

Elizabeth Achtemeier  
*Union Theological Seminary in Virginia*

## The Relevance of the Old Testament for Christian Preaching

It has become a truism to say that the Old Testament has been lost for Christian preaching in large sections of the church. One has only to participate in the life of almost any congregation to find evidence of such loss. But biblical scholars have not arrived at a consensus as to how we are to recover the lost two-thirds of our canon, and the purpose of this article is to aid in the ongoing discussion of the problem. We will put the question, first, in its historical perspective in order that we may realize just where we are. Second, we will attempt to lay the exegetical and theological basis for the Christian use of the Old Testament. Finally, we will suggest some possible methods of preaching from the Old Testament. Certainly this article makes no claim to solve all the problems. We do hope that it shows that the problems are not insoluble, and that it aids the church in proclaiming the whole Word of God which has been spoken to us.

### A HISTORICAL REVIEW

The neglect of the Old Testament in the contemporary proclamation of the Church did not come about accidentally. It is, rather, the result of specific scholarly views imposed on the Bible during the last part of the nineteenth century which are disastrously still very much alive among laymen and clergymen today. There have been efforts in the church ever since the time of Marcion to discard the Old Testament portion of the canon of course, but the modern abandonment of the Book of the Old Covenant grows largely out of the developmental, historical philosophy of Israel's history, which was finally

decisively formulated by Julius Wellhausen in his *Israelitische und Jüdische Geschichte* (1894).

In Wellhausen's philosophical treatise, the history in the Old Testament was viewed as a natural development of human institutions and ideas, proceeding by its own inner dynamic and paralleling natural development and evolution in the biological world. Israel's religious life proceeded, according to Wellhausen, by stages, developing out of an early natural, spontaneous period of monolatry, through the strict monotheism of the prophets, to the cultic and legalistic religion of post-exilic Judaism.

This meant, as Wellhausen's views were elaborated (and sometimes distorted) by scholars and laity at the turn of the century, that the history of the Bible came to be viewed as a progressive development upward toward the final achievement of the highest religious ideals in the teachings of Jesus. Revelation was equated with ideas about God, and the highest ideas, represented in the teachings of the Master, superseded and made irrelevant all that had gone before them. The Old Testament became an outdated book, primitive in its earliest history, stultified by a rigid legalism in its final stages, exhibiting only in occasional teachings of the psalmists and prophets religious ideals consonant with the ethics of Jesus. It certainly had no revelatory or authoritative value for the church, and it need be heeded only insofar as it provided an historical background to the understanding of the New Testament. Largely the Old Testament was an object of study for the antiquarian, the historian of religion, the archeologist. For the man in the pew, as well as the preacher in the pulpit, it could be safely ignored.

Anyone familiar with the course of modern biblical scholarship knows that the philosophy of the historical, developmental school has now been thoroughly shattered against the rocks of form and tradition criticism, with the approval of every other branch of biblical science. The developmental view of biblical history has been abandoned, the basic formative period of the Judaic-Christian faith has been placed in Mosaic times, revelation has come to be understood in active and creative terms, and emphasis on the ethical ideals of the Bible has given way to an acknowledgment of its thoroughly kerygmatic character.

What has not been provided by modern scholarship is an interpretive approach to the Bible as a whole to replace the Wellhausian consensus. For at least half a century, nearly everyone in the church agreed that the Old Testament could be abandoned. Knowledgeable churchmen now know that such abandonment is disastrous to the proclamation of the Gospel, but there is no general agreement among biblical interpreters as to just why this is so. The result is that many clergy and laymen still cling to

their developmental views, uneasily refusing to abandon old safe positions for a maze of conflicting new ones.

Modern attempts to justify the authority of the Old Testament for the church have been as many as they are varied, and this article makes no attempt to review them all. Rather, we shall concentrate on some attempts which have a bearing on Christian preaching, since it is in the modern pulpit that the authority of the Old Testament is most noticeably lacking.

One of the chief advocates of the relevance of the Old Testament for Christian preaching has been Lawrence E. Toombs of Drew Theological Seminary and later of Union College in British Columbia. In a number of writings,<sup>1</sup> Toombs has attempted to illustrate how the relevance of the Old Testament can be uncovered for our time. The two Testaments are one, says Toombs, in their understanding of the nature of man and his needs and of the manner in which God makes himself known. Furthermore, the essence of the sermon is the invitation to participate in an existence lived in history under the demand and freely offered grace of God. The Old Testament is, says Toombs, "... a book of God's approach to man, and if preaching is an invitation to accept the God who comes to men, it can hardly be conceived, much less conducted, without the Old Testament."<sup>2</sup>

Toombs links our historical existence with that of man in the Old Testament on the basis of a common humanity: "Insofar as we of the twentieth century share with ancient man in a common humanity, his evaluations of his situation are potentially relevant to our own."<sup>3</sup> The task of the preacher in Toombs' method of preaching from the Old Testament is therefore to discover to what facet of the human condition an Old Testament passage was originally directed, to ask what the contemporary equivalents of such a human situation are, and then to transfigure and transform the ancient word of the Old Testament so that it will speak its authentic message to the new forms in which that human situation has found expression in the present day.<sup>4</sup>

In such methodology, Toombs acknowledges the relativity of man's historical existence: "The specifics of a divine demand heard in an earlier time cannot merely be transposed into the existence of another person. It must be transformed into a demand which rises from, and speaks back to, his own distinctive situation."<sup>5</sup> The difficulty is that Toombs has not fully understood the historical specificity of the Old Testament. The Word in the Old Testament is not directed to "humanity" in general. It is directed to Israel, a specific people who stand in a specific relation to God, and it is solely in the context of that relationship (which itself changes, as von Rad has shown) that the Old Testament Word of demand and judgment and salvation has authority. It is not only that Israel is separated from us

by time and culture and language and world-view—Toombs has made allowance for that gap. It is also that she is a unique people who knows that God is with her, to judge and to redeem her, and it is this uniqueness that Toombs has not acknowledged. Indeed, even those portions of the Old Testament which seem to concern humanity in general, such as Gen 1–11 or some of the Writings, are deductions from or responses to Israel's consciousness of her election.

It is this historical specificity which forms the offense of the Bible, for both the Old Testament and the New (as we shall show) claim that God has entered into his world only in relation to a specific people. Thus the Word of the Scriptures is a Word which is spoken to that people, and unless somehow we are related to Israel, the Word is not spoken to us. As Paul puts it: "They are Israelites, and to them belong the sonship, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises: to them belong the patriarchs, and of their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ" (Rom 9: 4–5).

The question of the relevance of the Old Testament to Christian preaching, then, is the question of our relationship to Israel. What do we have to do with that God-met people, and what do they have to do with us? Do we in any way share in Israel's election relationship to God and therefore in the Word of judgment and salvation spoken to her?<sup>6</sup>

It is this historical specificity of the Old Testament Word which is recognized by Rudolph Bultmann. In his article "The Significance of the Old Testament for Christian Faith,"<sup>7</sup> Bultmann points to the historical, relative nature of Israel's existence and the fact that God's revelation in the Old Testament is bound to the history of that particular people:

So far as man belongs to this people, he can take comfort in the grace of God. What God has done in this history he has done unto each individual in so far as this individual has an integral place within his people and his people's history. What God has done unto the patriarchs, what he has done unto the people when he summoned Moses, led the people out of Egypt, guided them through the wilderness, and brought them into the Holy Land, he has done even now unto each person, since this history is not past history but present, ever reactualized in the present generation of the people.<sup>8</sup>

But, says Bultmann, for the Christian, this concrete history of God's dealing with a specific people has now come to an end. In Christ, God's eschatological deed of forgiveness is now proclaimed and is no longer an historical account about a past event, mediated through an ethnic, national, or cultural community, but is, rather, an immediate Word which addresses each

individual directly as the Word of God. Thus for the Christian, the Old Testament is no longer the Word of God or revelation. Its history "has come to an end. The old has passed away, the new has come."<sup>9</sup>

Seen from this standpoint, says Bultmann, the Old Testament is law for the Christian, history without grace, and, as such, it can be used in the church only for pedagogical reasons—that is, it can be used to show the nature of our existence under the divine demand. But even the concrete demands of the Old Testament are tied to Israel's specific situation, and therefore they are obsolete. The only demands of the law in the Old Testament which are still valid for us are those truly moral demands "that spring out of human relationship as such and not out of its concrete historical form."<sup>10</sup> These are set forth in a clear and radical way in the Decalogue and the prophets, but they are not specifically Old Testament demands as such. "They are grounded in human relationship itself, and every period finds them simply by serious reflections upon this relationship."<sup>11</sup> It is these demands, then, with their understanding of our existence as set under the demand of God, that can be used pedagogically to prepare us to hear the proclamation of grace in the Gospel. But such demands are not found merely in the Old Testament. There may be other sources which give the same understanding of existence.

If the Old Testament is understood as the Word of God for the church, writes Bultmann, it can only be so in the indirect sense that it mirrors our situation into which the Word of Christ is spoken. But nothing is found in it which is not already known from the revelation in Jesus Christ,<sup>12</sup> and the Old Testament becomes the Word of God for the Christian only when it is thus freed from its original reference to the Israelite people and their history and is understood as preparation for the Christian understanding of existence.

Bultmann thus wrestles with the historical specificity of the Old Testament Word in a far more cognizant way than does Toombs, but he is finally able to place the Old Testament's proclamation within the church only by abandoning such specificity. Its concrete demands must be turned into general moral demands, found also elsewhere, in order to serve as pedagogical tools for the church. Or its proclamation, to be the Word of God, must be understood apart from Israel and within an eschatological, ahistorical, individualistic framework, as the address of Christ to the individual now.<sup>13</sup> Unfortunately, this approach does violence to both Old Testament and New, since the Old Testament never understands the law as a general moral demand but only as the concrete commandment of God to its specific elected situation, and the New Testament Gospel is never divorced from its specific and historical realization in the person of Jesus Christ and, through

him, in the community of the church. It is precisely Bultmann's attempt to shed the historical specificity of the biblical Word which places his work outside the biblical understanding.

In his important book *The Authority of the Old Testament*,<sup>14</sup> John Bright initially seems to avoid the errors of both Bultmann and Toombs. The Old Testament is related to the New, and therefore authoritative for the Christian, says Bright, by reason of the fact that it shares with the New Testament a common "pervasive, constantly present, normative" theology or structure of faith. This theology Bright characterizes under the biblical categories of election, covenant (which includes the exclusive lordship of Yahweh and his covenant demands laid upon Israel), and hope in God's future action—although Bright by no means intends this list to be exhaustive. Furthermore, although any "structure of faith" is an abstraction out of a living history, as von Rad has so cogently shown in his *Old Testament Theology*,<sup>15</sup> and although the language of Bright's discussion unfortunately gives the impression at times that he has completely divorced this "structure of faith" from the events of Israel's history and taken flight into a gnostic understanding of revelation,<sup>16</sup> he nevertheless grounds this structure in the events of the biblical history. Thus Bright has recognized that it is a common participation in an election relationship with the covenant God of Israel that binds together Israelite and Christian, Old Testament and New, and thus makes the Old Testament relevant for the proclamation of the Gospel.<sup>17</sup>

Bright reverses his position in his very next chapter, however, when he discusses hermeneutics and the use of the Old Testament in the Christian pulpit.<sup>18</sup> He recognizes that not only there is a *heilsgeschichtliche* continuity between the Testaments, but also that there is a discontinuity, which led to the Jewish rejection of Christ and to the New Testament's radical re-interpretation of Israel's faith, and this discontinuity, says Bright, can be characterized by the fact that the entire perspective of the Old Testament is B.C. But ". . . B.C. is not—theologically speaking—simply an epoch in history that ended with the birth of Christ: it is a condition of living. It is the condition of standing, whether through ignorance or by decision, outside, or not fully subject to, the messianic kingdom of Christ."<sup>19</sup> This, writes Bright, is more or less the condition of every man, even of the Christian, and thus, in its "B.C.-ness," the Old Testament speaks to the condition of every man. "This is the "typical" element in the Old Testament, which "enables it to address modern man with immediacy." "It is typical because human nature remains essentially unchanged, and because men do find themselves in typical situations and react to circumstances, their fellowmen, and their God in typical ways."<sup>20</sup> In this typical "B.C.-ness," the Old Testa-

ment therefore serves a pedagogical function, mirroring the human condition and impelling man beyond the bounds of B.C. to the newness of the Gospel.<sup>21</sup>

It is clear that Bright is sharing here Toombs' view of a common humanity (if in a somewhat different context) and also Bultmann's view of the Old Testament as a propaedeutic to the Gospel, with the latter transformed into an eschatological, existential, individualistic understanding of existence. It is equally clear that Bright has followed both Toombs and Bultmann in their abandonment of the historical specificity of the biblical Word, for what has happened to that "structure of faith" which Bright has previously maintained to be normative for biblical theology? Where are the election and the covenant relationship, when the Old Testament speaks in its "B.C.-ness" to the "typical" human situation? The Old Testament never speaks without the presupposition of God's election relationship with Israel. Its Word is intended for a people who knows Yahweh has been with her, and surely that experience is not the "typical" condition of modern man! Thus the Old Testament remains fully alien to us, whether Christian or non-Christian, unless somehow we participate in Israel's relationship with her God. This portion of Bright's hermeneutical method falls victim to the historical specificity of the Word of God.

Brevard S. Childs of Yale has fully recognized the necessity of interpreting the Old Testament in its historical specificity, as addressed solely to an elected people, when he calls for the recovery of the canonical context in doing biblical theology.<sup>22</sup> The concept of a "canon," in Childs' view, has meaning only in the context of the church as that body of writing which calls forth the life of the church and continues to nourish it with the bread of life from God for each succeeding generation. Thus Childs grounds the interpretation of Scripture solidly in the elected community of faith, and it is within this community, with its whole canon, that each Testament is listened to with its historically conditioned texts. Neither Testament is sufficient in itself, for both are part of that canon which has given birth to the church itself and through which the living God continues to confront his people. Thus the Testaments stand in a two-way dialogue with one another, and both, in their decidedly different ways and in their own historical context, witness to Jesus Christ. Childs has not fully presented the exegetical basis of this canonical view of the Scriptures, and thus there is every likelihood that his position will be widely misunderstood. Nevertheless, he has correctly perceived the heart of the Old Testament hermeneutical problem.

It is precisely such faithfulness to the historical specificity of the biblical Word, such recognition that the Old Testament, as well as the New, is addressed to a specific, historical, elected people of God that will prevent the

allegorizing and moralizing uses of the Old Testament so prevalent in the Christian pulpit today. Wherever one finds sermons published today, one can almost at random find the Old Testament being so misused. Only a few examples must suffice.

In a sermon entitled, "Moral Choice in a Bountiful Land," published in *The Pulpit*,<sup>23</sup> Dwight E. Stevenson expounds on Josh 24: 15-16: ". . . choose this day whom you will serve, but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord." The situation of the Israelites newly arrived in the promised land is compared to that of Americans on the frontier, and the question is raised whether we will now be conquered by the comforts of urban culture, as the Israelites were conquered by the "fertile acres of the promised land." The assumption is that the imperative of the Old Testament, addressed to the elected people of Yahweh as they partake of the fulfillment of the divine promise to the patriarchs, can somehow be generalized to apply to any pioneer people faced with the temptations of civilization. Not only is the specific historical situation of the Israelites ignored, but, more important, the whole credo of Josh 24, with its recital of God's electing acts toward the patriarchs and Israel, is ignored. Stevenson has departed from his text and its setting at the very beginning of his sermon.

The same error is found time and again in the expository sections of *The Interpreter's Bible*. For example, in commenting on Num 2: 1-34, with its description of the Tent of Meeting in the midst of the Israelite camp, Albert George Butzer moralizes, "Is it not one of our deepest needs to put the church back again at the center of the community's life?"<sup>24</sup> as if somehow the church could be equated with the ancient Tent of Meeting and the elected tribes of Israel with any American community. Or, in expounding the story of Joseph thrown into the pit, Gen. 37: 24, the late Walter Russell Bowie allegorized: "Joseph is thrown by his brothers into a pit—a dreadful physical fact. But morally and spiritually, too, it may often seem that the soul of man is in a pit."<sup>25</sup> Such abandonment of the specific historical nature of the Old Testament Word would seem amusing were it not for the fact that it is widely practiced in the American pulpit every Sunday of the year.

The point which should be emphasized, however, is that not only must the historical setting of the Old Testament be preserved in any interpretation of it, but it must be recognized that part of the historical context of the Old Testament Word is the election relationship of Israel with her God. If that relationship is abandoned, if the Word of the Old Testament is understood as addressed not to a specific, historical, elected people but to mankind in general, then the historical context of the Old Testament has been lost and its proper interpretation has become impossible. The Old Testament is understood within the context of Israel as chosen, or it is not

understood at all; and the question of the relevance of the Old Testament for Christian preaching remains the question of our relation as Christians to the Old Testament people of God.

#### EXEGETICAL AND THEOLOGICAL BASIS FOR THE CHRISTIAN USE OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

As with most questions of theology, the question of our relation to biblical Israel can be answered only from the perspective of a proper understanding of who Jesus Christ is, and this perspective is given by New Testament and Old alike. One approaches Jesus Christ initially through the witness of the New Testament, but it becomes startling clear in that witness that Jesus Christ is understood by the New Testament writers to a great extent in terms of the function and role of Old Testament Israel. We can by no means indicate within the brief limits of this article all the exegetical evidence which supports that statement, but the general argument can be indicated.

The first sentence of the First Gospel proclaims that Jesus Christ is the son of Abraham and the son of David, and certainly Jesus is understood throughout the New Testament as the fulfillment of the promises given to both Abraham and David. Most evident to the church has been the fulfillment of the latter promise, with its hope of the coming of a righteous Davidic king or Messiah. Thus, the prophetic messianic pictures such as those in Is 9: 2-7 and 11: 1-9 or Zech 9: 9-11 have been most frequently referred to in the pulpit. Much less understood and utilized has been the whole theology of the Old Testament's Royal Psalms<sup>26</sup> in which the descendant of David who is awaited is the adopted son of God, the guarantor of Israel's relation with Yahweh, the embodiment of the people's life, the giver of righteousness and *shalom*, the mandator of Yahweh, sitting at his right hand and sharing in his cosmic rule and power. But the New Testament borrows frequently from this Old Testament picture of the ideal coming king in order to make clear just who Jesus is,<sup>27</sup> and the fact that it understands our Lord as the Davidic Messiah immediately binds up his life with the life of Israel, for the point of the messianic expectation in 2 Sam 7, in the Deuteronomic history of the Books of Kings, and in the Chronicler's history, as well as in the Royal Psalms, is that the covenant promise to David is the foundation stone of Yahweh's relation to Israel. It is through the Davidic king, who is the representative of the people before God, that the Royal Theology sees Yahweh as entering into relation with Israel, and the righteousness of the awaited Messiah will insure that that relation is favorable, bringing blessing and *shalom* (cf Jer 23: 5-6).

The Hexateuchal tradition, centered in the promises to Abraham, is of a totally different nature, and indeed, in the Old Testament, often stands in conscious tension with the Royal Theology. Nevertheless, the New Testament understands who Jesus is also in terms of the promises to the fathers. According to the traditions of Genesis, it is through Abraham and his descendants that Yahweh will make a new people, who will live under his righteous rule, and who will therefore suffer none of the disruptions of communal and family life which are pictured as the results of sin in the primeval history of Gen 2–11. Given to this people will be a “good land, flowing with milk and honey,” to replace the good garden which mankind has lost, and in the P traditions, Israel will participate in an everlasting covenant with Yahweh, in which they will once more be Yahweh’s people and he will be their God. As this new people of Yahweh, Israel will be a blessing in the midst of the earth, the community through which all nations, who now stand under the curse of God according to the primeval history, will once again find blessing.

That this promise finds its partial fulfillment in the gifts of descendants and nationhood and land and covenant to Israel<sup>28</sup> is quite clear in the Old Testament record. In fact, the Deuteronomic historians affirm the total fulfillment of the promise (Josh 21: 43–45). But the pre-exilic prophets announce that the fulfillment is totally reversed by Israel’s rebellion: the covenant is broken, the land will be lost in the exile, Israel becomes “no people,” and even her power to propagate is taken away, according to Hosea. Thus the hope for a new people, a new land,<sup>29</sup> a new covenant, becomes part of the eschatological hope in the prophets, as does the role of Israel as a blessing in the midst of the earth (Is 19: 24; Zech 8: 13; cf Jer 4: 2).

That which is pictured in the hope of Isaiah of Jerusalem is a new congregation of faith, which becomes the cornerstone of the new Zion and the mediator of revelation and peace to all nations (Is 28: 16; 2: 2–4), and the expectation is that through Israel all nations will come to God (cf Zech 8: 20–23; Pss. 47; 87; Zeph 3: 9). That this expectation is pushed to its most radical form in Deutero-Isaiah, then, seems quite clear, despite the long dispute over the identity of the Suffering Servant. If the Servant is meant to be identified with Israel transformed by the Spirit of God—and we think he is—the picture of the Servant’s work is fully consonant with the picture given by Isaiah of Jerusalem, of whose school of tradition, in all likelihood, Deutero-Isaiah was a member. Once again Israel, the Servant, is the mediator of revelation (light) to the nations, the center from which Yahweh’s *mishpat* and *torah* go out to all people (cf Is 2: 3–4; 42: 1–4). But the theology has become radically incarnational, and the covenant as well as the suffering and atoning death for sin become embodied in the person of the Servant (Is 42: 6; 49: 6; 52: 13–53: 12). At the same time, the Royal Theology with

its “steadfast, sure love for David,” is understood as the additional guarantee of Yahweh’s favor toward his people (Is 55: 3–5).

Indeed, it can be said that the major emphases of both the Royal and Hexateuchal theologies are summed up and combined in the figure of the Suffering Servant in Deutero-Isaiah. There is the emphasis on the exodus, the wilderness time, the covenant, the good land, the new people as a blessing in the midst of the earth. But within this Hexateuchal framework, the figure of the Servant (although probably primarily a prophetic figure) borrows from the characteristic Isaianic understandings of the Messiah as the bearer of the Spirit and the bringer of righteousness and *shalom*, as well as from Isaiah’s emphasis on Zion as the center of revelation, incarnated in the new congregation of faith (cf Is 40: 9; 51: 16; 52: 8–9). And the way the Royal and Hexateuchal theologies are combined by Deutero-Isaiah makes it almost impossible to separate them. Both before and after Deutero-Isaiah, the Deuteronomic historians and the Chronicler, respectively, combined the Royal and Hexateuchal theologies to some extent, the former by making the Davidic king subject to the law of Moses, the latter by modeling David after the figure of Moses, and all these traditions witness to post-exilic efforts to bring Israel’s various theological complexes into a unified whole. But the fruits of these efforts in the Old Testament are largely eschatological projections into the future, hopes for Israel’s future life before God.

It is in the New Testament that Israel’s hope is fulfilled, and the unity toward which the Old Testament theologies strain finds its concrete historical realization in the figure of Jesus of Nazareth. He is, as we have noted, the awaited Messiah, the bearer of the promise to David. But he is clearly also the fulfillment of the promise to Abraham, not only in general terms but in terms of the concrete content of the promise. He is the one who becomes, as Israel was meant to become, the blessing in the midst of the earth (Acts 3: 25; Gal 3: 8). He is understood as the new covenant and the beginning of God’s new people. Indeed, he is even identified with the promised land Israel was to inherit, her place of rest (Heb 3: 12–4: 13). But, after the manner of the Isaianic prophecies, all has become incarnational, the promises and prophetic words to Israel clothed in flesh and blood. Thus Jesus Christ is an incarnate covenant (Gal 4: 21 ff) and light to the nations and an incarnate atoning sacrifice. And his body becomes identified with Zion and its temple, as the place of revelation (Mt 26: 61; 27: 40; Jn 2: 19; 4: 21 ff; cf Heb 12: 22 ff; Rev 14: 1; 21: 22). He becomes Isaiah’s cornerstone, the germ cell of the new and faithful Israel (1 Pet 2: 4 ff; Eph 2: 18–22), and all who trust in him are built into him as members of his body. At the same time, as son of David and of Abraham, he is the new

Moses in the First Gospel,<sup>30</sup> and in the Gospel according to John and in Acts, he is the awaited "prophet like Moses."<sup>31</sup>

The New Testament utilizes every tradition at its disposal to proclaim that Jesus Christ has gathered up into himself and fulfilled the role and function of Old Testament Israel, as those are understood in both corporate and individual terms, and it is in his person alone that the Old Testament finds that unity and completion of its history for which Israel had hoped. Jesus Christ means the confirmation of Israel's history, the assurance that her hope was not in vain and that her God was faithful to his Word. And certainly without the Old Testament, Jesus Christ cannot be known for who he truly is.

At the same time, Jesus Christ means the end of Old Testament Israel's history, for he replaces Old Testament Israel as God's chosen son. The unfaithful son of the Old Testament (cf Ex 4: 22-23; Is 1: 2; Hos 11: 1-9; Jer 31: 20) gives way to the faithful son of the New, and from the time of his resurrection on, the promises, the election, the covenant, the law, the Messiah, the future hope—all the traditions of Israel—can be rightly understood only in terms of Jesus Christ. In this sense, Jesus Christ is therefore the fulfillment of the prophetic words of judgment and salvation; for with his death, all the old Israel (as well as all the old mankind) dies—a judgment never fully realized in the exile of Israel—and with his resurrection, the new Israel (which is synonymous with the new mankind) lives—a consummation unrecognized and still hoped for by the Jews. Thus, at the same time that the New Testament is a summation and completion and fulfillment of the Old Testament, it is also its transformation, and it is quite true that the Christian can read the Old Testament only in the light of the New, while at the same time understanding the New Testament only with the help of the Old.

But the Old Testament still remains a strange document to the Christian and of help only in understanding who Jesus Christ is unless we go a step further and examine the meaning of the new Israel for us.

The new Israel is Jesus Christ, as we have shown. In him, according to the New Testament, the new people of God has its beginning and its life, and apart from him, there is no new people and therefore no fulfillment of the Word to Israel. But it is the proclamation of the New Testament that by faith in Jesus Christ, by trust in God's saving act in him, we too become members of God's chosen people and participate in his life. Through Christ, we enter into covenant relationship with God, and the former alienation caused by our sin is ended. We become the elected people, the redeemed people, the God-met people, with our new Moses and our Davidic Messiah. We become God's kingdom of priests and God's holy nation, set

apart to be the instrument of God's purpose in the world. Especially 1 Pet 2: 9-10 and Eph 2: 11-22 make this clear:

Remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near in the blood of Christ. (Eph 2: 12-13.)

Thus the words which were spoken to Old Testament Israel as she approached the mount of covenanting in Ex 19: 6 are in 1 Pet 2: 9 spoken to those who are "in Christ Jesus"; and in 1 Pet 2: 10, then, Hosea's promise of a new people (Hos 2: 16-23) is seen as fulfilled by the people of Christ (cf Rom 9: 22 ff; 15: 7 ff). We who were once outside the people of God have become, in Paul's words, the wild olive shoots who have been grafted onto the root of Israel (Rom 11: 17 f). In the Gospel according to Matthew, the followers of Jesus are therefore given their new law, preached from their new mount of covenanting, by their new Moses (Mt 5-7). In Mark 3: 13-19, after Jesus' rejection by the scribes and Pharisees, the twelve disciples are called up "into the hills" (the mount?) to become those who now replace the twelve tribes of Israel. And in the Gospel according to John, to cite only one example, Jesus is that bread of life which is the manna given to all who believe in him, as the manna was given to Israel in the wilderness (Jn 6). As those who are "in Christ" or who are "members of his body," to use Paul's terminology, we too become God's new people, God's new Israel in Christ, built into the "household of God," as his sons and members of his new covenant. In Christ, but in him alone, the Christian church has become the new people of God, fulfilling the Old Testament prophetic hope for the participation of all peoples in Israel. Contrary to Bultmann, the new Israel in Christ is a concrete historical entity, manifested in the historical life of the Christian church. But the national, ethnic, cultural life of the Old Testament Israel has been left behind. In fulfillment of the promise to Abraham, the new Israel in Christ has become that fellowship in which the divisions of mankind pictured in Gen 2-11 have been finally healed, and there is now one fellowship under the sovereignty of God:

There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise. (Gal 3: 28.)

In the light of this good news—that we are members of God's chosen people through our faith in Jesus Christ—for the first time the Old Testa-

ment may be seen as addressed to us, as the Word of God which is authoritative for our life. The Old Testament is addressed to the covenant people of Yahweh and is authoritative only for them, and through faith in Christ we have now become members of that people. Now the Old Testament may be our story; now its history may be our history. Now its God may be our God, and its Word may be the Word also to us. But there can be no authority in the Old Testament for us outside that covenant framework, outside the act of God in Jesus Christ which has made us members of his people. There is no possibility for us of understanding the Old Testament as the Word of God for B.C. man; no possibility of seeing the Old Testament as divine law and nothing else; no possibility of identifying the Old Testament Word with God's instruction for mankind under wrath—for the Old Testament has the possibility of becoming Word of God for us only in the context of A.D. grace, only in the context of the new covenant in the new Israel in Jesus Christ.

#### HOMILETICAL METHODOLOGY

The foregoing does not mean that we abandon the historical understanding of the Old Testament. It must be understood in its historical context, as words and traditions addressed at specific times, through the witness of human speakers and writers, to the ancient Near Eastern people of Israel. As the history of ancient Israel, it tells us of our beginnings. It shows us the long and tortuous way by which God has fashioned for himself a new people. It tells us about the promises of which we have now become heirs. It makes clear how the Christian church has been created in Jesus Christ and why its creation was necessary. And that can all be read and studied as the interesting history of our beginnings, just as a United States citizen can read the interesting history of the American Revolution.

Certainly the Christian preacher has the responsibility of telling that history to his people, of proclaiming the story of what God has done in Israel. Otherwise his people will never know clearly who Jesus Christ is or even who they are as members of the new covenant people, the Christian church. And without that knowledge, the Old Testament—and, indeed, the New Testament—can never become the Word of God for the preacher's people. There must be, as the foundation of all Christian proclamation, the announcement of what God has done, and this is as true when one is preaching from the Psalms as it is when one is preaching from Genesis or the prophets. The picture of the historical people of Israel, in their historical situation before God, must be clearly implanted in the minds of the preacher and his people.

In the 1940s, it was the tendency of many in the Biblical Theology Movement to regard this first step in biblical preaching as sufficient; and during the 1950s and 1960s, it became a shibboleth throughout the church in the United States to regard biblical theology as consisting solely in the proclamation of the "mighty acts of God."<sup>32</sup> But the proclamation of what God has done in the history of Israel, as that is witnessed to in both Old Testament and New, lays only the foundation for biblical preaching. It has merely made it possible for the Old Testament, and, indeed, the Bible as a whole, to become Word of God for us, since it has made it clear that we are related to biblical Israel, and that our relationship is founded on our new covenant with God in Jesus Christ. Nevertheless, that whole story of what God has done, and of how we have become what we are, can remain a fully past event, having no significance for us except as etiology. It is fully possible to acknowledge that we are the new Israel in Christ without confronting the biblical story as authority for our life—as, sadly, the history of the Christian church has so frequently made clear. Toombs and Bultmann and Bright and the others in the long list of modern biblical scholars who emphasize the existentialist nature of the biblical Word are quite correct when they emphasize that biblical preaching must show the Word to be salvation and judgment and imperative for our present situation if it is to become Word of God for us. To use one of George Buttrick's colorful phrases, somehow the sermon must finally "nail the hearer to the pew." Our question is, then: How is this to be done in Christian preaching, specifically in relation to the Old Testament?

Two methods present themselves out of the biblical material itself: representation, and analogy. But, at the risk of being boringly repetitious, let it be emphasized once more that neither method has any validity except as it is used against the background of our relationship to Israel in Jesus Christ. Bultmann has used the first method, and Toombs the second, for example, but our argument has been that the foundational relationship of the Christian to Israel through Christ has not been fully understood by either of these scholars, as is the case with many others.

Martin Noth has discussed the method of re-presentation in his article on "The 'Re-Presentation' of the Old Testament in Proclamation."<sup>33</sup> He has correctly pointed out that in the three great annual festivals of Israel past and future events in Israel's history with her God, such as the wilderness wanderings or the exodus or the eschatological accession of God to rule,<sup>34</sup> as well as the giving of the law, were presented to Israel as present, contemporary happenings, which carried with them the immediate judging and saving and demanding action of God toward Israel. That is, Israel's history with God, both past and future, became contemporary, a fact of "now,"

for each new generation of Israelites who made their pilgrimage to the annual feasts, and this was done, Noth believes, through the cult, primarily by means of proclamation and narration but perhaps also by means of cultic drama.

That this was the case in ancient Israel is made clear throughout the book of Deuteronomy, in which seventh-century B.C. Israel is addressed as if she were the Israel of the thirteenth century B.C., still in the wilderness with Moses. Thus there is the constant emphasis on "this day" in Deuteronomy: ". . . this day you have become the people of the Lord your God" (Deut 27: 9).

You stand this day all of you before the Lord your God . . . that you may enter into the sworn covenant of the Lord your God, which the Lord your God makes with you this day; that he may establish you this day as his people, and that he may be your God, as he promised you, and as he swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob. Nor is it with you only that I make this sworn covenant, but with him who is not here with us this day as well as with him who stands here with us this day before the Lord our God. (Deut 29: 10-15; cf 5: 2-4.)

In other words, the biblical understanding of the nature of the Word is that it carries with it the action of God, not only in the past or in the future but contemporarily in the present "now." For biblical Israel in Palestine, for example, the exodus was not simply a past saving event which Israel knew to be part of its former history with God. Through the narration of the exodus story, at the Feast of Tabernacles and at Passover, the exodus event became contemporary; the Word of the exodus continued to work, exerting its influence on the present and working its redemption among those who were hearing the story anew. As von Rad has so brilliantly pointed out in *Old Testament Theology*, it was this continuing working of the Word which led to the constant reformulation and contemporizing of Israel's past traditions, and the ever new action of the past Word to Israel can be seen throughout the Old Testament in the constant updating of the past saving events and ordinances.

Basic to this phenomenon of contemporizing in the Old Testament is a dual understanding with regard to the Word of God. It is taken for granted that the Word of God is an active, effective power which creates and shapes the course of history,<sup>35</sup> just as it similarly works in the realm of nature. Secondly, it is assumed that a Word, spoken to a specific situation, is not exhausted in its action in that situation, but that it continues to work in the events which come after, influencing also their course. The Word of God in the Old Testament—and, indeed, in the New—is not the conveyor

of knowledge, which is but a deduction from it, but the powerful action of God within the sphere of man. And always the Word is alive in the Bible (Jesus Christ is risen!), it works, it acts according to the purposes of God, it exerts its influence.

Such an understanding might seem a little farfetched to twentieth-century man were it not for the fact that we know the same phenomenon in Christian worship. For example, we gather around the Lord's table for the Last Supper, and we hear the ancient story: ". . . the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, 'This is my body which is broken for you . . .'" And by the active effective working of the Word of God (many would say, by the working of the Holy Spirit), the event of the Last Supper suddenly becomes contemporary. Suddenly, we are now there in that upper room, sitting among the disciples, hearing that one of us will betray Jesus and wondering, "Is it I?" Through the narration of the past history, the events of the Bible become present history for us, and we find ourselves confronted by the immediate action of God through them.

Thus, as members of the covenant people, when we hear a story of God's dealings with Israel from the Old Testament, in all its concrete historical detail, it can happen by the working of the Word of God that that story becomes a present event for us. It is here. The saving or judging or demanding of God, directed to our fathers in the faith, becomes an action directed immediately also to us, and we can say, in the manner of Deuteronomy, "Not toward our fathers did God act, but toward us, who are all of us here alive this day." When we hear the story of the exodus, for example, we become the ancient Israelites, waiting behind doors smeared with blood, our loins girded for flight, our kneading bowls bound in our mantles on our shoulders, and the smell of roasted lamb in our nostrils. The Word of God, spoken to ancient Israel and told once more to us, creates the situation before God of which it speaks, in our lives, and God acts through that Word not only toward ancient Israel but now toward us, the new Israel.

Thus it can happen that dramatic proclamation of the story, the retelling of the mighty acts of God, itself becomes the medium through which the Bible becomes for us Word of God and authoritative. It was precisely this phenomenon which gave the Biblical Theology Movement its great impetus during the past two decades. But because this phenomenon depends on the free grace of God, acting through his Word, it is also an experience which cannot be coerced, as the Biblical Theology Movement also discovered, somewhat to its dismay. There is no homiletical technique which will insure that the story becomes the Word of God for us. Certainly the preacher can trust that such an event will take place. He can suggest to his people

that it may happen. He can, and indeed he must, through careful preparation and historical research and vividness and clarity of language, attempt to remove needless obstacles from the way of the coming Word. But in the last analysis, whether or not the biblical story becomes Word of God for us is up to God himself, a fact for which we should surely be grateful, considering our constant prideful attempts to manipulate our people and to capture God. We preachers stand under the command to proclaim the story—as Paul puts it (1 Cor 3), to plant and to water. Whether or not there is growth then depends on the Lord.

Theoretically, because the entire Old Testament is primarily concerned with the action of God toward ancient Israel, in this method of re-presentation no portion of the Old Testament should be incapable of being proclaimed as part of God's action, and in fact the church needs much more to utilize the narrative portions of the Old Testament in this fashion. There are vast areas of the biblical witness to God which have been omitted from the church's proclamation by the omission of these narratives (e.g., the many-sided views of the judging actions of God). On the other hand, there are portions of the Old Testament story in which the action of God is so obscure or in which such action is spread out over such a length of time that it becomes almost impossible to present it within the framework of the sermon. The preacher has the responsibility of carefully choosing his texts in order to tell the whole story most vividly and forcefully, but he must be equally sure that he does not omit some portions of the biblical story simply because they are distasteful to him or because he himself has not studied them sufficiently to understand what God did in them toward Israel.

Finally, in re-presenting the Old Testament, the preacher must always make clear the foundation on which the Old Testament is given to us—through God's act in Jesus Christ, which has made us the new Israel, which means ultimately that the Old Testament is never the story solely in itself, but that it is the story which finds its purpose and fulfillment and close in Jesus Christ. This foundation may simply be presented at the beginning of the sermon, and the preacher can then proceed to the exposition of an Old Testament text. But, methodologically, the preacher will most often find it necessary to utilize also a second method—that of showing the Old Testament story as the analogy of our life before God.

A great deal has been written about this method of using the Old Testament in the Christian church, largely on the basis of Gerhard von Rad's renewed use of it, and most often such a method has been called "typology." But this is a poor term, since it confuses the method with that of earlier pre-critical approaches to the Old Testament, in which the history was

completely ignored, and persons, places, and things in the Old Testament were seen as standing for elements in the New Testament or in the life of the Christian. For example, in pre-critical typology, the mark put on Cain, in Gen 4: 15, was understood as standing for or as the "type" of the cross, or the figure with whom Jacob wrestled in Gen 32 was understood as in reality Christ.<sup>36</sup> We have something different in mind—the method of seeing that the concrete history of Old Testament Israel before God forms an historical analogy to our historical existence in Christ before God, and of therefore realizing that the Word of God addressed to ancient Israel may be similar to or the same as the Word addressed to us.

There can be no doubt that our life as Christians is remarkably similar to the life of ancient Israel in its relationship to God. Both Israel and we are redeemed through no worth of our own, delivered from slavery, and given the possibility of a new life, in a new fellowship. Both of us, in response to God's initial act of deliverance, enter into covenant with Yahweh. Both of us have covenant commandments laid upon us, at whose center is the command to love God and neighbor. Both of us have not yet entered into our final fulfillment. Both of us have the responsibility of being God's witness to the world. Both of us strain toward the ultimate goal of God's kingship on this earth. Both of us wait for God's kingdom in faith and hope, and certainty that it will come. Both of us are therefore to live as if the kingdom were already here. It is therefore clear that ancient Israel's life before God is analogous to our own, and that her history can authoritatively illumine and guide our history in Christ.

Such analogous use of ancient Israel's history is not foreign to the Bible, for both Old Testament and New themselves use such a method. When Deutero-Isaiah describes the new age, for example, he describes it as analogous to the old, with a new exodus, a new wilderness wandering, a new and universal people, just as Jeremiah has a new covenant and Ezekiel a new David. And when the New Testament describes the life in Christ, it describes it in terms of Israel, with baptism become our passage out of Egypt and the Lord's Supper modeled on the feeding in the wilderness and the event at Sinai (cf 1 Cor 10–11). There is a real correspondence between the histories of the old Israel and the new, and therefore the preacher can proclaim the Old Testament as Word of God which is meaningful also for us. We are not separated from Israel by some vast historical gap, but participate historically in the relationship with God that Israel participated in. As we have shown, we now have entered into that covenant relationship through Jesus Christ.

Whereas with the method of re-presentation the past action of God is made present in the "now," with the method of analogy the "now" becomes

the "then," and as we hear the ancient words of Deuteronomy, for example, we can project ourselves back into their situation, and they can become words directed also to us, because we too are the covenant people who are now journeying from our redemption toward our final fulfillment :

Take heed lest you forget the Lord your God, by not keeping his commandments and his ordinances and his statutes, which I command you this day: lest, when you have eaten and are full, and have built goodly houses and live in them, and when your herds and flocks multiply, and your silver and gold is multiplied, and all that you have is multiplied, then your heart be lifted up, and you forget the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage . . . Beware lest you say in your heart, "My power and the might of my hand have gotten me this wealth." (Deut 8: 11-14, 17.)

It is in this context that the Old Testament can serve as a warning to us, as, indeed, the New Testament so often uses it. The continual Word is, "Harden not your hearts as in the rebellion, on the day of testing in the wilderness" (cf Heb 3-4). The Old Testament can warn us who share in Israel's situation before God not to share also her pride and unbelief and therefore not to be led into her rejection and destruction by God. But the Old Testament speaks to us in this manner not as B.C. men but as those who have been redeemed while they were yet sinners by the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Our situation becomes analogous to Israel's only through the new covenant, and thus the Old Testament's warning is not "propaedeutic" or preparation for the Gospel but, rather, its consequence. There is no way the Old Testament can be understood by the Christian as merely law. It becomes part of the Christian's canon only in the prior context of grace, and we can share in the exodus experience of redemption, to cite another example, only because we have already shared in the cross of Christ.

This method of analogy once again opens the whole Old Testament to the Christian preacher, for now there is no portion of Israel's life which is without interest to us. At every point, Israel is working out the consequences of its relationship with God, and it is one of the greatest gifts of God's grace that we have been given the story of ancient Israel as the forerunner of our own. Of course all of Israel's story is culturally and historically conditioned. The commands of the law, for example, are formulated in terms of Israel's concrete historical situation. But the intention of the law—to implement the lordship of God in the communal and individual life of his chosen people—remains quite relevant to our analogous situation, and both Israel and we are given commands only because we have been redeemed. In the same manner, it is by the method of analogy that the prophetic

oracles, addressed to Israel's specific historical situation, become authoritative for us. Indeed, we can say that it is often through the Old Testament that the Christian learns how to live as an elected person, and as the elected people in Christ, we are addressed by God, and therefore authoritatively, through the Old Testament.

Space does not permit the dozens of ramifications and illustrations of method which flow out of this approach to the Old Testament. Some will certainly condemn the approach as far too "Christological." Some will complain that the Old Testament is given no authority in and of itself, apart from the New Testament. Our reply is simply that we Christians should not expect it to be otherwise. Jesus Christ has lived and died and risen again, and he has told us plainly, "No one comes to the Father but by me." We should not expect to hear the Word of God from the Old Testament except through Jesus Christ. It is in him alone that the Old Testament is given to us, the new Israel. It is now through him alone that God speaks his Word to us.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> *The Old Testament in Christian Preaching* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1961); "The Old Testament in the Christian Pulpit," *Hartford Quarterly*, VIII, No. 2 (Winter 1968), 7-14; "The Problematic of Preaching from the Old Testament," *Interp*, July 1969, 302-14.

<sup>2</sup> *Hartford Quarterly*, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

<sup>3</sup> *Interp*, *op. cit.*, p. 303.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 304.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 308.

<sup>6</sup> The crucial nature of this question of the relationship to Israel is posed very early, in the Yahwist's history, in the promise to Abram: "I will bless those who bless you, and him who curses you I will curse; and by you all the families of the earth shall bless themselves" (Gen 12: 3).

<sup>7</sup> In B. W. Anderson, ed., *The Old Testament and Christian Faith* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), pp. 8-35.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 29-30.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 32.

<sup>13</sup> It should be noted, however, that Bultmann rejects all allegorizing of the Old Testament, and insists on historical research to discover the original sense: "For if this sense were changed, then it would no longer be the Old Testament that speaks." *Ibid.*, p. 33. But it is this "original sense" of the Old Testament that Bultmann must then divorce from its original reference to the Israelite people and their history.

<sup>14</sup> Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1967.

<sup>15</sup> London: Oliver and Boyd, Vol. I, 1962; Vol. II, 1965. Bright is largely following

the method of Walter Eichrodt's *Theology of the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, Vol. I, 1961; Vol. II, 1967).

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, especially in the discussion on pp. 148-50.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, Ch. III, pp. 110-51.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, Ch. IV, pp. 161-212.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 206.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 207.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 208.

<sup>22</sup> *Biblical Theology in Crisis* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1970). See especially pp. 97-122.

<sup>23</sup> Jan. 1968, pp. 19-21.

<sup>24</sup> Vol. 2 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1953), p. 149.

<sup>25</sup> Vol. 1 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1952), p. 754.

<sup>26</sup> Pss 2, 18, 20, 21, 45, 72, 89, 101, 110, 132.

<sup>27</sup> Ps 2 is utilized in the accounts of Jesus' baptism and transfiguration, and performs a basic role in Acts 4 and 13. In addition, its language frequently echoes from Heb and Rev. Ps 110 is the most important Royal Psalm for the New Testament, being quoted or alluded to in Mk 12: 36; 14: 62; 16: 19; Acts 2, 7; Rom 8: 34; 1 Cor 15: 25; Eph 1: 20, 22; Col 3: 1; Heb 1, 2, 5, 10, 12; 1 Pet 3: 22. But Ps 18 and 132 also speak from Acts 2, as does the language of Ps 89 from Col 1: 15-20 and Heb 1: 5.

<sup>28</sup> In P, the emphasis is on the revelation of the *kabod Yahweh* in the tabernacle on Sinai.

<sup>29</sup> Cf the pictures of nature transformed and Palestine become an Eden, Is 51: 3; Ezek 36: 33-35.

<sup>30</sup> Thus, Matthew's picture of Jesus giving the new law on the new mount, in the Sermon on the Mount, is quite deliberate, in contrast to Luke's sermon on the plain. Cf also Paul's comparison of Jesus with the Moses of Ex 34: 29-35, in 2 Cor 3-4.

<sup>31</sup> Acts 3: 22-23; 7: 37; Jn 6: 14; 7: 40, 52.

<sup>32</sup> For an excellent discussion of the Biblical Theology Movement, see Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis*.

<sup>33</sup> Claus Westermann, ed., *Essays on Old Testament Hermeneutics*, 2d ed. (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1964), Ch. 4, pp. 76-88.

<sup>34</sup> Cf the Enthronement Ps 47, 93, 96-99.

<sup>35</sup> Cf Is 55: 10-11; Ezek 12: 28, among many examples.

<sup>36</sup> W. Vischer still engages in a great deal of this typological, pre-critical exegesis, despite his claim to do otherwise. See his *The Witness of the Old Testament to Christ*, Vol. I (London, 1949).