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The Rediscovery of the Old Testament and the New Dimensions of Mission

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Fourteen years ago, when I was a theological student, I first read *The Call of the Minaret*, by Kenneth Cragg. For two reasons this proved to be a seminal book. First, it opened my mind to the new world of other faiths and to the great possibilities implicit in Cragg's approach to them. Second, it began for me a wholly new appreciation of the Bible, and more particularly of the Old Testament. From 1968 until 1972 I was on the staff of a theological college in North India, where I taught the Old Testament prophets. I found that I was continually trying to relate what I taught my students about the prophets to my conversation with Hindu and Muslim friends. This paper is born out of that struggle; it attempts to explore the connection between the Old Testament on the one hand, and, on the other, our contemporary task *vis-à-vis* men of other faiths—a connection first suggested to me by the reading of Cragg's book.

Over the last twenty years or so there has been a renaissance in Old Testament studies. There are now several major works on the theology of the Old Testament available in English (notably those by Eichrodt and Von Rad), as well as a host of minor ones. I can only claim to have read a minute selection of all this material, but it is my thesis that this rediscovery of the Old Testament can perform for us two vitally needed services. Firstly, it can provide the remedy for many of our current discontents, by showing us that many of our contemporary problems are in fact the problems of the Old Testament. Secondly, and this is my major theme, it can help us to work out our approach to men of other faiths. At the present time there is great confusion of thought in all branches of the Christian church about the challenges with which these faiths present to us. It is my conviction that the 'new' Old Testament theology suggests and indeed demands an approach which is very closely related to what some of us are trying to do. We need to remember that this theology is new only in the sense that it is new to us, it is in fact the recovery of certain long-forgotten biblical insights.

The renaissance can be traced to three main causes. The first of these is the upheavals of our own time. It was his experience of Germany in the late twenties and early thirties which drove Walther Eichrodt back to the Old Testament. (Although his great *Theology of the Old Testament* was first published in Germany in 1933 it was only in 1967 that the complete translation became available in English.)

Since no less a person than the Lord Chancellor of England recently said that contemporary England had about it the odour of Weimar it is perhaps not inappropriate for an Englishman to follow Eichrodt's example.

Secondly, the discoveries of archaeology in the Middle East over the last hundred years have compelled a complete re-orientation in Old Testament studies. What the new discoveries have done is to enable us to see Israel's faith and history against the background of its contemporary environment—a privilege which has belonged to no previous Christian generation. It is as we see Israel in the light of her neighbours who did not share her faith that we discover what the distinctive features of that faith were. In 1950 G. E. Wright published an important monograph with the significant title *The Old Testament Against Its Environment*. Similarly, W. F. Albright's *From the Stone Age to Christianity* and John Bright's *History of Israel*—both of them standard works—set the Old Testament against its contemporary background. On the first page of his magisterial work Eichrodt says: 'No presentation of Old Testament theology can properly be made without constant reference to its connections with the whole world of Near Eastern religion'.

The third and most important source of the renaissance is the re-discovery of Israel's faith. The early decades of archaeological discovery coincided with the period of liberal theology which was unable to come to terms with the fact of revelation. Wellhausen unwittingly confessed the bankruptcy of liberalism in the Old Testament field in a sentence which has become famous: 'Why Chemosh of Moab never became the God of righteousness and the Creator of heaven and earth is a question to which one can give no satisfactory answer'. In reply to that it is sufficient to quote G. E. Wright (*op. cit.* page 15):

'I find it necessary to agree with W. Eichrodt when he says that the source of the difficulty lies in the inability of the developmental hypothesis (sc. liberal theology) to take seriously the story of God's revelation and covenant at Mount Sinai. Thus no fixed starting point is provided for the unfolding of Israel's knowledge of God'.

Eichrodt in fact makes that very covenant the key to his interpretation of the whole range of Israelite faith.

Thanks to the work of these theologians we can now understand the complex relationship between Israel and her environment. Behind this complexity we can discern a pattern which seems to have been something like this. Israel was continually taking over various things from the nations which surrounded her. Thus the covenant at Sinai is modelled on the pattern of Hittite treaties, the great holy places of the patriarchs were sacred to the Canaanites long before the Jews ever arrived, Solomon's temple was probably based on a Syro-Phoenician model, and so on. All these things were taken over and fitted into the distinctive framework of Israel's faith. May we not

also claim that they provided material for the deeper development of that faith, and that without them such development would not have been possible?

Yet at the same time the prophets had to fight a continuous battle to prevent the alien environment from determining and therefore destroying Israel's faith. By what criterion did they know what to accept and what to resist? God, they believed, had revealed himself through the events of the Exodus. He manifested himself as personal sovereign will, as a God with a purpose. Further, the Exodus established that ever after historical events were to be the supreme means of God's revelation. For the Jews then, this experience came to be the touchstone against which all subsequent experience was to be tested. If God were truly God he must be consistent, and so nothing could contradict or deny that initial revelation.¹

The New Testament writers too had to grapple with the environment of their time. Thus in 1 Corinthians 2 and 3 Paul uses the language of the mystery religions to make clear to his readers that their new-found faith is *not* a mystery religion. Yet the terms of the mystery religions enable him to express certain facts of Christian truth which he could not have expressed without them. And perhaps not only to express but also to understand, for surely it was his experience as an evangelist which continually compelled Paul to develop his theology.

There is a striking parallel to all this in Bishop Ian Ramsey's book *Religious Language*. This book succeeds in coming to terms with the challenge presented to Christian faith by the philosophy of linguistic analysis. (For the purposes of our argument we may properly understand Ramsey as an evangelist and the philosophers as men of another faith.) Ramsey writes:

'Now it is true that philosophers do not claim [1957] as vigorously as they might have done even five years ago, that all the ultimate problems of metaphysics have been created by confounding logics; that these ultimate problems are just category blunders. Nevertheless it is plain that contemporary philosophy lays upon us an urgent task and duty, viz., to elucidate the logic of theological assertions, and this book may be seen as an endeavour to face and measure something of the challenge of contemporary philosophy; to state a case for religious language; to try to elucidate the logic of some of its characteristic claims. Nor is that all. As my first paragraph suggested, I hope to be able to show at the same time the considerable benefits for theological apologetic and controversy which can arise from facing this challenge with which contemporary philosophy presents us'. (p. 14)

¹ Eichrodt *op. cit.*, Vol. 1, pp. 36-45, on which the very compressed argument in this paragraph is based.

Let us now draw three important points from that quotation. The 'other religion' is, or was, a *threat*. If the philosophers are right then we are out of business! It is also by implication a *judgement* on inadequate theology which must be purged out. But once the threat has been met and the judgement accepted linguistic philosophy offers '*considerable benefits*'. In other words it enables us to penetrate more deeply into the nature of Christian truth than we were able to do without it. The criterion by which Ramsey judges linguistic philosophy is the revelation of God in Christ and thus his restatement of Christian faith is a proclamation of the Gospel to the philosophers—perhaps indeed it is the only way in which the Gospel could be either intelligible or relevant to them, *qua* philosophers.

Ramsey's argument thus illustrates the point we have already made about the Bible and its environment. There is a very real continuity—even if Ramsey was not directly conscious of this when he wrote. But we must now take the argument from the Old Testament a step further. The Jews had to come to terms with their environment not only, and certainly not mainly, in terms of ideas and institutions but supremely in terms of history. Because it was through history that God had revealed himself to them, the events of history could touch the nerve of their faith as nothing else could. We can now see how the quotation from Ramsey can both illuminate and be illuminated by an event in Jewish history, namely the Assyrian invasions in the time of Isaiah. (I have chosen this event at random, several others could equally well have served our purpose.) The Assyrian invasions were indeed a *threat* to the faith of Judah, for it looked as if the gods of Assyria were far more powerful than Yahweh—and had not Israel already been crushed by the Assyrian onslaught? Yet Isaiah also saw very clearly that the Assyrians were an instrument of *judgement*—'the rod of God's anger'—by which God was going to purge out from the life of Judah all that was unworthy of him, so that only the best could survive, in the shape of the remnant. More than this, Assyria was, in Ramsey's phrase '*a considerable benefit*' for it compelled Isaiah to reformulate his faith in Yahweh on a far grander scale than had up till then been either necessary or possible, for now Isaiah could see that God's rule embraced not merely puny Judah, but the great world empire of Assyria as well. Without the invasion that development would not have happened. Nor could it have happened if Isaiah had not been deeply rooted in the historic faith of his fathers. That faith provided the criterion by which he could both interpret the Assyrian challenge, and through it proclaim the Gospel of God to his contemporaries.

Further, in so far as she was true to that same historic faith Judah contained the seeds of a life which, for all their apparent might, the world-empires did not. This is the justification for the prophetic statement 'the word of our God shall stand for ever'. That is now no longer a claim of faith but a proven fact of history. Isaiah and the other prophets being dead yet speak, we have not had to dig them up from the forgotten past like Assyria and Babylon.

Now the whole of our argument so far can profoundly illuminate

the question of our contemporary relationship with men of other faiths. Here too we have suddenly found ourselves in a new environment which is far vaster, far more complex and far more challenging than anything that William Carey or Alexander Duff could ever have dreamt of. To quote a few outstanding examples, only in the last twenty five years has the serious study of the thought-world of Africa begun. Recent Arabic studies have made possible an entirely new reconstruction of the origins of Islam. We have hardly yet begun to penetrate the depths of Hinduism, we just know that the depths are there. We are therefore in a position very similar to the Old Testament scholars.

At this point I must be personal. Hindus and Muslims are to me a *threat*, a *judgement*, and a '*considerable benefit*'. A threat because, if they are right, I am out of business. Theological liberalism is of no help to me in meeting this threat. Just as Wellhausen could find no answer to the question why Chemosh of Moab did not become the God of righteousness and the Creator of heaven and earth, so the famous *Laymen's Enquiry* of 1928, led by W. E. Hocking could find nothing distinctive in the Christian faith and therefore no motive for the Christian mission. Of course, that particular theology has now been dead and buried for many years, but the much more positive theology which has replaced it has not, in some aspects, yet penetrated through to those who are today engaged in the missionary enterprise. It is my own experience that it is men of other faiths who compel me, and indeed in a sense enable me to discover what my own faith is—a service which my fellow Christians cannot perform in quite the same way. Thus the Muslim's insistence on the almightiness of God is perpetually compelling me to think through just what I understand by God's almightiness. Islam is both a judgement on my own thinking (and on my living, when I see Muslims at prayer) and it provides me with a means of penetrating more deeply into the mystery of Christ. There is surely a real parallel here to Eichrodt's sentence which I quoted earlier: 'No presentation of Old Testament theology can properly be made without constant reference to its connections with the whole world of Near Eastern religion'.

Let me quote another example of this which has recently come my way from the world of Hinduism. Hinduism has many myths in which a transformation of being is effected by plunging into water. Here is just one example among many, taken from Heinrich Zimmer's fascinating book '*Myths and Symbols in Indian Art and Civilization*', (pp. 30-31). The sage Narada asked the god Vishnu to tell him the secret of his *maya*. Vishnu said, 'Plunge into yonder pool and you shall experience the secret of my *maya*'. Narada dived into the pool and emerged in the shape of a beautiful girl, Sushila, daughter of the king of Varanasi. She married and had children who in their turn married and had children of their own. For many years Sushila was blissfully happy, but then her husband and her father quarrelled and in the ensuing war many of her sons and grandsons and both her husband and her father were all killed. Broken with grief she ordered a gigantic funeral pyre to be made for the bodies of her dear ones.

When the fire had caught she threw herself on to it. 'The blaze immediately became cool and clear, the pyre became a pool. And amidst the waters Sushila found herself—but again as the holy Narada. And the god Vishnu, holding the saint by the hand, was leading him out of the crystal pool'. Now this sheds a flood of light on the passage of the Red Sea, the baptism of Christ and on our own baptism. To plunge into the waters is to become a new person and to enter a new world. I am persuaded by this and similar Hindu legends that the Baptists are right, the only proper form of Christian baptism is by immersion. Our present custom has totally destroyed the symbolism of the rite. Furthermore these myths are also a judgement on my 'too cerebral Christianity'—based as it is far too much on books and mental activity. The opportunity to rediscover the world of myth and symbol which Hinduism affords has great potential for reintegrating one's own faith, and indeed western Christianity in general (See Jung and Mircea Eliade, *passim*). Yet this can only happen if, like Isaiah, we are faithful to the historic revelation.

Thus our task in relation to men of other faiths is to follow the course charted for us by Isaiah and indeed by the whole of the Old and New Testaments. That course is vindicated and clarified by Ramsey's work. Yet our task is not only on a far vaster scale than Ramsey's, it is also in one important respect significantly different. We are faced with the problem of language in a different sense from Ramsey. (It is worth noting that in our present context the title of Ramsey's book is somewhat misleading, what he is writing about is not religious language but Christian language. The use of words in both Hinduism and Islam is significantly different.) Here too contemporary Old Testament studies can both illuminate our problem and suggest the right way to approach it. In his recent book, *Exile and Restoration*, P. R. Ackroyd has this passage:

"To see the relationship in general terms between Israel's wisdom and that of Egypt, and even to go further and see in the Wisdom of Amen-em-ope an example in which the contacts may be particularly vividly illustrated, is one thing. To choose between differing interpretations of a difficult Egyptian text—whether or not one can lay claim to a knowledge of the complexities of the language—on the basis of the similarity or otherwise of possible renderings to a particular Old Testament passage, is a more hazardous proceeding. (The tendency to use "biblical language" in translating such ancient works adds to the impression of a relationship which may not exist at all.) . . . It is more important that we should have exact studies of the thought of different communities, as far as possible from within. The comparison may then be undertaken by those who are able to master the different types of thought and have the knowledge necessary for appreciating both' (pp. 10-11).

The first part of that quotation contains a warning which is both salutary and necessary, but it does need qualification. The English

language, even in this secularised age, is so steeped in Christian ideas that we may well ask, have we any alternative but to use 'biblical language' in translation? A classic example of this is the word *dharma* in Sanskrit and Hindi. In most translations of the Gita, for example, it is translated as 'righteousness'. This is probably the only English word which comes anywhere near to being an accurate rendering; yet *dharma* is very far removed from either *sedek* or *dikaiousune*. Ackroyd's last two sentences state very clearly the linguistic task which some of us are called upon to undertake *vis-à-vis* other religions today.

We must now return to the Old Testament and take the argument yet another stage further. How was the continual re-interpretation of Israel's faith achieved? It was achieved by men such as Hosea, Isaiah, Jeremiah and their disciples, and later by such as Haggai and Zechariah. For most of these men the re-orientation was achieved at very great personal cost. In the cases of Hosea and Jeremiah we might almost call it a crucifixion. Why was this so? Each of these men had a vision of the Kingdom of God—though that was not what they called it. Jeremiah's hopes were embodied in the community of the exile which he saw as the bearer of God's promises. Zechariah and Haggai both looked for the rapid establishment of God's kingdom in the midst of the restored community after the exile. Each of these men tried to communicate his vision to a reluctant people who could only understand God and his kingdom in terms of past experience. They could not or would not see that history had destroyed the old vision; or if, as in the case of the post-exilic community, they could see that the old had gone, they could not grasp the great hope offered by the new vision of the prophets. The prophets however could bear the agony of losing the old because they were sustained by the vision of the new which went beyond present circumstances.

Is not this at least in part the case of the church today? Many of those who support the Christian enterprise still think of it in nineteenth century terms, as if all we had to do was to stand up and preach 'the simple Gospel'.

There is another parallel. A feature of the prophetic vision was that it foreshortened history. For example Second Isaiah undoubtedly thought that the return of the exiles would usher in the reign of God in Jerusalem. *Mutatis mutandis* the same is true of most of the other prophets. In the early church there was a similar conviction that the return of Christ and the end of the world would happen very soon. Perhaps in each case it was the very vividness and intensity of the experience of God that made this so. I don't know. Yet this telescoping of history is illuminating. In the 1840's many people in India, not only Christians, thought that in a few generations India would be completely Christian. This sort of optimism was typical of most Christian thinking in the nineteenth century. Again, many of those who support us—or who have given up—just cannot see that that vision has been destroyed by history, or if they can see it they think that the fall of this particular Jerusalem is the death of God. Yet if we stand in the prophetic tradition must we not say that though

that vision was adequate for its day it is simply not big enough to encompass the new world to which this generation belongs?

The prophets were compelled to re-interpret the historic revelation of God in the light of new facts and new experiences which came to them as threat, as judgement and as promise. Thus in Isaiah's case, as we have seen, the new fact was the Assyrian invasions, in Jeremiah's case it was the destruction of Jerusalem, in Hosea's his broken marriage. Thus the Old Testament consists very largely of a series of theological crises, through which God led his people into ever deeper understanding of his nature and of his purposes. Today we too face a theological crisis, thrust upon us by other religions. Just as the prophets had to ask the question 'what is God doing outside our normal experience of him, in the coming of the Assyrians, in the destruction of Jerusalem, in the broken marriage?', so we are faced with a similar question. What is God doing outside our normal experience of him in the world of other faiths? This is a question which in the nature of things could never have occurred to our nineteenth century predecessors and which had not as yet occurred to many of our contemporaries. Let me illustrate the connection between the prophets and ourselves by means of a quotation from Alan Richardson's book *History Sacred and Profane*:

'The distinctive character of Israel's history was that it was built around a series of disclosure situations, which through the activity of prophetic minds became interpretative of Israel's historic destiny and ultimately of the history of all mankind . . . The disclosure situations attested in the Old Testament are not different in kind from those of other histories. Their distinctive character consists in the depth of their penetration . . . Though rooted in the particular predicaments of Israel's actual history, these disclosure situations illuminate the truth concerning the predicament of all nations in every age, the real situation of man as man' (pp. 224, 226).

Let us make a brief excursion into the New Testament and see how C. H. Dodd makes the same point in that field. This quotation is taken from *The Founder of Christianity*:

'God, the eternal, the omnipresent, can hardly be said to be nearer or further off at *this* time than at *that*. If he is king at all he is king always and everywhere. In that sense his kingdom does not *come*: it *is*. But human experience takes place within a framework of time and space. It has varying degrees of intensity. There are particular moments in the lives of men and in the history of mankind when what is permanently true (if largely unrecognised) becomes manifestly and effectively true. Such a moment of history is reflected in the gospels. The presence of God with men, a truth for all times and all places, became an effective truth' (pp. 56-57).

What both Richardson and Dodd say boils down to this. What God did through Israel and through Jesus gives us the clue to

understanding what he does *semper ubique et in omnibus*. What then is God doing in the world of other faiths, or in biblical terms, outside the historic revelation of the covenant? Just what he did and does within that revelation, for it is precisely that revelation which can interpret to us how he works everywhere. It is not an exception, but a pattern. To give one example of this, other faiths are now being compelled to grapple with history as threat, as judgement, and as promise. In North India there is a rising tide of protest against *all* religion, and in the coming years only the best will survive.

Does this mean that other men are 'Christians' already although they do not know it? No! Evangelism remains the fundamental missionary task now as it always has been, but evangelism does not mean inviting a man to leave his situation to meet a Christ who is external both to it and to him; it means inviting him to go more deeply into his situation and into his faith to discover the totally unexpected and perhaps unwelcome Christ who is already there. That is why some of us are now called to make the deepest possible study of other faiths, and to enter into the deepest possible friendship with their adherents.

Yet to embark on that demanding and enthralling task is to make a paradoxical discovery: in another and profound sense we do not yet know what God is doing outside the covenant, and we shall not know until we have done a lot more digging and exploring. For the kingdom of God is itself paradoxical. It is always the same and yet ever growing to take in wider and wider horizons. The Resurrection was indeed the second Exodus, and yet it surpassed, beyond the power of words to express, anything that Moses could have remotely imagined. So it is with us. The kingdom has come; we see Jesus; yet it is still to come in ways that will astonish us as much as the Resurrection astonished Peter and James and John. For we do not *yet* see all things subject to him. It does not *yet* appear what we shall be (though de Chardin has given us some important and exciting clues!), and in a real sense we do not *yet* see Jesus, for until all the tongues of men confess him and every thought is brought into captivity to his obedience we cannot see him as he truly is. Today it looks very much as if we are losing him, yet beyond that loss he invites us to discover him in new and wholly unexpected places, so that we in our turn can say, trembling with joy, 'It is the Lord'.

If the argument of this paper is sound then two important conclusions follow. First, all that we mean by dialogue, Christian presence, the new approach to other faiths is in one respect not new at all. We are essentially engaged in the same task as the prophets of the Old Testament and many others since their time—not least contemporary Old Testament scholars. The prophets too were repeatedly compelled to ask what God was doing outside the historic revelation, and it was their faith in the God of that revelation, *plus* the inescapable pressures of history which compelled them to ask that question. They found, as no doubt we shall, that in the end nothing and no-one is outside the covenant for all things belong to the covenant God.

Second, this would seem to be the right way in which to seek for the guidance of the Bible in building a theology of religions. We may point to 'holy pagans' such as Melchizedek, Ruth or Job as evidence of God's work outside Israel, and go on from there to infer that today he is at work among devout Hindus and Muslims. We may point to Jesus' conversation with the woman of Samaria as an example of dialogue. Yet if we look for the direct support of the Bible in this way we have to confess that the results are meagre and disappointing. How can the biblical writers really help us when for reasons of geography they knew nothing of Hinduism or Buddhism, and for reasons of history nothing of Islam? Yet they were continually grappling with new facts, as threat, judgement, and promise. *Au fond* that is just what we are doing today in the encounter with other faiths. Understood in this way the Bible can indeed provide us with a theology of other faiths.

All of which suggests that if the church is to rediscover her missionary vocation she must first of all rediscover the Old Testament.

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