

OUR NEGLECTED OLD TESTAMENT

J. D. SMART

SEVERAL years ago, when it was reported in the newspapers that in Germany attempts were being made to delete the Old Testament from the Bible, Christian people in all lands were profoundly shocked. But there was an element of hypocrisy in that reaction, for, to a very large extent, the Old Testament has for some years been deleted from the life of our churches. As W. J. Pythian Adams says in *The Call of Israel*, —“The entire volume of the Old Testament has now been virtually abandoned, as if the revelation which it contains were too imperfect to be spiritually profitable to Christians.” Any working minister who has his eyes open to existing conditions should be able to confirm that statement. Of course, some use is still made of parts of the Old Testament. A few of the psalms remain familiar through devotional use. Fragments of the prophets are popular because of their social emphasis. The *Genesis* stories, in an adapted form, have been made the exclusive property of Christian children. Excerpts from the historical books, which can be made to point a moral lesson, recur at intervals in Sunday-School teaching. *Daniel* and parts of other books have been used by those who are interested to draw all future history out of the Bible. Yet it must be acknowledged that for the average Christian the Old Testament is not a living entity, and that, in the Church in general, interest in the Old Testament and understanding of the contents of the Old Testament are at a very low ebb. In the lives of most Christians it would make little actual difference were the Old Testament removed from their Bible; in fact, if it were done quietly, it might be some time before the loss would be noticed. We are justified, therefore, in describing the existing situation as an estrangement between the Old Testament and the Church. Perhaps one should use an even stronger term, a *divorce*. And if this is so, then it is a state of affairs which demands earnest consideration from every friend either of the Church or of the Old Testament.

It is an almost infallible rule that when a certain phenomenon is observed in the life of the Church, its counterpart may be

found in the realm of Christian thought. What happens in theology gradually filters down and appears in concrete form in the lives of people who know nothing about what has been happening in that realm. In fact, often the implications of a tendency in theology are not recognized until it has begun to produce definite forms of life in the Church. Therefore we must attempt to trace the divorce between the Old Testament and the Church to its theological source. That is not hard to do, for the fact of such a divorce appears there again and again. Schleiermacher, the father of modern theology, found the Old Testament definitely uncongenial. Its fundamental conceptions of God and man could not by any pressure of interpretation be harmonized with those to which he held. Hegel considered the Old Testament religion less important than the Greek religion. Ritschl in all his work showed a consistent lack of understanding of the Old Testament. Harnack, in his book on Marcion, 1921, (p. 247 ff) even went so far as to deny the right of the Old Testament to canonical dignity. These are the men who have been most powerfully influential in the shaping of modern theology, and it would be surprising if the growth of their prestige in the Church had not its effect in an ignoring of the Old Testament. But when one looks, not into the developments of modern theology, but into the developments within Old Testament science itself, one sees indications there also of a divorce from the Church. In some Old Testament scholars this divorce has been consciously desired and sought after; in others it has taken place in their thought, while they have vainly sought to maintain a living connection. We must now examine more carefully the various factors in this alienation of Old Testament science from the Church.

First, we turn back to the bitter controversy which took place when, in the latter part of the nineteenth century, scholars who had been applying the historical-critical method to the study of the Scriptures began to announce their findings. The new method had to fight every step of its way, for churchmen everywhere felt that the Bible, the stronghold of Protestantism, was being undermined, and the cherished doctrines of their faith threatened. To-day, when little of a scholarly nature appears in theological literature from any other than the historical point of view, and most professors in our Protestant Colleges take for granted the use of the critical approach, it is difficult to comprehend the furore in the Church of half a century ago. Those who adhered to the new view were abused unmercifully,

and some of its representatives, such as Robertson Smith, were turned out of their professorships on charges of heresy. Most thoughtful churchmen are heartily ashamed of that episode in our Church history, although a few here and there still keep up the battle against the historical-critical method, very much like civilians who, zealous to defend their city, continue to snipe at the enemy long after the battle has been fought and finished. It is, however, the effect in our present-day situation of what happened fifty years ago which concerns us here. The strained relations which developed at that time between the Church and Old Testament science have never completely disappeared, but have left a residue of distrust and suspicion on both sides. This has been aggravated by a failure of the Church and of theology to face frankly and courageously the question of the relationship of the Old Testament to the New, and the corresponding question of the place of Old Testament science within the field of Christian theology. Men have avoided these questions for fear of reawakening the old conflict, and in silence Old Testament and Church have been permitted to drift apart.

The demand of the Old Testament scholar for independence and freedom from ecclesiastical control in his researches, a demand inspired partly by the painful experiences of last century and partly by the rationalist ideal of a free objective science, raises with sharpness the question of the place of the Old Testament in the Church. That research must be free and uncontrolled, surely none will be disposed to deny. But that does not mean that the results at which the Old Testament scientist arrives should be accepted uncritically within the Church. Old Testament science is not an exact science offering at every point fixed and proved results. It is a science dealing with records of human life, and its conclusions are influenced inevitably by the human presuppositions with which the subject-matter is approached. Moreover, it deals with records which are of exceptional importance within the Church, and to disclaim all responsibility toward the Church in investigating them is not likely to lead to happy results. As long as the Old Testament remains upon the pulpit before the Christian congregation, the Church has a very definite stake in all investigations of that book, and must be concerned with the results gained and the views enunciated by the investigators. It is hard to see how the scholar can have complete independence otherwise than by a complete separation from the Church. If he speaks from within the Church, then his statements, like all else in

the Church's life, must be submitted to critical examination in which the Church's theology seeks to discriminate between true and false.

The claim for Old Testament science that it is a purely objective science shows a lack of understanding of its subject-matter. That which is the ultimate object of investigation is a revelation of God which has its own laws of how it may be known and understood. A primary law of that revelation is that it is never comprehensible to spectators, however observant and intelligent they may be. It is never a revelation of information, but always a revelation of life. Its truth cannot be grasped except where there is a willingness that life shall be shaped by it. The content of the Old Testament does not permit neutrality, or the objectivity of the spectator, in those who speak of it. It forces them to take sides, to be for or against. Of course, there are many parts of the Old Testament field where in the determination of facts and the investigation of problems in the records the most severely objective consideration is possible. But it is a serious mistake when the scholar thinks that he can or that he does preserve this same objectivity in his interpretation of the *content* of Scripture. And to the making of that mistake, again and again, we owe much of the present-day loss of understanding for the revelation of the Old Testament. In fact it was inevitable that it should lead to a doubt in the minds of the investigators whether there was anything in the Old Testament which in the strictest sense could be called the revelation of God. I say it was inevitable, because the revelation of God by its nature is not to be known by objective intellectual investigation.

But something still more unfortunate happened. Investigators, who claimed to be deducing their conclusions purely from the records of the Old Testament, unconsciously brought to their studies certain theological assumptions, drawn from the thought-world of their time, which they proceeded to read into the records, and then to announce as the results of scientific study. Man has always found it hard to know his own assumptions, and, especially in a rationalist age, he likes to believe that in his thinking he is unbiassed by assumptions. More honest and more fruitful is it for a man to know and to acknowledge the standpoint from which he is looking at the data under consideration. Old Testament criticism has failed to be critical at this point,—in regard to the theological assumptions of the critics, which influence at every point the interpretation

of the text. I shall deal here with only two of the commonest uncritical assumptions; the conception of revelation in history, and the idea of a progressive revelation.

H. Wheeler Robinson says "The history (of Israel) is remarkable both in itself and in its product, the religious ideas of the Old Testament."¹ "It is a history progressively creative of the great ideas which are the foundation of the Christian faith."² God "manifests himself in the contour lines of Palestine and the influences of racial kinship, in the pressure of surrounding nations and the course of national politics, not less truly than in the prophetic consciousness which is guided to the interpretation of these phenomena"³ Of the ideas embodied in the religion of Israel, he says, "the history of Israel which created these ideas constitutes a revelation of divine truth". "History may itself be made the divine revelation. The foundation of the temple of religion will then be found—in the fortunes of a whole people, interpreted as the work of God. It is this which is characteristic of the religion of the Old Testament"⁴

This conception of history as the medium of divine revelation was one of the chief principles of Ritschl's theology, and became current through him and his followers. In criticism of it, a quotation from H. R. Mackintosh's *Types of Christian Theology* will serve. "Ritschl overlooks the fact, though it is plainly crucial, that objectively given history is not as it were automatically and by its very nature a divinely-meant disclosure of revealing significance. The Gospel picture of Jesus, the events of His career, read simply as a chapter in the record of the past, are not in themselves an immediate or transparent disclosure of God"⁵. Perhaps the best commentary of all upon this idea of history as revelation has been written in the life of the German Church during these past six years. The German Christians in 1933 merely took with full earnestness this belief in a God who reveals himself in the events of history. In the national transformation under the leadership of Hitler, which could easily be interpreted as a divine deliverance, they heard God calling them to create a Church worthy of the transformed State. All the changes which they instituted were validated by an appeal to this revelation in historic event. And it began to be evident that the revelation of history may be something very, very different from the revelation of God in Jesus Christ.

1 H. W. Robinson, *The Religious Ideas of the Old Testament*, p. 15:

2 *ibid.*, p. 24.

3 *ibid.*, p. 25.

4 *ibid.*, p. 29.

5 H. R. Mackintosh, *Types of Christian Theology*, p. 179:

Some are disposed to say that what was heard in the event of history was not the voice of God but the voice of a demon. It is clear, then, that the statement "History is revelation" is a theological proposition of doubtful validity.

That the history of men, just as the history of individual man, is in the hands of God, cannot be denied without denying that God is the Creator. But to affirm that all history is revelation is to affirm a revelation so general and so vague that it can be made to say whatever man wants it to say, and the revelation of God in His Word has lost its meaning and its authority.

The second assumption, so generally accepted that most men are amazed to hear it even questioned, is that of a progressive revelation. The union of these two words is one of a number of unhappy marriages which have taken place in the last century of Old Testament study. It joins two things which are essentially incompatible, that which is progressive and therefore relative and changing, and revelation which, if it be truly the revelation of God, cannot change, any more than God Himself can change in His nature. A revelation which is involved in a progressive process must be partly true and partly false at every point of that process, and if there be anywhere a revelation which claims to be not progressive but complete and absolute, man will naturally give his attention to this and will ignore the other. Who bothers with the tree which has only the developing but unripe fruit on it, when he has close at hand a tree with perfect fruit, ripe and ready for the eating? If the best that can be said of the Old Testament revelation is that it is progressive, how dare we blame men for turning away from the Old Testament and concentrating upon the New?

How did this idea of progressive revelation originate? As soon as the historical method had given a rough outline of the life and religion of Israel through the centuries, it became evident that vast changes took place in the course of the years in the religious customs, institutions, and points of view of the Israelites. That there was development of some kind between the days of the patriarchs and the days of the Scribes and Pharisees, was plainly to be seen. The development was from a lower to a higher level, and therefore should be termed a progression. Thus far, the conclusions were well-grounded. But now the progression from lower to higher was interpreted not as relating to the life of a people, but as relating to the revelation of God. Most likely this was due to the nineteenth-century

passion to explain all things in terms of progression from lower forms to higher. For those with a yard-stick which had proved itself efficient in a few spheres, the temptation was to measure everything by it, even revelation not being safe from it. It was also a neat attractive way of keeping the Old Testament related to the New; in fact it seemed to enhance the grandeur of the New by setting it at the summit of a thousand years of spiritual progression. The question whether it is revelation or something other than revelation in the Old Testament which progresses, does not seem to have been asked.

Light may perhaps be thrown on the problem by considering the religious developments which during twenty centuries have taken place in the Christian Church. In customs, in ideas, in the institutional forms which Christianity has taken, there have been great changes. It is possible to indicate elements in the life of the early Church which in comparison with to-day might be termed primitive. That there have been developments, none would deny. But it is not felt necessary for that reason to speak of a progressive revelation in the Christian Church. The revelation of God in Jesus Christ remains the single authoritative and unchanging basis of the Church's life. When the Church has thought itself to have progressed beyond that revelation, in time it has proved only to have passed away from it and to have yielded itself to another and alien principle. The revelation abides ever the same; it is the human Church which changes, moving not only forwards but backwards as well, as it approaches or recedes from the truth of God.

Similarly in Israel, the entire life of the people, religious, moral, political, was subject to constant change. Progression and regression can be traced. But it is always progression and regression in relation to a fixed point, the revelation of God. In the revelation itself there is no change. Therefore it would be well to have done with the unhappy term, progressive revelation. Both of these illustrations show how careless Old Testament science has been in regard to its theological assumptions, and how this carelessness has helped to alienate the Old Testament from the Church. Old Testament criticism must become theologically critical if it is ever to reclaim for itself and for its subject the place which should belong to them in the Church.

Another factor in the divorce we are considering, related definitely to the preceding, has been the determination of many Old Testament scholars to be untheological. They have con-

sidered themselves to be literary scientists, concerned only with the determination of facts. Their aim has been to set each Scripture passage in the circumstances of its origin, and to say what it meant on that particular historical occasion. They have not felt it to be their task to deal with questions of ultimate truth, theological questions. But as I have already indicated, they have never kept out of the theological realm, for as soon as a man tries to deal with the thought-content of the Scriptures, he is forced to make statements which are theological in their nature. They need not be phrased in familiar theological terminology for that to be true of them. But where this determination to be rigidly scientific and untheological has made itself most felt has been in commentaries. Who has not had the experience of turning away from the commentaries with a feeling of keen disappointment, pages having been devoted to the background and to technical questions, but the *content* of the text having been superficially treated as though its meaning were self-evident? What does it mean that in a journal devoted to Old Testament research, such as the *Journal of Biblical Literature*, the interest is almost wholly confined to technical and literary questions, and rarely does there show itself an interest in interpreting *the Truth* which has its expression in the Old Testament literature? Those technical and literary questions have their importance, but surely the questions which the Church asks of the Old Testament concerning God and man and the meaning of human life are of vastly greater importance. But these are theological questions, and a respectable Old Testament science does not feel that it dare touch them! The Church, however, is beginning to ask how an Old Testament science which exists *within* the Church can dare to leave these questions untouched. It is very much like a science of the New Testament feeling itself compelled to leave out all that is theological in regard to Jesus of Nazareth. As the latest New Testament researches have shown, that would mean simply the elimination of Jesus Christ from the New Testament. To become theological in one's treatment of the Scriptures, one does not require to be unscientific. Rather, if to be scientific means to use that method which will best get at the object of consideration, then an Old Testament science which undertook consciously the theological task would be most truly scientific. How can a science which renounces theological responsibility be expected to elucidate and to make known as a living reality the content of the Scriptures?

Another development in Old Testament science, which took place during the nineteenth century when it was under attack, and which has rarely been recognized, must be considered. Through a variety of influences it became closely associated with liberal theology. The two movements grew up side by side within the Church during the same period, and like most contemporaries exerted an influence upon each other. But of greater importance is the fact that both had to fight their way against a common antagonist, fundamentalist orthodoxy. Thus the new approach to the Scriptures and the new theology came to be considered and to consider themselves partners in a common cause. In reality they had nothing in common but their antagonist. It was a fatal alliance for Old Testament science, for the new theology contradicted the validity of the fundamental convictions concerning God and man which come to expression in the Old Testament.

That this unholy alliance continues very generally to this day is merely evidence of the blindness of the most intelligent men. Professor Gresham Machen, speaking for fundamentalist orthodoxy, shows a complete inability to distinguish between the two. He proves the faith of liberalism to be something other than what the Scriptures know as faith, and makes out a convincing case, but when he is done, he seems to think he has demolished the historical-critical method, which he has not really touched at all. Professor Emil Brunner, whose theology stands in contradiction to the liberal tradition, can in America be dubbed a liberal modernist because he accepts unreservedly the critical approach to the Scriptures. But this confusion of two entities does not exist only in the minds of fundamentalists. It exists also in the minds of many critical scholars. The acceptance of the historical-critical method seems to them to involve the adoption of the liberal point of view, and they appear at times to doubt whether the method can be applied honestly from any other.

The folly of the alliance is apparent when we learn of the unfriendliness of modern theology toward the Old Testament, from the time of Schleiermacher on. It is very much like a man marrying a woman who, because of some fundamental antagonism, must hate him and seek to kill him. The secret of modern theology's unfriendliness is to be found in the fact that it owed more to Greece than to Palestine, more to the Athenian philosophers than to the Hebrew men of faith. The dominance of the Greek spirit over the Hebrew and Christ-

ian in modern theology has not been sufficiently recognized. We do not need to be unsympathetic to the achievements of the Greeks in order to assert that on fundamentals the Greek and Hebrew stand in antithesis. Concerning God, man, the world, and the nature of life, one cannot believe both as a Greek and as a Hebrew. These views do not harmonize, as Paul Elmer More would have us believe, but at basis are radically antagonistic. Thus liberal theology, becoming impregnated with the Greek spirit and Greek ideas, lost its kinship with the Old Testament, retaining its use only by seeing in it "values" which could be transmuted into a new form, and ignoring those elements in the New Testament so peculiarly Hebrew that they eluded harmonization with the Greek. One has only to think of the monistic immanental conceptions of God, the customary optimistic assessment of man (with a bitter word for the stern Hebrew view), the idea of immortality instead of resurrection, the concern with civilization, to have abundant illustrations of this capitulation to Greece.

We may well ask what chance the Old Testament had of speaking out its own peculiar message, when with few exceptions the science appointed to investigate it was definitely linked with a theology which denied the very basis of that message. The only possible result was confusion, a confusion which would more and more cause the Old Testament to become a closed book. The marvel is that, chained to such a partner, Old Testament science has achieved so much that is durable during the past century. It could, however, have performed an exceptional service to the Church had it emancipated itself from modern theology earlier, and enunciated the message of the Old Testament in such a way as to bring out in all its sharpness the antithesis between the Hebrew and the Greek. That might have caused the Church to bethink itself more seriously concerning the assumptions of its theology. Nevertheless, it must be acknowledged that durable historical and critical results have been achieved, and the way points forward, not backwards. But if an understanding of the message of the Old Testament is to be restored to the Church, the interpretation of it must proceed from assumptions not alien from but rather congenial to the Old Testament itself.

Another aspect of the subject can only be mentioned. There is perhaps no point at which the divorce between Old Testament science and the Church may be more clearly observed than in those monographs which seek to total up results and to say

what the Old Testament as a whole is about. It is natural that the issue should there become acute, for no man can say what the Old Testament is about without committing himself to theological judgments and to a particular theological position. These monographs were at first entitled "Theology of the Old Testament", but during the past twenty-five years this has been displaced by the title "Religion of Israel". This change is of far greater significance than appears on the surface. Its causes and its implications form an independent subject, in dealing with which account would need to be taken of recent attempts by German scholars to recover a "Theology of the Old Testament". It is sufficient here to say that an Old Testament science which has as its *highest* objective a description of the rise and development of Hebrew Religion has disowned its responsibility toward Christian theology and the Christian Church, and has denied the essential unity of the Old and New Testaments. A detailed examination of the results of this procedure would be necessary to show where it must inevitably lead us. It certainly leads us to an Old Testament which no longer has any very compelling interest for the Church.

It would be unfair not to mention another factor which has drawn modern Christians into a neglect of the Old Testament. A large burden of responsibility must be borne by a Church and a ministry which have refused to face honestly the facts concerning the Scriptures which have been brought to light by critical research. A distinction must be made between those of a conservative bent whose dogma of literal infallibility had to be defended against the facts, and whose only resource was to refuse to see them, and, on the other hand, those by far the greater in number who, for fear of what people might think, definitely suppressed the facts they knew and did little to enlighten their people concerning the modern approach to the records of Scripture. The effect of both has been to keep Christian people uninformed, and to leave them without the ability to answer either for themselves or for others, particularly their children, questions which are being raised on every hand in regard to the Scriptures. Nowhere is this lack in Christian training more evident than in young men and women, within the Church, who enter the University. They carry with them a naive view of the Scriptures which does not last long in the atmosphere of the University, and, this being gone, often they feel that all which they knew as Christian faith is gone from them. The Church complains when these young people become

agnostics or adopt other attitudes unsympathetic to the Church. But it is the Church which is responsible, in having failed to give to them a training in the Scriptures which would stand and not fall when set in the full light of modern investigation and knowledge. Not only in the Universities, however, are questions raised about the Scriptures, but also in the shops, among schoolboys, and wherever men talk of religion. And that which has carried multitudes out of the Church is the impression that, to remain Christians, they must swallow that which has become unacceptable to any thoughtful and well-informed person. The Church has lost heavily in the esteem and reverence of men because of its failure to deal frankly and courageously with the Scriptures, and men, lacking proper guidance from the Church in the reading of the Scriptures, have turned away from them. Those ministers who will perhaps applaud most loudly the criticisms of Old Testament science expressed in this article, and will be inclined to say "Yes, Yes, it is the Higher Critics who have driven the people away from the Bible", are likely to forget that *their* responsibility is even greater. Some of them have kept their minds closed for an unbelievably long stretch of years against even the simplest adjustments in the understanding of the Scriptures, and they continue to enunciate a belief which can be supported only by refusing to think. Others have been guilty, through timidity, of permitting teaching to continue in the Church which they themselves know to be not in accordance with the facts. The Old Testament has suffered grievously from this kind of treatment, and this has been no small factor in its becoming a closed book to Christian people. If there is need to call Old Testament science to repent for its estrangement from the Church, there is equal need to call the Church to repent for its estrangement from Old Testament science.