Jesus’ Use of the Old Testament

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Among biblical scholars there exists a tendency to require the Old Testament to stand or fall on its own merits, exclusive of any New Testament witness to its integrity or its value. It seems, however, that he who has a reverent regard for the unity of God’s written revelation to man must consider the two Testaments in their entirety and their interrelation. Conservatives have long appealed to our Lord’s testimony in order to establish the historicity of Jonah, but they have tended to dismiss any serious consideration of His position as a student of the Old Testament with the simple assertion of His omniscience. Thus they have too frequently neglected a careful investigation of His use of the Hebrew Scriptures in His ministry. This article makes no claim to especial originality, but seeks to set forth simply, and in the light of some scholarship on the liberal side, some observations on Jesus’ use of the Old Testament.

I
His Attitude Toward Jewish Nationalism

That the Jews were a chosen people the Old Testament clearly affirms. It is not to be concluded, however, as some have assumed, that the election of Israel reveals such partiality in God as would cause Him to so favor Israel as to be unjust in His dealings with men in general. The Covenant with Abraham, and the Book of Isaiah, make it clear that God intended that the Hebrews should be a channel for the communication of divine blessing to all nations. Their very existence was a witness to their heathen neighbors concerning the uniqueness and exclusiveness of the one God. Jewish narrowness and selfishness prevented the large-scale realization of Jehovah’s purpose which should have been generously disseminated was selfishly retained.

Our Lord did not share Jewish prejudice in this matter. Addressing the Samaritan woman, He testified to His own Messiahship, much to the surprise of both the woman at the well of Sychar and the Disciples. The palsied servant of a Roman centurion was healed, and the servant’s master received distinction for possessing faith such as the Lord had not found in Israel. The sorely tormented daughter of a Syro-Phoenician woman secured freedom from demon possession, and the mother was warmly commended for her faith. From these last two incidents we may justifiably draw the conclusion that great faith is frequently more readily attained by those who are not “birthrighters”.

Jesus did not consider, as did His countrymen, that Jewish claims to Divine favor were inalienable. To them, being children of Abraham was considered sufficient; to Him, it was evident that while Abraham, Isaac and Jacob would enter the kingdom, accompanied by many Gentiles, a great number of those to whom He spoke would be cast into outer darkness, where dwelt weeping and gnashing of teeth. He could not accept the Jewish doctrine of “Once in race, always in grace.”

As an explanation of Jesus’ acceptance of some Jewish beliefs, it has been urged that He, being a Jew, was merely acquiescing in prevalent Jewish prejudices. While more will be said on this question later, it is sufficient to note here that, with reference to the possibility of Jews losing their spiritual and national preeminence with Christ was in no measure confused. As the national fortunes of His people dwindled, He sought to point out that the deeper message of Israel was that of pointing to the flowering of a new day. He
Himself was to be the fulfilment of Israel's prophetic thought.  

II  
His Use Of Scripture In Temptation  
One of Jesus' most effective uses of Scripture was in the combatting of temptation. The accounts in the Synoptics are well known; for the purpose of this study, quotations will be taken from Luke's Gospel. When Satan assailed with three consecutive appeals, addressed to three propensities, Christ responded with a series of passages quoted from Deuteronomy. The first that "man shall not live by bread alone", suggests the contrast between ordinary food and the other modes by which God sustains life. Its thrust is, that God is able to care for His own in ways apart from the customary means. The second, "Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and Him only shalt thou serve", suggests the contrast between God and all other objects of worship; the sources in Deuteronomy has special reference to the contrast between Jehovah and the gods of surrounding nations. The third, "Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God", grows out of the incident of Israel at Massah, in which Israel made a foolhardy demand for Jehovah's protection; Jesus likewise repudiates the suggestion that He throw Himself into needless danger, and then expect divine deliverance.

In connection with this incident; we note the quotation made by the tempter: "He shall give his angels charge over thee, to keep thee." This is from Psalm 91:11; Jesus' reply is based upon two grounds: first, the condition "in all thy ways" is omitted; more significant still, He suggests in the following verse (Luke 4:12) that providential care has necessary conditions.

These usages indicate that our Lord was aware, not only of the specific wording of the passages in question, but also of their contextual connections. With consummate skill, He brought them to bear upon an immediate situation, and in such a manner as to throw light upon their usage in Old Testament times. In all of this, we see an objectification of the practice of the Psalmist, "Thy word have I hid in my heart, that I might not sin against thee." Our Lord's use of this stands as a perennial pattern for the Christian.

III  
His Recognition Of The Authority Of The Law  
Jesus asserted that the Law and the prophets prophesied "until John" but He did not imply that at John's coming they lost their value. He did not hesitate to credit Moses with the distinction of being the Lawgiver, for He asked "Did not Moses give you the law?" This was significant to Him. To the same source He attributed the rite of circumcision (John 7:22); this means, in its context, that the ordinance (which sets aside the usual observance of the Sabbath) was prescribed in the writings of Moses, for in actuality the rite was ordained in the Covenant with Abraham.

It does not seem that Jesus desired to effect a distinct break with the past; and He could certainly not be justly accused of thinking the Old Testament to be of little value. He allowed Himself, in some degree at least, to be bound by it, and declared to John the Baptist that "it becometh us to fulfill all righteousness." through an outward ordinance. Not one jot (yodh), the smallest letter of the Hebrew alphabet) nor one tittle (the minute characteristic which distinguishes one Hebrew alphabetic character from a similar one) shall be stricken from the Law until its fulfilment. The lawbreaker and false teacher shall be least in the Kingdom of Heaven, while the one observing the Law and the true teacher shall be great in that Kingdom. Jesus criticized the Jews severely for their rejection of the Law and their substitution of tradition for it, employing as an example their misinterpretations of the Fifth Commandment which resulted, in some in-
stances of their denial of parental authority.

Thus, He in no way sought to impeach Old Testament authority. Rather, he sought by word and deed to establish it. Note His words: "Think not that I am come to destroy the Law, or the prophets; I am not come to destroy, but to fulfill." In practice, he instructed the healed leper to offer a gift for his cleansing according to the prescription of Moses. In this latter, Jesus not only sought to render the man socially complete as he was already physically whole, but also to avoid the encouragement of laxity toward the law, even though the official religion of His day was little worthy of respect.

It goes almost without saying that our Lord recognized the binding quality of the Ten Commandments; on various occasions He made direct reference to them. Five of these he called to the attention of the rich young ruler, adding the necessity of loving one's neighbor. In reply to the Pharisee lawyer's catch question, He condensed all the Commandments into two, love of God and love of neighbor, quoting here from Deut. 6:5 and Leviticus 19:19.

In addition to His general acceptance of the binding quality of the whole Law, He placed a higher interpretation—His own—upon it. In the light of the higher revelation made in Jesus Christ, anger without cause becomes gravely dangerous.* Adultery no longer inheres exclusively in an overt act, for immoral thoughts are equally reprehensible in the sight of God. Divorce is seriously limited; and Moses' apparent leniency with respect to the disintegration of the home must be attributed to Jewish hardness of heart. (Here He seems to assume that the Law allowed divorce on the lighter grounds permitted by the school of Hillel.)^2 Jesus circumscribed oaths with His "But I say unto you, Swear not at all...." Revenge must be supplanted by a new mode of action; instead of one's receiving satisfaction through a personal infliction of an injury like to the one he has suffered, as was prescribed by Old Testament civil law, he is enjoined to turn the other cheek. Nor is it sufficient that one carry out this injunction in spite of his inner desires in one matter; for the void resulting from displacing hatred of enemies must be replaced with genuine love. This implies an elevation in the interpretation of the law of Israel; we see, for example, in Leviticus 19:18 that love for neighbor was earlier restricted to fellow-countrymen. This grew out of the commanded devotion to the interests of the chosen people, but is now to be gathered up into a higher practice, based upon the universal thrust of Christ's love.

IV

His Acceptance of Old Testament History

Our Lord did not merely talk about the Old Testament; He lived in a manner which indicated that He believed it! He makes repeated references to Old Testament incidents which would be meaningless, had He no faith in their historicity, and had He simply accommodated Himself to beliefs current among His hearers, without regard to their literal accuracy.

The two sexes are the result, not of mere accident in a naturalistic scheme of development, but of the creative activity of an omnipotent God. Noah, to many present-day critics a purely mythological figure, was to Christ an historical personage who entered a very real ark. In the same passages Christ attests His belief in the factuality of the Flood.

While the Jews were children of Abraham by physical generation, their claims to being his spiritual offspring were un-

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2 The order in which the precepts are given in this account (Matt. 19:18-19) is not especially significant. The citation of "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself" from outside the dialogue was in accord with rabbinical practice. See Toy, op. cit., p. 48.

* Toy, op. cit., p. 28. The quotations here are not verbal, but are general summary statements of the Jewish law.

^2 Toy, op. cit., p. 29.

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masked and shown to be false by their desire to kill the Messiah. Not only did our Lord believe in Abraham's actual existence, but he was declared also a perceiver of future events, for, according to Jesus, Abraham saw Christ's day and rejoiced because of it. But while Abraham was to Christ, as to His fellow-countrymen, a remarkable individual deserving high esteem, Jesus declared that His greatness exceeded Abraham's for "Before Abraham was, I am."

Christ's mention of Lot is evidence that He believed Lot lived, and His terse caution, "Remember Lot's wife," implies some catastrophic occurrence such as that described in Genesis. In addition to this, Lot's name is connected with the tragic destruction of Sodom. This vile city received further notoriety as the Lord pronounced sentence on Capernaum, remarking that Sodom's fate will be preferable to Capernaum's at judgment. In the same manner He announced that Sodom will fare better in the Day of Judgment than those cities which in His day rejected the message carried throughout Jewry by the Seventy. Terms which are almost identical with those just referred to describe the moral responsibility of Sodom and Gomorrah at the Day of Judgment, as contrasted to that of those to whom the Twelve were sent.

Moses' experiences at the bush receive confirmation in Christ's reference to, and apparent acceptance of, that event. God was accepted by the Lord as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Christ entertained no doubts concerning the account of the Divine gift of manna in the wilderness, and, using this as a homiletic springboard, He proceeded to declare Himself to be the true bread from Heaven and the Bread of Life. These three incidents confirm Jesus' acceptance as historical of records preserved in Exodus.

The Book of Numbers is not left by the Lord without witness to its veracity for He referred factually to the serpent in the wilderness. In addition, He asked if those Pharisees who objected to the disciples' plucking grain on the Sabbath did not know that the priests were blameless in the temple as "profaned" the Sabbath. As another method of justifying His disciples' conduct, Jesus cited the instance of David's eating the shewbread, a breach of Levitical law.

At least two instances in I Kings are mentioned by the Lord. The Queen of Sheba's visit to Solomon was used as an illustration, as was Elijah's assistance to the widow at Sarepta. II Kings also has a crown of acceptance placed on its historical accuracy in Christ's reference to the healing of Naaman. In none of these incidents is there the slightest intimation that Christ thought of these as folklore, but every indication that He regarded them as thoroughly factual. Jesus thrust home His accusation that the Jews were prophet-killers by calling to their attention the murders of Abel and Zechariah described in Genesis and II Chronicles.

Last but not least, in Christ's historical references which we are considering is that of Jonah and the fish. While it is popular today to refer to that submarine experience as mere allegory, it was to Jesus an actuality and furnishes proof of our Lord's belief in the literality of one of the most hotly-contested portions of the Old Testament.

V
His Acceptance Of Old Testament Prophecy

Christ no more rejected the Old Testament's prophecy than did He its history, but rather accepted it as readily. Unquestionably He should have been able to understand that prophecy, for, to the two on the Emmaus road, He, "beginning at Moses and all the prophets"... expounded unto them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself. He confidently asserted that Moses, the prophets, and the Psalms contained things written of Him. Replying to the scribes' and priests' displeasure which was vociferously expressed during that Last Week when the children cried, "Hosanna to the son of David," Jesus quoted the Psalmist, "Out of the mouth of babes and sucklings shalt thou hast perfected praise." This means, that Jehovah manifests the paradox of His power by employing feeble things, such as children to manifest a truth
not grasped by learned men. Hence, children were seen by Jesus to be instruments of praise and strength. Three Gospels record Christ’s quotation of David: “The Lord said unto my Lord, ‘Sit thou on my right hand, till I make thine enemies thy footstool.’” Here, David is alluded to, not merely as author of the passage, but the one whose career is described by it. Toy personally can find no applicability to David’s life in Kings, but recognized that Jewish expositors both found such an applicability and also considered it to be Messianic. Again, it was David who had prophesied, “They hated me without a cause.” The Psalms had further honor paid them as Christ referred their statements to Himself: “Blessed is He that cometh in the Name of the Lord,” and: “The stone which the builders rejected, the same is become the head of the corner.” In this latter quotation, Jesus Himself in the embodiment of the truth that God chooses His instruments without regard to human estimate of them. Christ foresaw His death, attempted to prepare His disciples for it, and proclaimed that it was essential for fulfilling the Scriptures.

The Lord offered confirmation to one of Daniel’s prophecies when He, commenting on future events in response to the disciples’ questions, mentioned the “abomination of desolation.” This He sees, not only as an event shocking to the Jewish religious consciousness, but as one involving great physical hazard.

In His account of the rich man and Lazarus, our Lord quoted Abraham as telling this unfortunate individual that the message of Moses and the prophets should be sufficient to precipitate men’s repentance, and, if this did not produce the desired effect, the return of one from the dead would fail also.

The elevated literary production of Isaiah has suffered repeatedly from the section by critics. Jesus made frequent reference to Isaiah’s prophecies. Isaiah had spoken of Jewish failure to understand spiritual things, and to this Christ referred. Originally, Isaiah himself was to produce this result. In Jesus’ day, however, the affect of the preaching of repentance had the same result—of producing hardness and blindness. The prophet had also described the Jews’ hypocrisy as giving lip-service and refusing heart-obedience, and of this fact the Lord informed them. The force of this usage was, that the traditionists to whom He spoke were open to the same charge as the contemporaries of Isaiah. Here Jesus, like Isaiah, attacks the people and opinions which were held in the highest regard by the men of the day. Again, it was Isaiah who was quoted when the profaned condition of the temple made necessary its cleansing which took place at the close of Christ’s ministry. The temple, so the prophet declared, should be called a house of prayer. Furthermore, it was Isaiah who had written the marvelous passage which Christ unhesitatingly applied to Himself:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because He hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; He hath sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised, to preach the acceptable year of the Lord.

Jesus here interprets these words in their deepest spiritual sense, and interprets them as expressive of His own mission. Also, our Lord gave no hint that these quotations from chapters 6, 29, 43, 56 and 61 were from the pen of more than one writer. To those who hold a high view of the Person of Christ, this quotation from several sections of Isaiah, without qualifications, is a strong witness, not only to our Lord’s high estimate of the Book, but to its total Isaianic authorship.

VI

Conclusion

Christ’s testimony concerning the Old Testament has far-reaching implications in
the light of the bases of modern liberal criticism. Critical theories have for the past century and a half, stemmed from principles demanding the radical dissection of the Old Testament. But everything significant which has been advanced by Biblical critics can be summed up rather generally in the major presuppositions of Wellhausen, to whom the Old Testament was unreliable because: 1) the authenticity of its history should be regarded with skepticism, 2) the culture and religion it pictured must have been the result of a long evolutionary process, and 3) supernatural intervention in the origin and development of Israel's religion was impossible, if not utterly impossible. Without indulging in any mental contortions one can readily see that this whole scheme is thoroughly evolutionary and naturalistic.

In the history of Biblical criticism the Pentateuch was first attacked on the grounds of its unity, authorship, and authenticity. Some have said that Moses perhaps did not live and certainly never wrote. Thus, in their thinking, any laws attributed to him were in reality borrowed from Hammurabi, king of Babylon, regarded by many scholars as a contemporary of Abraham, or from other existing law codes. What did Jesus say about this? When a Hebrew spoke of "The Law" he apparently had in mind the unity of the Pentateuch. That this was true of Christ, also is indicated by the fact that he uses the expression "law and prophets" as inclusive terms. (Matt. 7:13; 11:13; 22:40, Luke 16:16). Frequently, He mentioned Moses as the author of the passage quoted, and He included all the Pentateuchal books in His Old Testament references. Repeatedly He used incidents from these books in His preaching and in such a manner as would be without point, or at least weakened in force, were the passages not historical.

Some of the most questioned accounts in the Old Testament received special mention upon the part of our Lord, as if He definitely anticipated the questions which would be forthcoming against the Scriptures. It is not without significance that the following should receive His especial mention: the Creation, the Flood, the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, the burning bush, Lot's wife's fate, Naaman's cleansing, and Jonah's experience.

Critics have long assailed the unity of the Book of Isaiah. While this unity stood unquestioned for 2500 years, its authorship is today assigned to Isaiah by only a few Old Testament scholars. Obvious differences in style between Isaiah 1-39 and 40-66 suddenly came to be accepted as conclusive evidence for divided authorship. But why? We do not always write letters in the same style (e.g., business letters and love letters), nor do we always adopt the same form of writing over an extended period of years. Problems with reference to the historical section (chapters 36-39) were partially responsible for postulating three Isiahs. In critical circles today as many as five Isiahs are supposedly distinguishable as contributing to the sixty-six chapters. But these ingenious researches have no eyes for any possible unifying qualities or motives in the book as a whole. Jesus quoted from the several supposed sections, and nowhere indicated any uneasiness with reference to the question of Isaiah, son of Amoz', relation to all of them.

Some find Christ's attitudes explainable upon the basis that He, being a Jew, was suffering from the prevailing Jewish misconceptions of His day. It has been impossible historically to reconcile this with His deity, even if we should be generous in accepting a radical kenosis. It is also suggested that He knew better, but chose to conduct Himself as if He accepted Jewish misunderstandings. Such an Accommodation Theory would be difficult to reconcile with His claim that He was the Truth. It seems impossible to have an erring Old Testament and a divine Lord; we must have either an unreliable Old Testament and no Christ in the sense held by historic Christianity; or a trustworthy Old Testament and a Christ who was the Son of the living God.

Julius Wellhausen, Prolegomena zur Geschichte Israels, passim.
We frequently meet those who contend that faith in Christ may consistently be held apart from a trust in the Old Testament, but our Lord declared an indissoluble liaison between Himself and the Old Testament by commenting on the Jews' perusing of the Scriptures as follows: "For had ye believed Moses, ye would have believed me, for he wrote of me. But if ye believe not his writings, how shall ye believe my words?" The true function of the Scriptures was to bring men to the Life-Giver. Esteem for Him goes hand in hand with a high evaluation upon the Witness to Him and confidence in Him can scarcely be nourished and sustained apart from a confidence in the Old Testament parallel to His.

"Dods, op. cit., p. 745."