Christian Faith will be considered since this understanding of the two Testaments can do justice to both of the Testaments. Since the unity of the Bible is found in the irruption on the part of Deity into the realm of history¹⁰ promise and

¹⁰ Samuel Terrien "The Old Testament and the Christian Preacher" 270

fulfillment are not separate aspects of two different deities. They are part and parcel of the same act; the God who promises is the same God who fulfills. Dr. Brevard S. Childs puts it thusly: "The prophetic word and its fulfillment are not held independently of one another, but belong to the same event."¹¹ It can belong to the same event only because it belongs to the same God, and the New Testament witnesses to a new revelation, but not to a new revelation by a new God. It witnesses to the same God acting in the New Testament witness as acted in the Old Covenant. Thus the God who reveals Himself in history does not divide the promise from its fulfillment. The same principle applies to the "Law-Gospel" dichotomy when it is brought before the witness of history. As Prof. Walther Eichrodt has shown us, the whole Law in Israel, together with the Decalogue, was regarded as a gift of grace and not a heavy burden. Grace and covenant are inseparable, the God who gave Israel the Law at Sinai had already claimed her; "I am the Lord thy God" signifies that God's saving work, by which he makes man his child, comes first and that consequential thereto the new obedience for life come into power.¹² In both Testaments we find a witness to the Law of God and to His gratuitous forgiveness.¹³ Again, it is true because the same God acts in His fulness when and wherever He acts.

11 Brevard S. Childs "Promise and Fulfillment" Interpretation XII:267

12 Walther Eichrodt "The Law and Gospel" Interpretation XI:33

13 Samuel Terrien "The Old Testament and The Christian Preacher"

In using fulfillment therefore to interpret the nature of the New Testament it is not used over-against history, instead, it is history determining and directing all of existence; it is the point of interpretation for all of life; it is the faith-category through which past-present-future are lived from an eschatological dimension because it is the announcement of God's reign and rule on the earth. Jesus as the eschatological deed of God ends all folk history thus He is fulfillment. In this act grace is conceived radically, that is, it has happened and is not tied to any group or event; it is God's forgiveness pure and simple; the new is come.

I think, however, that when we face the meaning of Christ seriously as the revelation of God the Old Testament may still speak. Revelation as it comes to us in history is "particularistic", that is, it is tied to an event. This does not mean that God does not reveal Himself anymore; it means that all successive divine "visitations" must be understood in the light of this central event. For us, therefore, God may even speak through the Old Testament. But because Christ is the center of all Scripture as its fulfillment what is said to us in the Old Testament can only help us understand His speaking to us. But in a real way it may help us to understand the event, which is the historic claim of the Church. It maintains that Jesus' "coming into our world did not happen at random but is the result of a special intervention of the divine will, and the whole history of Israel before him is a preface to his advent."¹⁴ The Church

14 Terrien "The Old Testament and The Christian Preacher" 267

itself may be said to have no independent existence over-against Israel. It is the root that gets the branches and not the other way around.¹⁵ Ephesians 2:20 tells us that the Church is continuous with the Old Testament People of God, "is built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets."¹⁶ So in the Church we cannot get rid of the Old Testament.

Without the Old Testament, the New Testament may lead to neo-Platonic mysticism and oriental pantheism. The God of Jesus is neither a sentimental puppet nor a philosophical objectivation of man's religious feelings Human evil is not merely a lack of adaptation to social environment. The cross dominates the mystery of salvation, but it cannot be understood without the Hebrew theology of sacrifice and atonement. The Church is the body of Christ, but this sublime truth can hardly be grasped without the Old Testament notion of corporate personality. The Old Testament was the Scripture of Jesus and of the first Christians. It leads to the New exactly as the New is fulfillment of the Old and without which it hangs in mid-air, deprived of its historical and theological foundations.¹⁷

Therefore, even for the understanding of the event and the historical community the Old Testament is significant. In a special way the laws of the Old Testament may speak to the man of faith within the community of believers. I do not mean to imply that the Old Testament words may be helpful in an intermediate way by bringing man to an awareness of God's claim on him. What I am saying puts God's work first, and the commandments serve as "exemplary guides

15 T.F. Torrence "The Israel of God" Interpretation X:316

16 G. Knight A Christian Theol. of The Old Testament (Richmond, 1959)p.348f.

17 Terrien, p. 270

for the works of love in our contemporary situation.....

....after we understand them by the commandment of love, they have a judging and condemning effect on us.....since the law brings us to this position, it espouses us to a mirror and prepares us, by exposing our real nature, both to see and to hear what God has done for us in the cross of Christ. And when it is given to us to understand that the whole law is fulfilled in Christ by the new creation of his forgiveness, by which we are transferred from the condemnation of the law to the new creation of God in Christ, then the true purpose of the judgment of the law is fulfilled.¹⁸

The Old Testament is significant in that through its witness the Church may find renewal. Israel's life reflects a continuous renewal because her life was a continuous falling away from God. While Christ is the fulfillment of history, man is at once a believer and a non-believer, he is saved and is being saved, thus he and the whole Church must return continually in repentance to the God of History.¹⁹

18 Eichrodt, p.39

19 W. A. Visser T' Hooft The Renewal of the Church (London, 1956) Ch.1

SUMMARY

A rich diversity of types of literature marks the Bible. There is progress in revelation; part of the Old Testament was outgrown before the Old Testament itself was completed, and more was superseded in the New Testament. Yet amid the diversity runs a unity, and in all the progress there is the thread of a true continuity which derives from the God who speaks through it all. The end of true study of the Bible is to hear his voice, and all who have ears to hear may hear it. The wise student of the Bible will welcome every aid to understand its background and meaning, but his supreme need is one no other can supply. It is the humble desire to find God in his word, and to hear his word that it may find response in gratitude and obedience.

The Bible is a unity in Christ who is its center and the redemptive-interpretive revelation of God in history. The Old Testament for the Christian must be understood in terms of Christ, but its meaning as intended by its authors must not be allegorized or must not be forced into a typology. It cannot be divided into a book of Law since the same gracious God who gave the Law had already given His deliverance and promises to continue it. It can be understood in terms of history, that is, inreading the Old Testament with Christ and with itself we see in it the mighty deeds of God in history of which it not only witnesses but of which it is also a part. And these deeds of God are climaxed in "the eschatological deed," Jesus Christ who gathers up in Himself

all that is past through forgiveness; and announces that whoever accepts this forgiveness in faith not only lives in the present but at the same moment lives in the future. He is a new creation living in a new age. But because we have this newness in an earthen vessel and must live in a world where the new age is not fulfilled in all things, we may learn much from the Old Testament whose people also live in a Covenant bond with the same God who has claimed us and who is working out his gracious purpose in spite of us and through us in this world. This God is the Lord of history as He is its Creator.

The whole matter, for the writer, may be summed up in the following words of Richard Hoehen "The general end both of the Old and New (Testaments) is one; the difference between them consisting in this that the Old did make wise by teaching salvation through Christ that should come, the New by teaching that Christ the Saviour is come, and that Jesus whom the Jews did crucify, and whom God did raise again from the dead, is He."²⁰

²⁰ Richardson, Allan *Christian Apologetics*, Harper, New York, 1947

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