



## The fully furnished room

The virgin birth of our Lord has always had a central place in the proclamation of the Christian message. The conception in the body of the virgin, foretold by Isaiah and fulfilled in the incarnation of Jesus Christ is at the very heart of the *kerygma*, the proclamation of the good news.

The role of Mary is one of complete passivity and subjectivity. She is naturally astounded following the announcement of the angel — *"How can this be, seeing I do not know a man?"* The angel replies:

*"The Holy Ghost shall come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you; therefore, also, that holy thing who is to be born of you will be called the Son of God".*

(Luke 1:35)

To which Mary replies in verse 38, *"Let it be..."*, and yields to the divine appointment. Jesus is to be carried in her body, reduced to a span, carried to term, cared for in infancy; and thus He enters upon the scene of this world's history.

The pregnancy of Mary is, in a sense, a commentary upon the whole of the Old Testament and its place in the canon of Scripture. Mary had a promise of the eventual birth into the world of the holy one, the Son of God. Up to the point of fulfilment of that promise, she had to carry within her own body the Person of the Saviour, who had willingly taken our human nature to Himself. Mysteriously, conception took place outwith the normal biological requirements for human reproduction. Gradually, the baby in the womb made Himself known and felt, and was brought forth into the world, a natural birth following a supernatural conception.

In the same way, there is at the dawn of human history, consequent upon the sin of man, a promise. The seed of the woman will bruise the head of the serpent. There will be a Saviour, whose saving work will be the redemption of the church. Until the fulfilment of that promise, Jesus must be borne within the womb of human history, mysteriously set forth in types and symbols, gradually making Himself more and more known until at last expectation gives way to fulfilment, anticipation to arrival. The Old Testament is the womb in which the Saviour and His work are carried, up until the point where shadow dissolves before reality. And as Mary is, though passive, indispensable to the incarnation story, so the Old Testament is indispensable to Christian theology.

Someone has described the Old Testament as "a room fully furnished but dimly lit". All of God's salvation is there, but can be seen only through a glass, darkly. With the coming of the light, the furniture in the room is apparent, and clearly seen. We may ask — what is it that makes the Old Testament so vital, and so indispensable to Christian thought in general, and to the proclamation of the Gospel in particular? What is this womb in which Jesus is carried though hidden from the gaze of men? What are the furnishings that make this room so full?

### The same God

The Old Testament is furnished with the Being and Presence of God. Indeed, God declares in Exodus 6:7 that His saving purpose has as a key element in its design that *"you shall know that I am the Lord your God"*. Prof. Elmer Martens takes this theme of 'God's Design' as a grid for his Old Testament theology: God's design for His people is deliverance (in salvation), community (through covenant), experience (through revelation), and inheritance (the promise of land). Integral to God's design, therefore, is that His people will know Him. The Old Testament is, therefore, essentially self-revelation on the part of God.

Hebrews 1:1 gives the definitive comment on this when it says that the same God who spoke in the Old Testament has spoken in Christ. While the mode and operations of the revelation have taken a new form across the course of the Testaments, the subject is the same. The claims of liberal criticism that *"Archaeology has unearthed the Old Testament's literary predecessors and thus disproved the idea that the Old Testament is a unique, unprecedented and unified expression of God's Word"* (M. Barthel, *What the Bible Really Says*, p.31), are in direct contradiction to the explicit claims of that Word. The mystery of godliness is that the God of the Old Testament is manifest in the flesh.

Not only so; the God who speaks in the Old Testament is the triune God. To be sure, the fundamental emphasis of the Old Testament is that God is one. And the world religions that have based themselves upon the Old Testament have majored on the fact of unity to the exclusion of God's more-than-oneness, the doctrine of the Trinity. While it is true that the doctrine of the trinity is fully developed only in the New Testament, it makes itself felt in the Old. For example, there is a distinct reference to plurality in God at Genesis 1:26, where the creation of man is deliberated on in these terms: *"Let US make man in OUR image"*. This is not a vestige of polytheism, for the whole account centres on the one God who creates. So Aalders: *"...this passage, standing by itself, would not constitute a clear proof of the Trinity... But what is clearly indicated here is that God, in His unity, has a certain plurality"* (Genesis, Vol. 1, p.70).

God reveals Himself in the Old Testament also in the Person of Christ. Indeed, the revelation of the Messiah in the Old Testament is a fundamental element in the Old Testament doctrine of the Trinity. According to 1 Corinthians 10:3, the fathers in the wilderness *"drank of that spiritual Rock that followed them, and that Rock was Christ"*. This was the Angel of the Covenant, who appears in passages such as Judges 6, 7 and 13, claiming the name of Jehovah. Manoah registers this by saying *"We have seen God"* (Judges 13:22).

Calvin says that Christ, *"though he were not clothed with flesh, yet he descended as in an intermediate form, that he might have more familiar access to the faithful... Although the time of humiliation had not yet arrived, the eternal Word exhibited a type of the office which he was to fulfil"*.

(*Institutes*, I.xiii.10)

The Old Testament is fully furnished with Christ, appearing in promise and type. The *protevangelium*, the original Gospel promise of Genesis 3:15 is vague - 'who is this seed of the woman'? Eve mistakenly considers Cain to be the deliverer — *"I have gotten a man from the Lord"* is her cry of triumph. But it is soon to become a cry of despair, as the blood of Abel cries from the ground. Only with the unfolding revelation of the covenant, showing that the deliverer will come through the line of Noah, Abraham, Moses and David, does the Christocentric focus of the Old Testament become clearer. At last, Malachi is straining to see God, Jehovah, the Messenger of the Covenant come to His own Temple (Malachi 3:1).

The presence of Christ in the Old Testament is corroborated by the testimony of the Lord Himself. *"Search the Scriptures"*, He says to the Jews in John 5:39 — *"these are they which testify of me"*. Again, on the Emmaus road, *"beginning at Moses and all the Prophets"*, Jesus expounded to the two weary disciples, *"the things concerning Himself"* (Luke 24:27). And John tells us that Isaiah spoke of Jesus, *"when he saw His glory"* (John 12:41). He declares Himself to have existed before Abraham's time (John 8:58), and Peter declares Him to have lived in Noah's day (1 Peter 3:19-20). These proofs of the pre-existence of Christ, which can only be demonstrative of His divine glory, furnish us also with testimony to the fact that the Old Testament was full of Christ. The paschal Lamb spoke of Him, the tabernacle spoke of Him, the burning bush spoke of Him, Moses spoke of Him, Aaron's rod spoke of Him, the manna spoke of Him, the kinsman-redeemer spoke of Him, and countless other persons and experiences, all symbolic as far as the church in the Old Testament was concerned, and all typical as far as the church in the New is concerned. For the Old Testament, as Patrick Fairbairn has it, *"records the typical fact, which properly constitutes the whole there is of prediction in the matter; while the New reads forth its import as such, by announcing the co-relative events or circumstances in which the fulfilment should be discovered"* (*The Typology of Scripture*, Vol. I, p. 141).

Indeed, so much is this a principle of biblical interpretation that Peter insists that the Spirit at work in and through the prophets was none other than the spirit of Christ (1 Peter 1:11). It was not the prophets who testified of His sufferings and glory, but the Spirit of Christ in them. And they did it, continues Peter, not for their benefit but for ours (1:12). All of which leaves the angels in a state of bewilderment, anxiously desiring to look into these things.

## **The same Gospel**

The Old Testament is also furnished with the constituent elements of the Good News to fallen man. As Fairbairn says, *"Everything under the Old Covenant bore reference to the future and more perfect dispensation of the Gospel"* (ibid., p. 152); which means that the Old Testament dispensation was itself a Gospel dispensation.

R.L. Dabney argues this with great force in his attack on 'Campbellism' (*Discussions*, Vol. 1, p.314ff). The object of his attack is the system of church government proposed by Alexander Campbell. Among other things, Campbell argued that the gospel is not found in the Old Testament, *except* in type and promise; and that in these forms it could have no authority. Dabney saw in Campbellism an attempt to exclude infants from the sacraments of the church, and an attempt to remove the distinction between the visible and the invisible church.

Dabney brings four reasons to bear on the question of the Gospel in the Old Testament. First, *"The same God would not have two religions for sinners of the same race"*. There is only one religion for sinners, and it is published in both testaments. Second, there is only one covenant; Galatians 3:17 makes it clear that the covenant confirmed with Abraham could not subsequently be disannulled. Third, under the New Testament, the gospel comes to us by way of promise, and requires faith in the promises of God:

*"Abraham's faith, the model of the gospel faith by which we are saved, exhibits its virtue precisely in this, that he staggered not at the promise of God through unbelief".*

And, fourth, the testimony of Christ establishes for us the fact that through the doctrines and teachings of the Old Testament, *"the fathers exercised the same faith and grasped the same salvation as ours"*.

Indeed, the unity of the Scriptures can only be established on the basis that the message of salvation in both the Old and New Testaments is essentially and fundamentally the same. To change the *form* in which a report is published is not to alter its *substance*. And while we concede more light with the advent of the new dispensation, we discover that the Old Testament kerygma was one with the New. Since man fell, the only possibility of salvation has ever been by means of a divinely ordained covenantal union established between God and man. In successive generations that covenant was revealed, each stage building on the previous and anticipating the next.

It is the covenantal unity of Scripture that yields the only adequate hermeneutic for the interpretation of the Old Testament. The blessings of divine favour and spiritual life are mediated to the saints in the Old Testament in the covenant of grace as surely as they are to us in the same covenant. Certainly, the form of that covenant makes its appearance in the Gospel 'more excellent' and 'founded upon better promises', but it is one with God's way of salvation in the Old. And for this reason the apostle can talk of us 'walking in the steps of our father Abraham' (Romans 4:12) if we are of the number who believe.

## **The same ethic**

The impulse of the spiritual life is the same in both the Old and New Testaments. The life of faith is lived to please God, and it is a faith that works through love and demonstrates itself through obedience. The psalmist who says 'I love the Lord' in Psalm 116, and who cries to be led along the path of God's commandments in Psalm 119, is not speaking a language foreign to the New Testament saint. He too believes; his faith too works through love; and his faith also shows itself in obedience. Romans 3:31 demonstrates that the operations of grace do not displace the functions of law, as if God's law has no more to do with the Christian. And Romans 8, the great chapter of

liberty, spells out for us what the relationship of the believer to the law of God actually is — through the life-giving and liberating power of the Spirit, the righteousness of the law is now fulfilled by us.

As a corroboration of this, we might note that the writer to the Hebrews, when he wishes to encourage believers to keep running the Christian race with patience, looking to Jesus, draws on the fund of Old Testament biography to illustrate his theme. This great cloud of witnesses (Hebrews 12:1), so his argument goes, ran the same race with the same impulse of faith. And similarly James, who wishes to press home the point that saving faith demonstrates itself in the action of obedience, draws his illustration from Abraham and Rahab (James 2:21-26).

The Old Testament saints walked the same narrow way as those of the New, sought to serve and please the same God, and loved to do so. And they did so with the same hope of ultimate vindication and victory. From the mists of time Job catches the dream, "*I know that my Redeemer liveth, and that he shall stand on the latter day on the earth*", and his confidence is that he will see him. But this is no dream; this is hope in its full glory, the hope of those who will not be put to shame. Such confidences we share with them, for the promises made over to them are now made doubly sure to us, made yea and amen in the blood of atonement. The blood of Abel called to men to take up their cross and follow on victory road, but now there is blood which bespeaks better things, blood which tells of victory won and hope assured.

Louis Berkhof sums up the Reformed understanding of Scripture thus: *Both the Old and the New Testament form essential parts of God's special revelation. God is the Author of both, and in both has the same purpose in mind. They both contain the same doctrine of redemption, preach the same Christ, and impose upon men the same moral and religious duties*".

(*Principles of biblical interpretation*. p. 135)

## **Implications**

All of which calls, first, for a *biblical* use of the Old Testament. It is all too easy to overlook a legitimate typology in the interests of guarding against an unwarranted allegorising or spiritualising of the Old Testament. What were clearly *symbols* to the people of God of old are types of better things to come, things that we enjoy in their fulness, with the coming of the light. Things that were not symbols then cannot be regarded as types now.

This is well expressed in one of John Newton's letters in the *Cardophonia*: "*...some tell me that Deborah is the law, and that by the oak I am to understand the cross of Christ; and I remember to have heard a preacher who discovered a type of Christ crucified in Absalom hanging by the hair on another oak. I am quite a mole when compared with these eagle-eyed divines; and must often content myself with plodding upon the lower ground of accommodation and allusion, except when the New Testament writers assure me what the mind of the Holy Ghost was*". Not only our premises, but also our 'conclusions, must be measured by the canon of Scripture.

It calls, secondly, for a *devotional* use of the Old Testament. If the essential elements of saving religion are present in the older covenant, as surely as in the new, it follows that the experience of such religion, in its influence on the heart and mind and soul of man must be essentially the same. That is why the psalms, for example, find an echo in the joys and sorrows of the New Testament believer, and why the prayers of David, of Daniel, of Jeremiah and of Jabez so adequately express the deepest longings of the believer. As A.W. Pink puts it, "*There is many a verse of Scripture (he is talking in the immediate context of Psalm 32:3,4) which no commentary save that of personal experience, can satisfactorily interpret*" (*Profiting from the Word*, p.13. Far from making subjective experience the criterion for biblical exegesis, Pink is reminding us that the doctrine of the Bible is mirrored in the experience of the Christian.

John Ker, in his useful book *The Psalms in History and Biography* reminds us of the "age-long communion of interest" apparent through the Psalms. By this he means that there is an experience of God's salvation which is common throughout every era of human history. He continues:

*"In the Psalms of the Old Testament and the Gospels of the New — the songs of the son of Jesse and the person of the Son of David — there is room for the meeting of many who may be divided elsewhere".*

To be sure, there is discontinuity over the two testaments, but primarily in the realm of knowledge and not in the realm of the experience of grace.

It calls, thirdly, for an *evangelistic* use of the Old Testament. If the Gospel is present in the old dispensation, the same Gospel that is blazingly apparent in the New, then it is incumbent upon us as preachers to use the Old Testament evangelistically. Its themes do not strike a note of discord or disharmony in the proclamation of the New Testament kerygma. Its emphases are one with those of the Gospel proclaimed by Christ and the apostles.

And it calls, finally, for a *practical* use of the Old Testament. There are many Christians for whom the Lord's Day is a day of sport, recreation and leisure, as it is for many non-Christians. *"Not under the law!"* is their justification for this. But the directives of the Old Testament furnish us with the equipment we need for healthy spiritual life. For it is the righteousness of the law that is to be fulfilled by us if we walk after the Spirit (Romans 8:3).

Walter Kaiser draws attention to the abuse of the Old Testament, suffering from both an 'allegorical spiritualizing' approach, and a 'dry-bones-history-and-grammar approach' (*Towards an Exegetical Theology*, p. 201). This abuse he sees naturally as leading to a 'crisis in evangelical practice'. Where there is a misuse in approach to the Old Testament, there will be a crisis in our proclamation of the evangel. On the other hand, a healthy approach to the Old Testament will lead to a thorough-going evangelistic practice.

*Christ in the Old Testament* was a selection of Spurgeon's sermon published in 1899 (recently reprinted as *Jesus Christ: the History, Ceremony, Prophecy as told in the Old Testament*). The Preface to the original edition stated:

*"The Old Testament was Christ's Bible, and it is a Bible full of Christ... May the glory of Christ in the Old Testament lead some to receive Christ into the heart as the hope of glory, and lend a new value to that Scripture which, though unsparingly assailed, is ever its own best witness!" Amen!*

ID Campbell

© 2013  
[www.christianstudylibrary.org](http://www.christianstudylibrary.org)