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THE CHURCH OF CHRIST AND THE OLD TESTAMENT

NOT for the first time in her stormy history the Church of Christ is asked: What hast thou to do with the Old Testament, the book of the Jews? Would it not be better and more appropriate to remove that book of a small people in a remote corner of Anterior Asia from our Bible? Already in the first centuries of our age Marcion and his disciples had not only summoned the Church to abandon the O.T., but Marcion himself had offered to the Church a New Testament purified from all elements relating to the Old. And the youngest admirer of Marcion, the late Professor Adolf Harnack of Berlin, declared himself to be at one with Marcion.

What is objected to in the first part of our Bible to-day, is not a thing dating only from modern times. The difference between now and the past is that, in our days, the rejection of the O.T. is in the main based on racial grounds. In the preamble to his translation of the Bible Martin Luther says that some people disdain the O.T., with the assertion that it speaks solely of things and histories of the past and concerning only the Jewish people. Likewise Calvin was forced, in the second part of his *Institutio Religionis christianae*, to refute the saying of some fanatics, that the O.T. is not a book for Christians. The powerful influence of Schleiermacher on the theology of all Protestant lands with his incapacity of grasping the significance of the O.T. became decisive for many generations of theologians in Germany and abroad by the commonly admitted assumption of having in the O.T. not God's revelation but the record of the Jewish religion. The slogan of Alfred Rosenberg, author of the widespread book *Der Mythos des 20. Jahrhunderts*—The O.T. must be replaced by Nordic sagas and histories, has been received by numberless men and women and is the watchword of the so-called German Faith Movement.

Therefore the Church has no choice but to strive for a new and more distinct light on the significance of the O.T. for our Christian religion, provided she is really and firmly convinced that in the O.T. we possess not a Jewish book but the Word of God speaking with absolute authority. The battle we have

to fight in Germany in our days is not the exclusive matter of the Churches in that country. It concerns all Churches, because the whole Christian community is threatened by the same danger.

I

Eighty years ago the pastor, Dr. Hermann Friedrich Kohlbrügge at Elberfeld wrote his booklet, *Wozu das Alte Testament?*—an old book but filled with actuality for our own situation. Here he says that it is by no means an indifferent matter how we estimate the O.T.; on the contrary it is a question of the greatest consequence for time and eternity, for the individual believer as for the whole Church.

Because we are facing the dilemma: a Jewish book or the Word of God which demands obedience and respect, we have to do more than put forward the easy proof that in the O.T. are indeed contained many contributions that are acceptable or even precious for the Christian, or that we meet here a genuine and deep piety, which is not denied even by determined antagonists of our Book. I remind myself of the Anglo-German, Houston Stuart Chamberlain, in his famous *Grundlagen des 20. Jahrhunderts*, to whom nearly all racial and national opponents of Biblical religion like to refer. There would be little gained by giving a perhaps plausible apology for this or that psalm or some chapters in the prophets, if at the same time we agree to the principal modern dogma, that the Church must and could live without the O.T. This teaching is inconsistent with the very essence of the Christian religion. Therefore we deem it unnecessary to mention the high significance of the O.T. for the culture of the Christian nations, which is a matter beyond doubt. It is not as a supporter of culture the Church has always clung to her sacred Book. Even so we do not want to praise the wonderful beauty and power of its language or to declare that we are delighted with so many pages that are equal to the noblest creations of world literature. Not for nothing has Luther emphasized even the force of the language of the Hebrew Bible, the more he mastered the genius of its language. It might be that we should happily succeed in commending the Bible as a piece of literature. But what should we gain by doing so? The question for life and death of the Church would remain untouched, notwithstanding all our panegyrics: What

is the O.T. for? As soon as we put this final question, we cannot longer feel inclined to the conventional well-meant but inefficient recommendations of the O.T. on account of its historic or aesthetic or cultural value.

Therefore it does not matter to us that, with little trouble, we can gather many favourable opinions upon the O.T. from its adversaries. Not that we are looking down on such judgments. For among the adversaries one meets men who possess a real knowledge of the O.T., far away from a superficial dilettantism. But even these most friendly sayings do not touch the matter which is all-important to the Church. That may be made plain by two especially impressive examples, by the utterances of two scholars, who in the rejection of the O.T. were taking up a leading position.

First Friedrich Nietzsche, the famous philosopher at Basle, whose thoughts we encounter everywhere in the nationalistic movement. In his much read book *Fenseits von Gut und Böse* he declares: "Im jüdischen Alten Testament, dem Buch von der göttlichen Gerechtigkeit, gibt es Menschen und Dinge und Reden in so grossem Stil, dass-das griechische und indische Schrifttum ihm nichts an die Seite zu stellen hat. Man steht mit Schrecken und Ehrfurcht vor diesen ungeheuren Überbleibseln dessen, was der Mensch einstmals war." "Der Geschmack am Alten Testament ist ein Prüfstein in Hinsicht auf Gross und Klein."

In the second place take a word of Paul de Lagarde, the passionate champion of the national aims of the nineteenth century and highly revered by all adherents of the racial ideals: "Die grossen Erwerbungen des frommen Gemüts, die in den Worten heilig, gerecht, demütig und ähnlichen ihren Ausdruck gefunden haben; die Einsicht, dass die Gott suchenden Menschen in einem Gottesdienst sich vereinigen müssen; dieser Gottesdienst selbst, der die Anbetenden auf die Grenze zwischen Zeit und Ewigkeit stellt, der sie zu Fremdlingen macht auf dieser Erde und zu Genossen eines in dunkeln Todeswolken verhüllten Lebens; das Bewusstsein, dass jeder Augenblick menschlichen Daseins unter dem Einfluss göttlichen Willens stehen soll: das ist es, worin die Bedeutung des Alten Testaments gelegen hat und noch liegt."

Though these observations are conclusive and striking, yet they do not touch the essential question. Nietzsche was speaking

as an aesthetic enchanted by human greatness; Lagarde as a philosopher of religion. But both are at a loss for an answer to our inquiry for the significance of the O.T. for the Church of Christ, to the question why even the Church cannot give over the O.T. without giving over herself. If the Church has to say nothing more than that Mr. X. and Mr. Y. have uttered kind words on our book, or that the O.T. is of the highest importance for history and culture or that it brings about strong religious impulses, she has to await sure defeat in the present situation. Only so long as the Church will be able to confess, Here is my Bible, will she hear in this book the voice and revelation of the living God. That is the fatal Either-Or, either a book of Jewish history or God's revelation; either a picture gallery of religious heroes or the witness of God Himself. To-day, as in the past, everything depends on this Either-Or.

In order to get a clear decision we must remember the motives which have induced the fold of Jesus to accept the O.T. as the Holy Writ of the Church. To begin with the thing lying nearest at hand we have to refer to the circumstance that the O.T. was the Bible of the Lord and His disciples, accompanying Him from His childhood to the cross as the word of consolation, strengthening, exhortation, as the armoury against the devil, as the light to see the ways the Father had prepared for Him. "That the Scripture be fulfilled", how often this consideration has helped Him to break through all hindrances! The tie uniting Jesus with the O.T. can in no way be loosened. "For had ye believed Moses, ye would have believed me; for he wrote of me. But if ye believe not his writings, how shall ye believe my words?" Jesus was at home in His Bible, not only in this respect, that He got the external form of His discourses, the mode of expression out of it, but it was to Him the living, ever present Word of His Father in heaven. In His eyes His message was by no means the simple sequel of the message of Moses in the sense that it superseded the message that went before, but He received His message from the O.T. along with the witness, "This day is this Scripture fulfilled in your ears." To Him the God of the Scriptures was not the mere summary of the different religious ideas of the Jews, but the one and eternal God, His heavenly Father. And the history of Israel was to Him not the history of a people as other peoples but the history of a divine work with this people to whom God was

pleased to unveil Himself. Jesus did not feel a strange spirit as often he opened the Bible, but the same spirit the Father had bestowed upon Him, to obey which was the purport of His life. In place of a long discussion we may simply refer to the fact that He called Himself the Christ, which means that Jesus has affirmed the whole message of the O.T. and applied it to His person as its fulfilment. By calling Himself the Messiah He acknowledged the O.T. as the revelation of God, "who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets and in the last days unto us by His Son."

II

In like manner with the Lord the apostles heard and respected the O.T. as God's Word which they treated with unlimited authority and not as a merely devotional book, let alone as only Jewish history. All difficult questions on the doctrine and the order of the growing Church were answered by the light they got from the Scriptures. According to the nationalistic spokesmen St. Paul is said to have ruined the Church by pressing upon her the O.T. But there is no difference between St. Paul, St. John, St. Peter. All these teachers of the first age of Christianity learnt their message from the Law and the Prophets and appealed to the O.T. as often as they announced the glorious works of God; and this they did not only among the Jews but also among the Gentiles. When St. Paul led the Greek at Corinth to the cross and to the open sepulchre of Easter morning, the Scriptures were to him and to the Church the guides and the interpreters of the secrets of salvation: Christ died for our sins, Christ rose the third day, and he adds accentuating: according to the Scriptures! St. Peter and St. James in their epistles to former Jews cannot but rely on their inherited Bible in the same way as St. Paul in his writings to the Gentiles in the implicit certainty that their message was the truth of God. The "It is written", which for Jesus was the firm foundation of His teaching and acting, remained also for the Church the rock that baffled all counter-arguments of human reason. The people at Berea (Acts xvii) did not agree to the word of the apostles because of their apostolic dignity, but they examined what they had learned, if it was in correspondence with the Scriptures. Out of the Law and the Prophets St. Paul proved to the Jews in Rome from the

morning till evening, that Jesus is the King of Israel, just as the Lord Himself had given testimony of His cross and resurrection to the disciples of Emmaus by quoting their Bible.

Therefore the loud demand of to-day to produce a N.T. purified from the thoughts and notions of the O.T., is an impossibility. It would signify to sever the root from which the N.T. has grown, with the consequence that the rooted-out second part of the Bible must quickly wither away. Beside some moral precepts and religious platitudes not much would be left. In a purified Bible there would be no place, beyond their name, for the vigorous personalities of St. Peter, St. James, St. John, not to speak of St. Paul. Jesus Himself would become a creation of the imagination, moulded according to the wishes of the modern racial idealism, which did not even shrink back from the desperate resolution of developing the Son of David into a blonde Aryan. Take for example the above-mentioned book of H. St. Chamberlain. What did Jesus? Chamberlain answers: He asked a heroic turning of the will; in Him man becomes conscious of himself as a free being, as contrasted with his material existence. The Saviour of sinners has here put on His shoulders the mantle of a philosopher, a very thin one. Such a misinterpretation of Jesus is pushed to extremities by many modernists. In Rosenberg for example, not to mention others, we read: "Jesus, der gewaltige Prediger, der Zürnende im Tempel, der Mann, der mitriss und dem sic alle folgten—nicht das Opferlamm der jüdischen Prophetie, nicht der Gekreuzigte ist heute das bildende Ideal, das uns aus dem Evangelium hervorleuchtet." Plainly put, what in the N.T. can still be accepted must diminish more and more till we come to the statement of the Count of Reventlow: "Ich vertrete die Ansicht, dass Jesus einige unbedingt grundlegende Aussprüche getan hat." As soon as we loosen the brackets uniting the two parts of our Bible, as soon as we refuse, like the apostles, to see in the O.T. the dawn of the day, which in the N.T. has reached its meridian, it is evident that also the N.T. must crumble to pieces, at the most it becomes an incomprehensible fragment of human vitality. Both parts of the Bible cannot be held unless they are held together.

But the most considerable thing for us is not to ascertain the fact that the rejection of the O.T. as the binding Word of God produces a spiritual starvation. More reasonable and useful will be the acknowledgment of our own faults in the way

of dealing with the O.T. We have read it with the best intention but with want of judgment in the sense that we have in it a collection of types of piety. Especially at school we were endeavouring to bring the devoutness and moral valour of the Biblical heroes to the foreground, thereby forgetting that the O.T. relates a history not of ideal but of real people with all their sins, and a history of God's deeds, Who in it gave real expression to His thoughts towards sinful men. To decide whether Abraham or Moses or David was agreeable to God is not our business, without counting that our opinion is quite unimportant. For our God has the freedom of using in His service the instruments He chooses, and of laying them aside at His time and at His hour. The thinking and acting of men will surely interest us, yet the will and work of God is alone conclusive. To this point our theology and preaching have paid too little attention. Now God has pleased to raise the adversaries of the O.T., who feel a pleasure in bringing to light the faults and offences of a Jacob, a David and all the others, in order to strengthen the faith of the believers through the knowledge that our Bible is not a book for praising human virtues and that it does not belong to its task to represent sinful men as spotless saints. The opposition to the O.T. recalls the reality of life to our mind.

That there are no incidents in the Bible offensive to human feeling is not at all the meaning of the Church. Perhaps Christians will be pained by such cases of stumbling still more deeply than the unbelieving world, and nobody will pretend that the witness of Moses and the prophets is a flattering one. On the contrary the ways of God with His chosen people in judgment and grace are very shocking to all human thinking. The marvel of the Book is not the circumstance that it is congenial to the German or Semitic blood. Who have revolted more passionately against the words of the prophets than the Jews? For good reasons the O.T. has been called the most antisemitic book of the world. But that is the marvel, that this Word in its human form is speaking to us with divine authority, reducing us to silence. Thankfully we use the help the critical and historical research of the contemporary history and its background can afford to our understanding. But after having settled such problems we have to begin with our essential work, viz. to learn as Jesus and the apostles did, what God here and now will teach us. We do not condemn the earthen vessel, but the treasure it

contains is the chief matter. Moreover, the final point is not to know what the psalmist or prophet himself understood and thought in this or that assertion, but it is of the greatest consequence for us to learn why God has caused these words to be written. Most probably not one of the Biblical authors has fully understood what he had to speak. What e.g. Isaiah was thinking of in the memorable fifty-third chapter of his book, of himself or of another or of his people, did not matter to Philip the evangelist when he announced the good tidings to the eunuch of Ethiopia. Without much ado he attested to his disciple what God has revealed in that chapter to all mankind: "Philip opened his mouth and preached unto him Jesus."

III

Provided that we honour the O.T. as God's revelation, we are saved from the danger of being scandalized by the difficulties and stumbling-blocks contained in it, and we bear in mind that God is appealing in this book to people of the most different kinds. The same word that to-day is still an enigma to me can to-morrow come to have a wonderful clearness. The same history that displeases the one may become a light on dark ways to another. God distributes from the riches of the Scriptures to everyone He is in need of in His situation. In Bible reading we may in particular not forget the old rule: to observe not only the isolated facts but to turn our attention to the whole. Christ must stand before our eyes as the meaning and the object of the whole O.T., albeit, as Luther said, "a babe wrapped in swaddling clothes", then the O.T. is no longer a sealed book for us but God's clear witness of His covenant of grace. We have only to avoid the common blunder of confounding the Israel of the prophets and of the apostles with the petrified and degenerated Jewry that crucified the Messiah and has made the Jewish race hated all over the world. The heiress of the promises is not the Synagogue, the woman with blindfolded eyes and broken stick on the paintings of the Middle Ages, but the Ecclesia, the Church of Jesus Christ, the spiritual seed of Abraham gathered from all people. The Church cannot let go her hold of the O.T. but on condition of losing also hold of her eternal Head and of all the saints in the present and in the past. If our message is not able to interpret Moses and the Prophets as God's

message to His Church, we must not be astonished if the world regards our whole preaching as untrustworthy.

To neglect the O.T. makes the Church defenceless against the ever-threatening danger that to-day, as in the age of deism and rationalism a hundred years ago, the living and acting God will be superseded by a cosmic God, Who so to speak as a watch-maker after having made the colossal mechanism of the world let it go according to its inherent laws, but Whom nobody will pay heed to. The O.T. has been entrusted to us to keep awake the knowledge of God the Supreme Lord of all things, Who is not a mere neutral being, the *summum bonum*, the *ultima causa rerum* or something else. There in the beginning of history are not elves nor nymphs dancing their dances, but God is speaking His almighty word and it happens as He commands. Not a philosophy on the primal cause is there announced, it is rather from the beginning until the end the living God Who in the Law and in the Gospel carries out His will.

Before His face there is also no place for that popular sentimental religiousness which thinks of God as a harmless being, that kindly smiles on the weak points of His creatures and with wise providence arranges all things according to our will. This widespread sentimentality is a sworn enemy of the Christian faith that it poisons by its untruthfulness. The Church of Christ does not know such a being but is preaching the Holy One, before whose eyes the sinner must tremble and whose ways are in the hidden depth, Who humbles and exalts the nations. By means of the O.T. the Church has succeeded in continuing the message of the holy and righteous love of God and in keeping off her threshold the idol of the jovial Grandfather.

Relentlessly the O.T. resists all efforts to obliterate the frontier between God and man and to build from the side of man a bridge across the abyss separating time from eternity. God is in heaven and you are on earth! So the Bible speaks from its first page to its last. The modern religiousness in art and poetry especially in all groups of the nationalistic view of life likes to adore a God Who in the way of mysticism is said to be found in the depths of human soul. Not by haphazard has Alfred Rosenberg praised the pantheistic utterances of the old mystics as the innate expression of the Nordic soul. This pantheistic piety must according to its nature revolt against the God of the Bible Who reveals Himself to us only from above as

one with Whom we can be in touch only under the condition that He enters into fellowship with us. Neither the bloodless idols of human reason nor the glowing creations of human imagination and longing can hold the field in the Christian Church, because the O.T. as a cherub with the flaming sword has mounted guard at the Church's very door.

IV

The significance of the O.T. for the Church has very often been seen in this, that O.T. and N.T. are distinguished as law and gospel, promise and fulfilment, book of the hope and book of the faith. All these distinctions express a great truth, but they do not get to the very bottom of the matter. Gospel is also contained in the O.T. as already Jesus and the first Christians and later on the Reformers read it as Gospel. Luther called the Genesis a nearly evangelical book and was convinced that it teaches justification by faith, not by works. And in the N.T. the Law of God is maintained with the same earnestness as in the prophets of Israel. Even the favourite classification as promise and fulfilment does not suffice for the characterizing of the difference between the two parts of the Scriptures, because the N.T. is also a book of promise and hope.

The obedience of the Church to the O.T. rests on the fact that the same God speaks in both parts of the Bible, that the same Spirit becomes manifest and that Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh, is the heart of the whole revelation. By bringing sin to light the Law puts the insuperable barrier to all human ways of salvation and deprives us of all hope beside the promised remission and the prospect of glory in the fulness of the ages. In the Church of the old and the new covenant we meet the same attitude of faith and hope upon God's intervention in our hopeless situation. When Christ began to gather His Church below the cross she brought with her her Bible to Calvary and read the prophetic witness of Christ in the light of the cross. Therefore she could understand her book. The scholars could not make much of the O.T., because they read it in the light of Babel and Egypt and of the current philosophy. But the little flock of Christ had stayed at Golgotha and for that reason had kept the ability of seeing the Christ of God proceeding with growing clearness through the pages of the O.T.

Neither Theology nor the Church can do without the O.T., which warns theologians against becoming absorbed in fruitless speculations and calls the believers to sing the psalm of hope and gratitude for God's faithfulness. The Church without the O.T. would appear as a torn-off piece of a sonata of which the subject is not known. Certainly the O.T. is unfinished and God has not spoken in it His last word. But in its undeveloped state it is so in its place and indispensable as the still unfinished work of art before the eye of the artist previous to his beginning the completion of what his genius had seen. The O.T. reports past things. But the ear opened by the Holy Ghost hears the witness of things that never grow obsolete, the witness of the Church of the Saints that was and is and will be for ever. In spite of the pride of men who are hardened against the Old Testament message of God's day of judgment and of His overflowing grace, above the Old as above the New Testament is written the pledged word of the Almighty : "The Word of the Lord endureth for ever."

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