

19 The Old Testament in Christianity

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Some issues in life are not capable of final resolution. Questions such as 'What is the good life?' and 'How can we get good government?' and 'Whom can I trust?' are not amenable to definitive answers in the same way as many mathematical and scientific questions. Rather, such fundamental questions of living recur afresh in every age. Part of the thesis of this chapter is that the role of the Old Testament in Christianity is, in essence, such an irresolvable issue. Christians ancient and modern have not found unanimity or finality in understanding and using the Old Testament – and this may be a sign not of failure but rather of the intrinsic variety of the challenges that the Old Testament poses for Christian faith. A collection of religious literature that is pre-Christian in origin, written over centuries and initially compiled by Jews (as Israel's Scriptures), and only subsequently appropriated by Christians (as the Old Testament), inherently poses intriguing, albeit enriching, questions to Christians.

Lack of definitive resolution therefore should in no way call into question the importance of wrestling with understanding the Old Testament within Christian faith. A. H. J. Gunneweg, for example, wrote

It would be no exaggeration to understand the hermeneutical problem of the Old Testament as *the* problem of Christian theology, and not just one problem among others.... If the interpretation of holy scripture is an essential task for theology, and if the Bible is the basis of Christian life, the foundation of the church and the medium of revelation, then it is of fundamental importance for the theologian to ask whether and why the collection of Israelite and Jewish writings to which the Christian church has given the name Old Testament are part – indeed the most substantial part – of the canon of scripture and what their relevance is. This question affects the extent and also qualitatively the substance of what may be regarded as Christian.¹

Thus, engagement in debates about the understanding and appropriation of the Old Testament – debates which in practice probably take place more in contexts of worship and everyday life than in formal academic contexts – is itself part of what constitutes Christian faith.

DIVERGENT ATTITUDES

Some of the recurrent issues can readily be set out. On the one hand, the Old Testament contains much that is constitutive of Christian faith: there is one God, creator of the world, who is personal, good, sovereign, and the appropriate recipient of human trust and allegiance; human life has intrinsic dignity and value ('in the image of God'); human knowledge of, and relationship with, God is always initiated by God ('grace', 'revelation'); God's purposes within the world focus on, though are not restricted to, the loving call of a people whose call entails faithful service ('election'); prayer is an essential means of communication between humans and God; human life entails, in important respects, imitating God through displaying qualities of moral integrity, justice and mercy – one should love God and one's neighbour. Without such content, there would be no Christian faith.

Of course, some of the content of the Old Testament has no continuing constitutive role within Christianity, as already becomes clear in the New Testament with regard to circumcision and the dietary laws (both of which symbolise Israel's distinctiveness vis-à-vis the Gentiles), even though the covenant symbolised by circumcision is said to be given 'in perpetuity' (Gen 17:7, 13), that is, with no termination or revocation envisaged. But these points simply recognise, in essence, how the death and resurrection of Jesus mean that Christians approach the Old Testament differently from Jews.

On the other hand, the Old Testament contains material that appears problematic. Most notoriously, God's instructions to Israel for the occupation of Canaan appear to sponsor murderous 'ethnic cleansing' (Deuteronomy 7, Joshua 1–12), and to be at some remove from God's self-giving in Jesus; Elijah calls down fire from heaven to incinerate a hundred soldiers and their captains so as to teach proper respect for a prophet (2 Kings 1; contrast Luke 9:52–5); the psalmists utter imprecations on enemies (e.g., Psalm 58; contrast Matt 5:44). Assumptions are made whose enduring value is doubtful, not least about the relative worth and roles of male and female (e.g. Lev 27:1–8). There are questions as to how far, if at all, the Old Testament can be appropriated in the light of modern science and history. And so on.

Such issues have received extensive discussion down the ages. Sometimes closer study can show how some positive features may be more problematic, and some negative features less problematic, than they appeared initially.² It is also usually most helpful to try to grasp an overall frame of reference within which Christians approach the Old Testament (as in a chapter such as this) so that the discussion of particular issues progresses in dialectical interchange with an understanding of the whole. Nonetheless, even though real progress in understanding the Old Testament is possible, debate about the nature and extent of its appropriation within Christianity remains ongoing.

Some measure of the diversity can be gauged by considering the following statements by eminent twentieth-century Protestant theologians (one of the historical distinguishing marks of Protestant Christianity being its emphasis upon the importance of the Bible). Adolf von Harnack, who operated within a Lutheran frame of reference that has sometimes tended to ambivalence towards the Old Testament,³ wrote a major book on Marcion, who c. AD 150 had proposed a form of Christian faith entirely without the Old Testament, on the basis that the deity it portrays is other than, and inferior to, the God of Christian faith of whom Paul speaks. In it, Harnack proffers this much-quoted dictum:

To reject the Old Testament in the second century was a mistake which the Church rightly repudiated; to retain it in the sixteenth century was a fate which the Reformation could not yet avoid; but to continue to keep it in Protestantism as a canonical document after the nineteenth century is the consequence of religious and ecclesiastical paralysis.⁴

To be sure, Harnack's own proposal was not the abandonment of the Old Testament within Christianity (as Marcion had sought) but rather its downgrading, that the Old Testament should lose its canonical status and be placed among books that are 'good and useful to read', which was how Luther classified the Apocrypha. Nonetheless, it is clear that Harnack sought a renewed form of Christian self-definition with minimal input from the Old Testament.

By contrast, Brevard Childs, who stood in the Reformed tradition of Calvin and Barth, which has probably been the strand within Protestantism that has consistently placed the highest value on the enduring significance of the Old Testament for Christian faith, says this when discussing how to speak of God:

I do not come to the Old Testament to learn about someone else's God, but about the God we confess, who has made himself known to

Israel, to Abraham, Isaac and to Jacob. I do not approach some ancient concept, some mythological construct akin to Zeus or Moloch, but our God, our Father. The Old Testament bears witness that God revealed himself to Abraham, and we confess that he has broken into our lives. I do not come to the Old Testament to be informed about some strange religious phenomenon, but in faith I strive for knowledge as I seek to understand ourselves in the light of God's self-disclosure. In the context of the church's scripture I seek to be pointed to our God who has made himself known, is making himself known, and will make himself known.⁵

The God whose self-revelation to Abraham is attested in the Old Testament is the God who is known in Christian faith today. There is both continuity and familiarity for Christians who read the Old Testament in faith, for its story is their story, its God is their God. Christian faith is in principle formed by substantive input from the Old Testament.

Although Childs undoubtedly expresses a classical Christian understanding in a way that Harnack does not, numerous Christians still express doubts about the Old Testament comparable to those of Harnack – which can give ongoing debates about the Old Testament a sharp edge.

THE OLD TESTAMENT IN RELATION TO JESUS AND THE NEW TESTAMENT

Christian faith in God focuses on Jesus and has come to understand Jesus as the key not only to understanding and encountering God but also to understanding and being able to realise what human life is really about – as summed up in the shorthand affirmation (itself summarising the Council of Chalcedon in AD 451) that Jesus is truly divine and truly human. Yet Jesus himself was rooted within and formed by Jewish faith in God that receives its fundamental formulation in Israel's Scriptures. This means that the faith that Christians have in Jesus is not identical with the faith that Jesus himself had; Jesus himself was not a Christian but a Jew.⁶ Yet Christians have generally felt it important that there should be continuity between the faith of Jesus himself and faith in Jesus. Arguably, it is in the complex dynamics of holding these together that many core issues of Christian faith relating to the Old Testament also can be seen.

Consider the differences between the synoptic gospels which portray Jesus' earthly ministry and message, and the Pauline letters which depict Christian proclamation about Jesus. For example, in Matthew's account of Jesus' encounter with the rich young man (Matt 19:16–22),⁷ Jesus answers the young man's question about eternal life with 'If you

wish to enter into life, keep the commandments' (19:17). When the young man asks the clarifying question 'Which ones?', Jesus responds by citing scriptural commandments, primarily some of the Ten Commandments (Exod 20:13–16, Deut 5:17–20), but also the injunction to 'love your neighbour as yourself' (Lev 19:18). The young man says that he has observed these and asks the further question 'What do I still lack?' This appears to depict him as someone who has done all the right things and yet for whom the realities of God have for some reason not come alive. So Jesus offers a way ahead through issuing a challenge that should, as it were, break the log jam – the young man should give up all his wealth and follow Jesus as a disciple. In this, Jesus speaks as one for whom God's commandments as set out in Israel's Scripture ('law', *torah*) contain the way of life – what matters is to live out, and find life in, what God has already said. Jesus' challenge to sell up and follow involves no particular belief about himself, beyond recognition of him as someone in touch with God, and the emphasis is upon an action whose radical demand will bring alive the realities of God as set out in Israel's law.

However, Paul in Galatians 3 puts a markedly different challenge to his readers: 'Did you receive the Spirit by doing the works of the law or by believing what you heard?' A strong antithesis between believing a message about the crucified Jesus and doing particular deeds in obedience to Israel's law runs throughout Paul's argument. Strikingly, Paul roots this antithesis within Israel's Scriptures themselves, positing an antithesis between Abraham and the law. Paul appeals to Abraham as one who believes and has this faith reckoned as righteousness (Gen 15:6). His righteousness thereby constitutes a model for others, too, who by believing receive the promise of blessing which was also given to Abraham (3:6–9, 15–18). The law, by contrast, was a temporary expedient whose purpose was fulfilled with the coming of Christ in whom God's promise to Abraham is now received by faith (3:19–26). Far from commending obedience to the Ten Commandments, Paul's dialectical argument about the nature of Christian faith revolves around God's promise to Abraham, believing, receiving the Spirit, and being baptised into Christ (whose crucifixion is fundamental, 3:1; 6:12, 14).

On any reckoning, the tenor of Paul's argument is markedly different from that of Jesus' words in Matthew's portrayal.⁸ The question then becomes how one should understand the relationship between the two, not least because both are part of the New Testament, which is authoritative for Christian faith. I have heard more than one preacher argue that the words of Jesus to the rich young man could not really mean what they appear to mean – presumably because that would conflict too much

with what is taken to be a Pauline understanding of salvation – and so must be understood ironically, perhaps as a way of helping the young man to see that obedience to the law can only end in failure (in the sense of still lacking something), for which Jesus then provides the remedy. In effect, Luther's antithesis between law and gospel provides a way of prioritising Pauline theology and re-conceptualising the synoptic portrayal of Jesus within a Pauline frame of reference.

At a more sophisticated level, Rudolf Bultmann put his finger on this issue in his own distinctive way at the outset of his *Theology of the New Testament*:

The message of Jesus is a presupposition for the theology of the New Testament rather than a part of that theology itself. . . . Christian faith did not exist until there was a Christian kerygma; i.e., a kerygma proclaiming Jesus Christ – specifically Jesus Christ the Crucified and Risen One – to be God's eschatological act of salvation. He was first so proclaimed in the kerygma of the earliest Church, not in the message of the historical Jesus.⁹

In other words, Paul gives authentic Christian theology, while Jesus' words are historical background to that theology. Of course, all this is not as such a difference between the Old and New Testaments, for the difference is located within the New Testament. But conceptually Bultmann removes that which precedes the Christian message of Christ crucified and risen from being integral to, and constitutive of, the content of Christian faith. What applies to the teaching of Jesus in his ministry assuredly applies even more so to the Old Testament,¹⁰ as Bultmann consistently argued in two well-known essays.¹¹

Bultmann reads the Old Testament with a distinctive, indeed idiosyncratic, hermeneutic, inspired by a particular reading of Pauline theology. First, because 'Jesus is God's demonstration of grace in a manner which is fundamentally different from the demonstrations of divine grace attested in the Old Testament',¹² the prophetic hope of the Old Testament 'is fulfilled in its inner contradiction, its miscarriage'; though 'the miscarriage of history actually amounts to a promise', for the failure of the human way gives an opening to God's way in Christ.¹³ Secondly, the manner in which the Old Testament functions for Christians is not different from what can be found elsewhere:

The exodus from Egypt, the giving of the Law at Sinai, the building of Solomon's Temple, the work of the prophets, all redound to our benefit in so far as these are historical episodes which form part of our Occidental history. In the same sense, however, it can be said

that the Spartans fell at Thermopylae for us and that Socrates drank the hemlock for us.¹⁴

The Old Testament's lack of special theological significance is essentially because 'everywhere the possibility is present for man to become aware of his nothingness and to come to humility or despair.'¹⁵

Bultmann, like Harnack, offers a revisionist proposal in the name of 'faith that is specifically Christian',¹⁶ only, in so doing, he has played off differing voices in the canon of both Old and New Testaments against each other in a way that leaves a rather thin Christianity. As Francis Watson puts it,

The polyphonic witness of both Testaments to God's definitive self-disclosure in Jesus Christ has been *replaced* by the monotony of the kerygma, the single word that can only be repeated, over and over again.¹⁷

In sum, it should be clear that an understanding of the role of the Old Testament within Christianity necessarily involves wide-ranging and complex theological judgements, which are not separable from judgements about how best to comprehend the differing theological emphases in relation to Jesus found within the New Testament.

DIFFERING USES OF THE OLD TESTAMENT IN MATTHEW'S GOSPEL

A simpler example of some of the issues concerning the Old Testament within Christianity can be found in a consideration of the use of the Old Testament specifically within Matthew's Gospel. There are two recurrent emphases in Christian debate about the Old Testament. One is that there is profound moral and theological content within the Old Testament such that Christian neglect leads to spiritual impoverishment.¹⁸ Another is that much Christian appeal to the Old Testament is fanciful, taking passages out of context and using them arbitrarily. Within Matthew's Gospel, one can see grounds for both of these contentions.

On the one hand, there is Jesus' use of the Old Testament as portrayed by Matthew,¹⁹ a use that is consistently searching. When, for example, the nature of Jesus' ministry as Son of God is being tested, Jesus responds to temptations to use God's power to make things easier for himself by appeal to precepts in Deuteronomy: relieving his hunger is less important than the obedience to God that is constitutive of true human living; promises of divine protection should not be used in such

a way as to diminish the trust they are meant to engender; realisation of God's promises should not be sought in seemingly speedy ways that compromise loyalty to God (Matt 4:1–11). Jesus twice highlights a fundamental prophetic sentiment, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice' (Hos 6:6; cf. 1 Sam 15:22), and challenges his interlocutors, who, of course, are familiar with the notion, to go away and learn what it really means (Matt 9:13, 12:7). Jesus critiques a preoccupation with detailed niceties of religious observance through a challenge to attend to 'the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness' (without neglecting detailed observances [Matt 23:23]). Most famously, Jesus specifies that the two most important commandments are to love God and one's neighbour, and that these are a key to the Old Testament as a whole (Matt 22:34–40).

On the other hand, there is Matthew's own use of the Old Testament in his framing some of the episodes in his narrative. With small variations of wording, there are nine occurrences of the formula 'This was to fulfil [or "then was fulfilled"] what was spoken by the prophet, saying ...'.²⁰ The most famous of these is the first, 1:22–3, where the angel's message to Joseph that Mary has conceived a child by the Holy Spirit is said by Matthew to be in fulfilment of Isaiah 7:14 (in the Septuagint), 'Behold the virgin shall conceive...'. Commentators ancient and modern have regularly pointed out that the sense of Isaiah 7:14 in its own context (in Hebrew) neither implies virginal conception nor envisages a long-range prediction only to be realised many centuries later. In other words, the Isaiah text is given a re-contextualisation by Matthew that leaves unclear the sense in which this 'fulfils' what the Old Testament says. Modern interpreters vary widely in their evaluation of Matthew's fulfilment formulae. To some, these formulae represent arbitrary and forced proof-texting, the kind of thing which gives Christian use of the Old Testament a bad name; to others, they represent a subtle and imaginative drawing out of larger patterns within the Old Testament. Either way, this is a use of the Old Testament strikingly different from the use made by Jesus. The puzzle is that Matthew wrote both.

A CHRISTIAN APPROACH TO THE SHEMA

Another instructive example is afforded by characteristic Christian approaches to that passage which Judaism has considered foundational, the Shema (Deut 6:4–9):

Hear, O Israel: YHWH our God, YHWH is the one and only.²¹ So you shall love YHWH your God with all your heart, and with all your

being, and with all your might. These words that I am commanding you today are to be in your heart; repeat them to your children, and speak of them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you get up. Bind them as a sign on your hand, and let them be as emblems on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

Judaism has historically focussed upon this as a key text for Jewish identity and practice,²² which seems in line with the intrinsic significance of the text. Deuteronomy contains theological perspectives which are formative for much of the Old Testament; the verses cited are the keynote of Moses' address to Israel in the light of his appointment to speak for YHWH (Deut 5:22–33), and the content of this passage, both the proclamation of YHWH as the sole recipient of Israel's undivided allegiance and the importance attached to the pondering, teaching, and displaying of this proclamation, highlight the text's intrinsic significance. Down the ages, Jews have framed their activities and their sense of time by reciting these words at the end and beginning of each day (in line with verse 7b), and for many, these words have been their dying utterance, often in contexts of martyrdom, from Aqiba under the Romans (*b. Ber* 61b) to countless Jews under the Nazis. Moreover, although Jews have disagreed over the precise understanding of the injunctions to 'bind' and 'write' and have varied in their practices, it has nonetheless been characteristic that these words have led to specific practices symbolic of Jewish identity and allegiance.

So, for example, the Mishnah, the first authoritative post-biblical codification of Jewish thought and practice, begins with tractate Berakoth, whose opening line is 'From what time in the evening may the *Shema* be recited?'²³ There is no question *whether* the *Shema* should be recited; Jewish practice in conformity with the biblical injunction is presupposed, and so the question concerns *when*. If the biblical text indicates recital in evening and morning, the first question to discuss is the parameters of evening and morning: how late or early can one be in relation to each and still count as fulfilling the requirement? The tractate then moves on to consider possible distractions, difficulties and hard cases,²⁴ all with a view to clarifying and enabling faithful observance of this core religious obligation. In continuity with this perspective, a modern scholarly Jewish commentary on Deuteronomy, such as that of Jeffrey Tigay,²⁵ devotes considerable space not only to interpretation of the biblical injunctions but also to discussing issues of practical observance (even if primarily in a historical rather than a contemporary mode).

A Christian approach is, unsurprisingly, rooted in the gospel portrayal of Jesus. According to Matthew and Mark (Matt 22:34–40; Mark 12:28–34)²⁶ Jesus, when asked which commandment in the law took pre-eminence, responds with the injunction to love God wholly and unreservedly (Deut 6:5), to which he conjoins the command to ‘love your neighbour as yourself’ (Lev 19:18). Although in speaking thus Jesus stands firmly within Jewish tradition,²⁷ Christian tradition has often fixed on this double love commandment as a convenient shorthand summary of the Christian life. Augustine, for example, in his *On Christian Teaching*, took the command to love God and neighbour as the key to, and purpose of, biblical interpretation as a whole. Moreover, the double-love commandment has received frequent use within Christian liturgies. Although this does indeed direct Christian attention to the Shema, it does so peculiarly. Not only is there some tendency (as already in Matt 22:37) to refer to loving God without the preceding affirmation about Israel’s God as the one and only, which can diminish the sense of loving God as a realisation of Israel’s true identity; the injunctions about remembering, teaching, displaying, and writing the all-important preceding words also become separated and get lost.

By way of contrast with the Mishnah’s opening concern with practical observance, it is instructive to consider a recent anthology of early Christian commentators on Deuteronomy 6:4–9, who are generally somewhat later in date than the Mishnah but remain comparable as representatives of antiquity.²⁸ The editor provides extensive discussion of verses 4 and 5 by numerous commentators who focus both on the oneness of God and on love. Yet, on verses 6–9, no early Christian commentator is quoted, and although the section is headed ‘6:4–9 The Great Commandment’, only the text of verses 4 and 5 is cited by the editor at the head of the section; verses 6–9 have disappeared. Even if the anthology is not exhaustive, it is surely representative; as such, its disinterest in verses 6–9 is telling of Christian assumptions.

Among modern Christian commentators on the Old Testament, Gerhard von Rad is widely recognised as outstanding, not least in his concerns to relate the Old Testament to Christian faith. In his commentary on Deuteronomy, von Rad devotes 581 words to 6:4–9.²⁹ Of these, 451 words are devoted to verses 4 and 5, whilst only 130 words are devoted to verses 6–9. He notes the problem of the referent of ‘these words’ in verse 6a; he remarks on the ‘intensity of the spirituality’ in verses 6–9; and he concludes

It is not clear what significance is attached to the tokens which were to serve as reminders and so forth. Probably we still have to do here

with a figurative mode of expression, which was then later understood literally and led to the use of the so-called phylacteries.

Von Rad seems not greatly interested in the text. Neither analogous ancient Near Eastern practices nor extensive Jewish debates and varying practices merit any mention. Many other Christian commentaries on the text display proportions comparable to those of von Rad in their allocation of space. Whilst the more scholarly linger a little on whether verses 8 and 9 are metaphorical or literal, with some inclination towards recognising that the original sense may well have been literal,³⁰ some of the more popularly oriented treatments have hardened von Rad's 'probably ... figurative' into a bald assertion of fact,³¹ in the kind of way which may imply that predominant historic Jewish practice, which has sought actually to do what the text says, shows a misunderstanding based on a regrettable legalistic attachment to the letter of the text rather than its spirit.³²

Surely this disinterest in verses 6–9 is a corollary of Christians feeling under no obligation to do what the text says – despite verses 6–9 being one of the more extended and emphatic sets of related injunctions in the Old Testament. When Christians do feel under obligation to do what the biblical text says, then the engagement with the text becomes endlessly more extensive – if one considers, for example, Christian commentary down the ages on the Lord's Prayer or the eucharistic words of Jesus. This Christian 'sitting light' to verses 6–9 is rooted partly in the disappearance of these verses in Christian usage of verses 4 and 5, and more substantively in the fact that Christian identity centres on the person of Jesus. The words that Christians most regularly recite are the words that Jesus taught his disciples, the Lord's Prayer; and the symbol of identity and allegiance that Christians display on their person and their buildings is the cross. A centre of gravity other than that envisaged in Deuteronomy leads to a set of practises other than those envisaged in Deuteronomy.

Yet it is worth asking why Christian practice should replace, rather than supplement, the Deuteronomic prescription. If one asks ordinary Christians why they do not do what the biblical text specifies as well as saying the Lord's Prayer and displaying a cross,³³ the prime answer tends to be some form of 'Well, we just don't'; that is, the practice is not a recognised part of Christian tradition. Another answer is 'That's what Jews do' – because doing what Deuteronomy prescribes is a recognised distinctive of Jewish identity, Christians feel that they should not do something that implies Jewishness. Either way, although Christians

still (in principle) seek to practice, teach and display love for the one and only God, they do not obey the Deuteronomic prescription because of the growth of a distinctively Christian identity and practice from earliest times.

All this revealingly illustrates something of the intrinsically differentiated Christian stance towards the Old Testament. The content is appropriated unevenly and comes to function differently in its Christian context – a fact to which, of course, attention is often drawn in relation to issues more contentious than the Shema, not least, at present, Christian use of the Old Testament for formulating appropriate disciplines for sexual (including homosexual) practises. Although one can formulate a kind of general Christian rationale along the lines of ‘adopt and apply the principles more than the practices’, this stance does not really do justice to the complexities involved when the Old Testament is read and appropriated in contexts where the focus upon Jesus entails a re-contextualisation and re-configuration of those scriptures in ways which they themselves do not envisage.

CLASSIC CHRISTIAN HERMENEUTICAL STRATEGIES

The recognition that Christian faith leads to a re-contextualisation of Israel's Scriptures has been foundational to classic Christian approaches down the ages. A paradigmatic example is Luke's account of the risen Jesus' pointing the puzzled disciples on the Emmaus Road to 'Moses and all the prophets' (Luke 24:25–7). In context, where the disciples know clearly the facts of Jesus' ministry and of angelic reports of an empty tomb, and yet are miserable (24:17–24), the risen Jesus is offering that which will enable them at last to understand him. And since he has returned from the dead and might be expected to be able to make startling new revelations on that basis, it is the more striking that he appeals to existing Scripture as that which is necessary to understanding; that is, Jesus cannot be understood without the Old Testament. But since the disciples were already thoroughly familiar with the Old Testament yet had not hitherto managed to understand Jesus on this basis, it is clear that some fresh way of reading related to Jesus' passion is required (24:26); that is, the Old Testament cannot be understood without Jesus. This dialectic between Jesus and Israel's Scriptures, each necessary for the understanding of the other, implies that Christian reading of the Old Testament has as its corollary a Jesus-centred frame of reference.

To be sure, modern historical-critical scholarship has emphasised the benefits, practical and existential, as well as academic, of

understanding the texts within the Old Testament as ancient texts with meanings related to their world of origin. Nonetheless, this does not deny that when the texts are read and appropriated within Christian contexts, there may still be necessary re-contextualisations. Rather, it clarifies that there is a dual task for contemporary Christian faith, both to do justice to the texts in their originating pre-Christian frame of reference and within their acquired Christian frame of reference.³⁴ It must be recognised, however, that for much of Christian history this distinction was not clearly made; the latter task obscured the former.

One classic Reformation strategy, with older roots, was to introduce accessible conceptual distinctions in order to clarify how and why the Old Testament still functions within a Christian context. As the Thirty Nine Articles in the Anglican *Book of Common Prayer* put it, in Article VII about the Old Testament,

Although the Law given from God by Moses, as touching Ceremonies and Rites, do not bind Christian men, nor the Civil precepts thereof ought of necessity to be received in any commonwealth; yet notwithstanding, no Christian man whatsoever is freed from the obedience of the Commandments which are called Moral.

The logic is plain: the ceremonial/ritual has been fulfilled in the sacrificial death of Christ, the civil applied to the context of ancient Israel, whilst the moral is enduringly valid. It has often been observed that such distinctions do not do justice to, and can indeed impede understanding of, the Old Testament laws in their originating frames of reference, whose conceptualities are quite other. Nonetheless, the distinctions were not devised in the service of ancient historical understanding but rather to serve as a comprehensible rule of thumb for Christian appropriation.

Moreover, although a clear distinction between originating frames of reference and Christian frames of reference is in principle helpful, in practice there are many grey areas, especially relating to the fact that already within the Old Testament there is extensive re-contextualisation of material. This can encourage metaphorical and analogical modes of reading which anticipate certain characteristic Christian modes of reading. If the titles which relate many of the Psalms to David and to particular episodes in his life are, as appears likely, secondary additions which attest an imaginative shift within the understanding and use of the Psalms already within the Old Testament period, then the classical Christian relating of the Psalms to David and the Messiah is already adumbrated by such re-contextualisation.³⁵

Another interesting example is afforded by the paradigm problem of 'ethnic cleansing' in Joshua 1–12. A characteristic Christian mode of reading is exemplified by Origen (c. 185–c. 254), from whom we have the oldest extant corpus of Christian homilies on the Old Testament. Origen recognised that the text of Joshua was about warfare and that, as such, it could incite its readers to violence (which he states pejoratively as a matter of fact):

When that Israel which is according to the flesh read these same Scriptures before the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, they understood nothing in them except wars and the shedding of blood, from which their spirits, too, were incited to excessive savageries and were always fed by wars and strife.³⁶

However, Origen is clear that the coming of Jesus changes things; Jesus 'teaches us peace from this very reading of wars',³⁷ which happens when the biblical text is read metaphorically in terms of moral and spiritual warfare:

We shall not fight in the same manner as the ancients fought. Nor are the battles in our land to be conducted against humans 'but against sovereigns, against authorities, against the rulers of darkness of this world' [Eph 6:12]. Certainly you understand now where you must undertake struggles of this kind.³⁸

And again:

And therefore, according to the teaching of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we indeed read these things, we also equip ourselves and are roused for battle, but against those enemies that 'proceed from our heart': obviously, 'evil thought, thefts, false testimony, slanders' [Matt. 15:19], and other similar adversaries of the soul. Following what this Scripture sets forth, we try, if it can be done, not to leave behind any 'who may be saved or who may breathe' [Josh 10:40].³⁹

Modern biblical scholarship has sometimes been dismissive of such a reading of the text as a forced evasion of its plain sense. Yet Origen's clear concern is with how the texts should be read in a Christian frame of reference: that is, re-contextualised in the light of Jesus.

Moreover, modern biblical scholarship itself has made the reading of the Joshua narratives less straightforward. On the one hand, there is a picture of incomplete Israelite occupation of Canaan in the book of Judges, which has long been recognised to stand in some tension with

the narrative of Joshua 1–12. Also, archaeological evidence has generally been recognised not to support the historicity of the conquest account. On the other hand, scholars are inclined to date the composition of the narrative to centuries after the scenario it envisages. What if, therefore, one were to posit that the Joshua narrative might never have been intended to tell the history of the conquest (as that might be understood today) but rather was meant to serve a different purpose?

Within the storyline, the interest is not in the details of battles or body counts⁴⁰ but rather in certain episodes set within the conflict. The most detailed narrative is Joshua 2, which features a Canaanite prostitute – an entirely unpromising figure in Old Testament terms. Yet Rahab offers a full acknowledgement of YHWH (2:9–13) – and deals with the Israelite spies in a way that exemplifies ‘steadfast love’ (*hesed*, v. 12), a prime quality of YHWH himself (Exod 34:6–7), so that both she and her family are spared and become part of Israel (6:22–5). The only narrative that depicts explicit sin features Achan, who has an impeccable pedigree within the tribe of Judah, yet brings death upon himself and his family (7:1–26). The one who should be killed acts faithfully and lives; the one who should live acts faithlessly and dies. Just as the 1997 film *Titanic* uses the known story of the sinking of the *Titanic* to portray a love story set against the backdrop of the ship’s voyage, it may be that Joshua 1–12 is a narrative about the paradoxical boundaries of Israel’s identity as the people of YHWH in relation to living by *torah*, set against a backdrop of demarcating conflict.⁴¹

At the very least, the reading of Joshua appears to be intrinsically open to more possibilities than may initially be suggested by concerns about ‘ethnic cleansing’. Indeed, it would be a pleasing irony if modern scholarship began to find common ground with Origen in terms of reading the text metaphorically.

CONCLUSION

‘The more things change, the more they remain the same.’ This epigram could well sum up the role of the Old Testament in Christianity. Although the modern debates have complexities undreamed of in antiquity, and although there are no straight lines from Marcion to Harnack and Bultmann or from Irenaeus to von Rad and Childs, there are nonetheless real continuities, continuities which sometimes become clearer the deeper one goes into the debates. Moreover, I have suggested that the continuing debates are a sign of life, evidence of engagement

with the challenges of what really constitutes authentic Christian living and thinking.

In conclusion, it would be appropriate to note the capacity of the Old Testament to surprise and enrich its Christian readers in unanticipated ways. Three features from recent years may be noted. First is the re-discovery of the value of the lament psalms as potent resources for honest expression of some of the difficulties of trusting God in a world that is often painful and puzzling. Second is the re-discovery of the principle of debt remission, the Jubilee (Leviticus 25), which recently played a significant role in a major international campaign to ease the debt problems of poor countries today. Third is the re-discovery of the value of Jewish tradition and interpretation, which has helped many Christians escape from negative stereotypes about what Jews mean by faithful adherence to *torah*, as part of learning to recognise important common ground between Christians and Jews. If there are comparable re-discoveries yet to come in the years ahead, the role of the Old Testament within Christianity should continue to be richly fruitful.

NOTES

- 1 A. H. J. Gunneweg, *Understanding the Old Testament*, trans. by John Bowden (OTL; London: SCM Press, 1978), 2. Gunneweg is writing in the context of introducing his book on the subject, so one might suspect a degree of rhetorical over-statement. Nonetheless, his basic point, that understanding the role of the Old Testament is integral to the content and self-understanding of Christian faith, is unarguable.
- 2 E.g., both the command to love YHWH unreservedly (Deuteronomy 6) and the command to put to the ban the seven nations of the land (Deuteronomy 7) are less straightforward in meaning than they may initially appear (see my 'Toward an Interpretation of the Shema' in *Theological Exegesis: Essays in Honor of Brevard S. Childs*, ed. by Christopher Seitz and Kathryn Greene-McCreight [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans: 1999], 124–44).
- 3 It is not possible to do justice to the subtlety and complexity of Luther (still less his appropriation in nineteenth- and twentieth-century liberal Lutheranism) in a few words. Nonetheless, to put matters baldly, Luther developed a foundational theological dialectic between law and gospel; and, although he found both law and gospel in the Old Testament, he found there more of the former than the latter, and this generated ambivalence towards the Old Testament.
- 4 Adolf von Harnack, *Marcion: das Evangelium vom fremden Gott. Eine Monographie zur Geschichte der Grundlegung der katholischen Kirche* (Darmstadt, Germany: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1921), 248f, as cited in Heikki Räisänen, 'Attacking the Book, Not the People: Marcion

- and the Jewish Roots of Christianity' in his *Marcion, Muhammad and the Mahatma* (London: SCM Press, 1999), 64–80 (77).
- 5 Brevard S. Childs, *Old Testament Theology in a Canonical Context* (London: SCM Press, 1985), 28.
 - 6 This point has often been made in modern biblical scholarship, though only in recent years has it led to a new respect for Jewish faith and tradition both ancient and modern. Julius Wellhausen famously wrote, 'Jesus was not a Christian, but a Jew' ('*Jesus war kein Christ, sondern Jude*', in his *Einleitung in die drei ersten Evangelien* [Berlin: Reimer, 1905], 113), and yet was notoriously negative towards Judaism.
 - 7 In my paraphrase here I cannot do justice to all the distinctive Matthean emphases within the telling of the story.
 - 8 Of course, Paul elsewhere says other, more positive things about the law (Rom 7:12) and can speak of fulfilling the commandments (Rom 13:8–10). So the tenor of Paul himself varies from context to context. My use of Galatians 3 is heuristic, to highlight the challenge of diversity within the New Testament with reference to pre- and post-Easter contexts.
 - 9 Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, vol. I, trans. by Kendrick Grobel (London: SCM Press, 1952), 3.
 - 10 Bultmann observes: 'Thus Luther has already rightly perceived that Jesus, in so far as he is engaged in teaching, is not different from the Old Testament prophets; rather, like them, he proclaimed the Law and consequently belongs within the Old Testament' ('The Significance of the Old Testament for Christian Faith', in *The Old Testament and Christian Faith*, ed. by Bernhard W. Anderson [London: SCM Press, 1964], 8–35, 12).
 - 11 'Prophecy and Fulfilment', in *Essays on Old Testament Interpretation*, ed. by Claus Westermann (London: SCM Press, 1963), 50–75; 'Significance', 8–35.
 - 12 'Significance', 29.
 - 13 'Prophecy', 72.
 - 14 'Significance', 31.
 - 15 *Ibid.*, 17.
 - 16 *Ibid.*, 12.
 - 17 Francis Watson, *Text and Truth: Redefining Biblical Theology* (Edinburgh, UK: T & T Clark, 1997), 168.
 - 18 Ronald Heine offers the image of a 'message of Jesus' that is 'largely severed from its roots in the Old Testament Scriptures' as being a 'cut-flower faith' (*Reading the Old Testament with the Ancient Church* [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007], 11).
 - 19 My use of "Matthew" is conventional, without prejudice towards questions of ancient authorial identity.
 - 20 Matt. 1:22–3, 2:15, 2:17–18, 2:23, 4:14–16, 8:17, 12:17–21, 21:4–5, 27:9–10. A tenth example is 2:5–6, though this is set on the lips of characters within the narrative.
 - 21 I have discussed the construal of *'ehad*, and other interpretive issues, in my 'Toward an Interpretation of the Shema', 124–44.
 - 22 I am oversimplifying the practice of morning and evening prayers, where Deut 6:4–9 is recited in conjunction with Deut 11:13–21 and Num 15:37–41.
 - 23 Herbert Danby, ed., *The Mishnah* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1933), 2.

- 24 E.g., 2:5, 'A bridegroom is exempt from reciting the *Shema* on the first night, or until the close of the [next] Sabbath if he has not consummated the marriage. Once when Rabban Gamaliel married he recited the *Shema* on the first night. His disciples said to him, "Master, didst thou not teach us that a bridegroom is exempt from reciting the *Shema* on the first night?" He said to them, "I will not hearken to you to cast off from myself the yoke of the kingdom of heaven even for a moment."'
- 25 Jeffrey Tigay, *Deuteronomy* (JPS Torah Commentary; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 5756/1996), 76–9, 438–44.
- 26 There are complexities within the tradition, for only in Mark's account does Jesus cite Deut 6:4, whilst in Luke's account (Luke 10:25–28) it is the questioning lawyer, rather than Jesus, who links the two love commandments.
- 27 The Lukan portrayal of the lawyer linking the commandments, together with the scribe within the Markan account instantly acknowledging the rightness of Jesus' double love commandment (rather than expressing astonishment), implies that the linkage of the love commandments was not a novelty on Jesus' part but rather an articulation of a live issue of understanding and interpreting Scripture among his contemporaries.
- 28 Joseph T. Lienhard, ed., *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Old Testament III: Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Press, 2001), 282–5.
- 29 Gerhard von Rad, *Deuteronomy: A Commentary*, trans. by Dorothea Barton (OTL; London: SCM Press, 1966), 63–4. For convenience, my word count is based on the English translation.
- 30 E.g., A. D. H. Mayes, *Deuteronomy* (NCB; London: Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1979), 177.
- 31 'What was given originally as a metaphor became for later Jews a literal injunction' (J. A. Thompson, *Deuteronomy* [Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries; London: IVP Press, 1974], 123); 'originally this order was understood metaphorically, but later it was interpreted literally and led to the wearing of phylacteries' (Anthony Phillips, *Deuteronomy* [CBC; Cambridge University Press, 1973], 57–8.
- 32 In recent years, however, there is more distancing from this pejorative attitude with a corresponding finding of more significance in the text. So, for example, Christopher Wright says, 'Christian readers of 6:8–9 may be tempted to dismiss the Jewish use of *tefillin* ... and *mezuzot* ... as unnecessary literalism.... However, the question is whether we are any more serious or successful in flavoring the whole of life with conscious attention to the law of God (v. 7, which is not at all "symbolic") as a personal, familial, and social strategy for living out our commitment to loving God totally' (*Deuteronomy* [NIBCOT; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1996], 100).
- 33 I have asked this question on a number of occasions but confess that my 'research' is anecdotal rather than systematic.
- 34 There is a triple task if one includes understanding and respecting Jewish interpretation and appropriation.
- 35 The classic modern essay is Brevard S. Childs, 'Psalm Titles and Midrashic Exegesis', *JSS* 16 (1971): 137–50.

- 36 Origen, *Homilies on Joshua*, Homily 14:1, ed. by Cynthia White; trans. by Barbara Bruce (FC 105; Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2002), 130.
- 37 Ibid.
- 38 Homily 12:1 in *Homilies*, 121.
- 39 Homily 14:1 in *Homilies*, 130.
- 40 In the account of Jericho (Joshua 6), the interest is overwhelmingly in Israel's ritual actions and the exceptional treatment allowed for Rahab and her family. The actual overthrow of Jericho is told briefly; the accounts of victories in Joshua 10–12 become increasingly brief and stylised.
- 41 See further Douglas S. Earl, *Reading Joshua as Christian Scripture* (Journal of Theological Interpretation Supplements 2; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2010); also, in more popular format, Earl, *The Joshua Delusion! Rethinking Genocide in the Bible* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2010).

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