

## THE COVENANTS AND THE INTERPRETATION OF THE OLD TESTAMENT<sup>1</sup>

FOUNDATIONAL to any true interpretation of the language of the Old Testament is the understanding of what happens to an idea when it passes over from the sphere of the Old Covenant to the sphere of the New Covenant. These two Covenants represent different principles of dispensation of the Divine grace, and to that extent we may speak of the Old Testament dispensation and the New Testament dispensation.

It is of further importance to recognize that the revelation of God under the old dispensation is the same in kind as that under the new, though coming short in degrees of fullness. It is an error to think of the Old Testament as a revelation consisting of mere types and emblems. The revelation in the Old Testament is the revelation of truth: it has all the qualities of reality, and may not be dismissed or undervalued as consisting in mere shadows. It may be granted that within the ceremonial system there are things that in themselves are but “ the shadow of the true ”, faint delineations of something that was to follow, but this element of adumbration is only a minor accident of the old dispensation.

The Old Testament writers did not speak in cryptic or shadowland terms. They spoke the revelation of God for the needs of the spiritual situation which they faced, and in so far as their words were predictive or forward-looking, they too had the quality of spiritual reality. What they said was what they meant, and their utterances had intrinsic spiritual worth. It is a mistake to think they were engaged in playing with counters and not with real currency. The kingdom of God of which they spoke was the real kingdom of God. It took the form of the Hebrew kingdom, the throne of David, the inviolability of Zion, and the glorious worship of Jehovah in His Temple. The enemies to whom they made reference were real enemies to God's kingdom, and they were the Assyrians, the Babylonians and the other peoples whom they named. The triumph of God's kingdom was quite literally and realistically the overcoming of the armies of these threatening foes, and the deliverance of the nation from the oppressions and captivities to which they were so frequently subjected.

<sup>1</sup> A paper read at a Summer School in Tyndale House, Cambridge, July, 1952.

All this amounts to saying that the kingdom of God was really present and was identified with the Hebrew nation under the Davidic monarchy. The words of Dr. A. B. Davidson are valuable here:

In its fullest sense the kingdom of God was only introduced in the Coming of the Son of God into the world; and in this sense all that went before might seem only capable of being regarded as preparation for this kingdom, or at most shadows of it. And this is the view which has often been taken of what is called the Old Testament dispensation, namely, that it is a designed shadow or adumbration of the new. *But this is not the view which it takes of itself*; the consciousness of Israel as reflected in the minds of its prophets and highest men was that it was the kingdom of God already. The apparent discrepancy disappears on a little consideration of what the kingdom of God is. . . . Thus the perfect kingdom was gradually prepared for by *setting up such a kingdom* in an imperfect state and under temporary forms, and by administering it in such a way as progressively to suggest to men's minds the true ideal of the kingdom, and communicate to them in broader streams the true life in such a kingdom. And each step of this communication was a more perfect bringing in of the kingdom itself, an advance towards its perfect form. Thus a life and a thought were awakened within this kingdom of God set up in Israel, which grew and expanded till they finally burst and threw off from them the imperfect outward form of the kingdom in which they were enclosed.<sup>1</sup>

The kingdom of God was thus not prepared for by the introduction of something which was only a shadow of something to come. It could be prepared for only *by the introduction of itself in embryonic form*.<sup>2</sup>

The kingdom of God is present, of course, and more gloriously so, under the terms of the New Covenant. It was not "another" kingdom, or "another" revelation that was given in the New Covenant. It was the same kingdom and the same revelation, but given under new principles of dispensation.

It is of paramount importance to hold to what has been called the theological continuity between the Old and the New Testaments. A. G. Hebert argues that this is a continuity which is implied in the Seventh Article of the Church of England, which reads:

The Old Testament is not contrary to the New; for both in the Old and New Testament everlasting life is offered to Mankind by Christ, Who is the only Mediator between God and Man, being both God and Man.

<sup>1</sup> *Theology of the Old Testament*, pp. 2 f.

<sup>2</sup> See *The Old Testament and Modern Study* (edited by H. H. Rowley), Essay on "Old Testament Theology", by Norman W. Porteous, p. 314.

There is unbroken continuity of purpose which binds the Covenants into one. The Messianic hope betrays the incompleteness of the Old Covenant and projects its purpose into the New. The object of the Messianic hope was the completion of the Purpose which God took in hand when He called Israel to be His People. The relation between the Old and New Covenants then may be stated as identity in diversity. The identity attaches to the underlying spiritual realities with which both are concerned, while the diversity belongs to form and expression. Dr. Phythian-Adams brings in the word "homology" to indicate the principle of interpretation that rests upon this close union of the Covenants, and it will be profitable to adopt it. He writes:

How shall we describe this interpretation of the Old Testament? At the risk of seeming pedantic I would urge that we need a special term. To speak of "analogy" and "metaphor" in this connection is not merely inadequate, it misses the mark at which the writers were aiming. The relation which they perceived between the old and the new Dispensation was, in fact, wholly unique and cannot be indicated in quite ordinary language. But there is another term, less common yet not entirely unfamiliar, which may help us, namely, "homology". By "homology" we mean that there is between two things not a mere resemblance but a real and vital—in this case, an "economic"—correspondence: and this seems to be precisely what the writers of the New Testament expound.<sup>1</sup>

The kingdom, the purpose, and the revelation are thus one: and the later form of these things stands in relation to the former as the developed organism does to its embryo, or, to drop all illustrative language, as fulfilment does to promise.

We are introduced at this point to the question of the nature of "fulfilment". This fulfilment, our Lord says, does not require an abrogation or denial of what was earlier given, nor does it involve any necessity to forsake it. "Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil" (Matt. v. 17). What is fulfilment? Fulfilment is organically related to prediction. We have a relation between prophecy and fulfilment such as exists between the flower and the fruit, or between the bud and the blossom, or between the seed and the growth of a plant. The prophecy contains its fulfilment in germinal form, and it is this that requires us to speak of organic fulfilment. All that is latent within a pregnant Old Covenant word or within one of its pre-

<sup>1</sup> W. A. Phythian-Adams, *The Way of At-one-ment*, p. 11.

dictive rites comes forth to fruition. Thus the law both passes away and does not pass away, in the same sense as that in which the blossom perishes yet lives on in luscious fruit. All that is permanent and vital, all that is independent of time and place, in Old Testament law and prophecy is taken up and conserved in the Gospel.

To understand fulfilment in this way provides us with an invaluable instrument for understanding the initial Old Testament word. Only as we have plucked with our hand the apple from the tree in the Autumn do we understand the meaning of the Spring-time apple blossom which it has replaced. Only as we stand before a giant oak do we truly understand the meaning of an acorn. This is what Procksch means when he says it is only the Christian who can fully understand the Old Testament.<sup>1</sup> The point may be underlined a little by noting its significance in relation to the idea of Sacrifice. Says A. G. Hebert:

The idea of Sacrifice was not first thought of by the Rabbi Paul as a fitting comparison by which to illustrate certain dogmatic truths about our Lord's death; it is attested as having been present in His own mind at the time of His passion. Hence we do not say that His death is like a Sacrifice; we say that it is a Sacrifice, and indeed the Fulfilment of all Sacrifice, so that it is there that we must look if we would learn the inner meaning of all sacrificial rites whatsoever. And so the mystical interpretation of the sacrificial allusions in the Psalms as referring to the Sacrifice of Christ turns out to be no arbitrary comparison, nor even merely a striking analogy, but directly on the line of the Fulfilment towards which the Israel of the Old Covenant was looking.<sup>2</sup>

Interpretation of the Old Testament on this principle has been given the name "mystical"; but this must not for one moment be thought to be synonymous with the arbitrary and subjective. It is compatible with a true respect for the historical approach. This approach, when made in obedience to the history, will reveal what are the constants in Old Testament religion.<sup>3</sup> There have, of course, been interpretations masquerading under this name which deny the very principles of it, but leaving these allegorical and fanciful notions aside as self-condemned, it must be recognized that the true mystical interpretation proceeds by means of the guidance of a deeply set theological principle. The mystical interpretation of Old Testa-

ment passages related itself worthily to the theological meaning of them expounded in the New Testament. We do not commit ourselves to all the glowing Authorized Version headings of certain Psalms, and chapters in the Song of Solomon or Isaiah; but these attempts at explanation were far nearer the truth than certain recent trends of Old Testament interpretation seem to allow. It is quite impossible to use the Psalter, and particularly the imprecatory Psalms, apart from the mystical interpretation. To quote A. G. Hebert again:

It is evident that the Christian use of the Psalter demands that many words and ideas receive a mystical interpretation, since this mystical interpretation means neither more nor less than the understanding of them in the light of their fulfilment in Jesus the Messiah. When we sing of "Zion", or "Jerusalem" in the Psalms, we give those words the meaning that they bear in St. Paul's epistles and in the Book of the Revelation; when we sing of "sacrifice", we think of Christ's sacrifice . . .; when a Psalm speaks of "the king", we shall in most cases refer it to Christ. Clearly, in this general sense the mystical interpretation of the Old Testament is for Christians a matter of obligation.<sup>1</sup>

This mystical and theological principle of interpretation of the Old Testament hinges on the great change of dispensation which occurs when God passes from His operations under the Old Covenant to His operations under the New. These two Covenants, both of which are Covenants of Grace, are of supreme significance in the interpretation of the Scripture.<sup>2</sup>

Under the Old Covenant—the Covenant with Abraham—God worked through a line of natural descent, giving the Covenant sign of circumcision, providing external and material media of spiritual worship, promising a fruitful land, and providential protection, by means of all of which God would cause His great name to be feared among the nations. God's mercy and grace were truly found under the terms of this old dispensation and to it the prophets make continual appeal. The spiritual essentials were repentance toward God, and faith in the way of salvation He had mercifully provided.

Under the New Covenant—the Covenant confirmed in the blood of Christ—the spiritual essentials of the Old Covenant are continued, but elevated or advanced in their application.

<sup>1</sup> See Porteous in Rowley, op. cit., p. 319.

<sup>2</sup> *The Throne of David*, p. 261.

<sup>3</sup> See Porteous in Rowley, op. cit., pp. 322 f.

<sup>1</sup> Op. cit., p. 256.

<sup>2</sup> We are not concerned here with the smaller problem of the relation between law and grace.

We reach a principle of interpretation, then, which has its roots in the Covenants, and we may now face our opening question once again. What happens to an idea when it passes over from the sphere of the Old Covenant to the sphere of the New Covenant? The principle may be stated as follows: *Interpretation must emerge from the dispensational character of prophecy as determined by the Covenants.*

Prophecy had to be spoken within the framework of the present and the past, that is to say, *in the terms of the old dispensation.*

This dispensation determines the outward material forms of prophecy. In all their statements about the kingdom of God, even when uttering the most spiritual and glorious truths regarding it, the vocabulary which the prophets employ is always that of the kingdom of God in the forms in which they knew it in their own day.

Interpretation must first discover these “dispensational forms”, namely, the historical and circumstantial factors of the prophecy, and then, and only then, can it make the necessary inferences.

This means that we take the prophet to mean exactly what he says—“literalistically” (except in cases of obvious and declared metaphor)—though the *fulfilment* of what he says may greatly transcend both what he knows and the terms he uses.

With regard to prophecy that was uttered with reference to Old Testament conditions and peoples, but which, as yet, is still unfulfilled, A. B. Davidson wisely says:

The true way to regard prophecy is to accept it literally as the meaning of the prophet—the only meaning which in his time he could have—but to say, as to fulfilment, that the form of the kingdom of God is now altered, and altered finally, never to return to its old form; and so fulfilment will not take place in the form of the prediction, but in an altered form; but still the truth of the prophecy will, no doubt, be realized.<sup>1</sup>

The prophetic pronouncements against Assyria are a good illustration of this principle. What the prophets said they said and meant quite literally about the Assyrian empire of their day. When we are confronted with certain aspects of their prophecies which seem still to await realization we must neither affirm that the Bible is untrue, nor must we resort to “typological” ex-

<sup>1</sup> *Old Testament Prophecy*, p. 169.

planations which lend an artificiality to the prophetic meaning. Says A. B. Davidson:

Certainly the prophet, so far as his own mind was concerned, did not use the term “Assyrian” merely as a symbolical name for the foe of the Church. He meant the Assyrian—who, no doubt, was the foe of the Church. . . . It is safer to say, not that Assyria is a symbol or type of all enemies of God’s kingdom, but that the truth expressed by the prophet in regard to Assyria is, of course, not limited to Assyria, but may be applied to all foes of the people of God. It is a truth which may be generalized. . . . This way of stating the case conserves the literal sense of the prophet’s words, and allows us to perceive how he thought and spoke, as one would naturally do in the circumstances in which he was placed.<sup>1</sup>

The careful observance of this important principle will save us from resorting too readily to “symbol” and will also keep us from arbitrary and artificial interpretations.

As a corollary of this principle of interpretation it follows that prophecy undergoes transmutation when it passes from one dispensation to another. Our understanding of this “transmutation” must be guided by New Testament principles. The light of later and clearer revelation is to be brought to bear on the earlier or the more obscure. Descriptions of the Day of the Lord and its issues are subject to modification by fuller revelations given to subsequent generations. “Such modifications are not cancellations of the prophetic word but amplifications, glimpses of broader streams of grace than the narrower rivulets of former days.”<sup>2</sup>

If we direct out interpretation of the Old Testament on the basis of the “homological”—to use Phythian-Adams’s term—unity of the covenants, we shall be helped by observing three rules:

1. *Look for a general spiritual principle rather than a “predictive event”.*

Prophecy is more than “a wonder” of predictive precision! A spiritual discernment will disclose the fact that the prophet is usually enunciating some general principle of the kingdom of God. “While we must read it literally in order to understand the message of the prophet for his own age, we may be obliged for many reasons to conclude that only the general idea which he expresses remains true for our own and future ages.”<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Old Testament Prophecy*, pp. 187 f.

<sup>2</sup> G. R. Beasley-Murray, in *THE EVANGELICAL QUARTERLY*, July, 1948, p. 227.

<sup>3</sup> A. B. Davidson, *Old Testament Prophecy*, p. 188.

2. Understand “dispensational” language in moral and religious terms.

The inner religious principle being discerned, the language has then to be translated into its moral equivalents.

3. Find the “idea” which is latent in the “form”.

Prophecy is governed by the law of organic fulfilment. Fulfilment is real: that is to say, what the prophet forecasts will come to pass. There is a genuine correspondence between the prophecy and the fulfilment. This is not to say, however, that it will be “literalistic” (we avoid the term “literal” because ambiguous) in the sense of a letter-by-letter mechanical correspondence in form in both prediction and fulfilment.

So long as we hold to the *reality* of the fulfilment, we might say that the best word for the true interpretative rule is “idealistic”; that is to say, it is the embodied “idea” which lives on in the fulfilment, after the “form” has been shed like a husk.

From these rules we may deduce a practical working method.

1. If the prophet’s words apply only to the Old Testament dispensation, and are to be fulfilled in it, they will, no doubt, be fulfilled literally in terms of the Old Testament dispensation.

2. If the prophecies refer to things only to be realized in the New Testament dispensation, than we shall probably have to strip off from them the Old Testament form, which arose from the dispensation and time when the prophet lived, and look for their fulfilment in a way corresponding to the spirit of the New Testament dispensation and the altered conditions of the world.

3. If a great general principle be expressed, capable of several fulfilments, that fulfilment which took place in Old Testament times will be in terms of Old Testament economy, and that which will take place in New Testament times will be according to the spirit and principles of Christianity.<sup>1</sup>

From all this two duties arise. In the light of these principles it becomes the interpreter’s duty in the first place to distinguish between what is of permanent validity and what belongs to the circumstances of the time. “It is fatal to assume that every Scripture is of permanent validity irrespective of the circumstances in which it was given” (J. Stafford Wright). The

Levitical laws are an example of this. In the second place, the interpreter of prophecy must respect the dispensational principle which is stated thus: the *form* is transcended and the *prophecy* is transmuted.

Examples of the transmutation of the prophecies may be seen in the Davidic Kingship, the Servant, the Chosen People, the Hill of Zion, the institution of worship through Priest and Sacrifice, and the Messianic hope. Of most of these transmutations the New Testament is itself the principal witness, the passages being too numerous to quote, but exceedingly significant to study. Our Lord Himself transmuted many of the Old Covenant conceptions, such as the Sabbath, Ceremonial Defilement, the Temple, and the Davidic Kingship. It was because of His transmutation of the last that the Jews drove Him to His death.

It will be useful to close this brief discussion by a return to the foundational truth upon which it all rests, namely, the theological continuity between the Old and New Testaments.

The concept of Israel is the concept of the *ecclesia*. The Chosen People is the Church, and the Church is the Chosen People. There is no “rejection” of the people of God’s choice, nor is there any “stealing” of Israel’s promises by the Church. The Church is the possessor of these promises from the beginning. There is thus no antithesis between “particularism” and “universalism”. This, says A. G. Hebert, “is essentially alien to the thought both of the Old Testament and of the New.”<sup>1</sup> The King of whom God speaks and whose prosperous reign He promises is Christ, even in the Old Testament, and the reading of the Psalms serves only to establish this truth. David and others of his line were but the embodiment of this Divine idea. The priestly and sacrificial institutions are thus the making concrete of the principle of mediation and atonement which had eternally resided in Christ, the “Lamb without blemish and without spot: who verily was foreordained before the foundation of the world” (1 Peter i. 19 f.). On this last point a passage from A. G. Hebert is so much in place that it needs to be quoted.

Moses had been commanded to regulate the sacrifices of Israel according to the pattern shown him in the Mount (Heb. viii. 5); that is, according to the Idea or Pattern or real truth of Priesthood and Sacrifice, into which it is implied that Moses was granted an insight.

<sup>1</sup> Op. cit., p. 221.

<sup>1</sup> See Davidson, *Old Testament Prophecy*, p. 192.

But the actual Levitical sacrifices could give only an incomplete and broken expression of that heavenly reality; mixed up with the symbolism of the deep things of God they contained provisional and transitory elements. But in the Messiah the heavenly idea itself descended to earth and became incarnate.

This means that the idea of Sacrifice cannot rightly be treated as just one of the analogies by which we may picture to ourselves the meaning of our Lord's saving work. It is not that we first know what His saving work is, and then use this and other illustrations in order to make its meaning intelligible to simple minds. The idea of Sacrifice was not an analogy which men thought of afterwards to describe the meaning of His death; He Himself went through His passion thinking of it as a sacrifice, as the blood of the Covenant being shed for many. Thus we do not say that His death is *like* a sacrifice, but rather that it *is* a sacrifice: or rather, that in it Sacrifice is seen in its true meaning.

But if it is only in the Messiah that the meaning of Sacrifice is fully seen, it follows that the Old Testament writers do not fully know what the meaning is. Moberly expresses the point: "It is one of the capital mistakes of those who discuss Christian priesthood, a mistake which is answerable for some of the most deplorable conclusions—to go back, for the standard of the 'true' or 'literal' or 'proper' meaning of the words Sacrifice and Priest, to what they meant in the Old Testament, or what they meant in the ancient pagan world, or in the mouths of those who may be supposed to have first devised the terms. Nothing could be more fatally misleading. . . . There is one standard only and measure of the reality of the meaning of these words: and that is, their meaning in the Person of Christ."<sup>1</sup>

A right conception of the two Covenants and the continuity of Divine Purpose and Revelation will do more than anything else to rehabilitate the Old Testament in Christian thinking and to give solidity and theological coherence to our New Testament exposition. With the re-emphasized unity of the Bible before us we say again with St. Augustine: "The New is in the Old concealed; the Old is in the New revealed."

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<sup>1</sup> Hebert, *op. cit.*, pp. 204 f.