

Preaching from the Old Testament

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An Inaugural Lecture delivered upon the Opening of Rutherford House, Edinburgh, February 18th, 1983

It used to be a practice of the late Alan Stibbs, whose speciality was the New Testament, to inspect the service register of any church in which he was preaching, to see when the minister had last taken an *Old Testament* theme. He reported sadly that his search was usually a long one.

Although I may be addressing a roomful of exceptions to this rule, I will at least make his experience an excuse to open the subject with the question 'Why' – Why preach from the Old Testament? – before going on to consider the 'How' of the matter.

Why Preach from the Old Testament?

1. Fundamentally, we must answer, because the New Testament itself sets us this example. Not, of course, that it is always doing this (we have only to think of our Lord's parables, or of His conversation with the woman at the well, or of Paul's Areopagus address, to correct this exaggeration), yet the Epistles, written largely to non-Jewish converts, took pains to present the gospel as something rooted in what God had been doing from the beginning. The new Christians had become not only children of God but the Israel of God (Gal. 6:16) and children of Abraham (Gal. 3:29), and it was important that they should absorb the background which they now shared with the rest of their adopted family. Israel's history was now theirs, with not only its mistakes to learn from (*cf.* 1 Cor. 10) but its glories to inherit (*e.g.* 1 Pet. 2:9f.). For our part then we have every reason to follow this lead from the Apostles, and to make sure that our congregations know how deep and rich is their inheritance.

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2. To do this we must begin where the Old Testament itself begins: with its wealth of narrative. And this, surely, is not only a duty but a joy, for here is truth not abstract and disembodied but very much alive and accessible. This corresponds in fact to the first way in which we learn anything. On the human level, our parents presumably gave us initially no systematic statements of their views and attributes. We learned these gradually, by living with them, getting their running commentary on life by

word and action in a variety of contexts; sometimes indeed through their questions or their thought-provoking silences. Their statements of principle, when they came out with them directly, had this living background. So too it is with this large part of the Old Testament, in its events, its comments and its withholding of comment. But this is done on the grand scale: spanning many lifetimes, and introducing us to situations that range from the family to the nation and the world, and from the commonplace to the cataclysmic.

The vitality of this material gives us every reason to come to it often: not only to take our hearers back to their origins, as we were considering, but to confront them with the living God in action, and with men and women of like passions with ourselves. Incidentally, what characters these are! – and how many of their incomparable stories will be fresh to the modern generation. Here are not cardboard figures, certainly no plaster saints. No two of them are alike in temperament or failings or achievements, and very few of them would have fitted comfortably into our church fellowships.

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3. But this brings me to the next point. The Old Testament blesses us not only with the concrete and embodied truth which we have noticed, but with some valuable correctives to our ways of thinking. Its very foreignness and cultural remoteness, which so often lead to its neglect, may be in fact one of its strongest assets. It is fierce and harsh, where we are soft; assured where we are tentative; impassioned where we are cool. Like John the Baptist, all skin and bone and leather, at the silken court of Herod, it may jar on us but it speaks out like a prophet, not a courtier.

In a milder sense, too, it may be a corrective to the imbalance that we risk if we confine ourselves to the New Testament. In more than one respect the Old is the earthy complement to the New: not merely in the negative sense that it falls short of the latter's heights, but also in the positive sense, that it gives us a fuller picture than we find in its companion volume of the ordinary man in everyday life: how he 'ticks' (as we say), and what he has to cope with. Here, in particular, is the great contribution of the

Wisdom books; and, with them, the opportunity and authority to turn aside occasionally from making rapid mileage in our preaching along the main road of Covenant and Salvation, to pause and explore the humbler themes of human friendship, attitudes to work, counsels of prudence, and so on, as matters that all have their place in the Creator's realm. Not every by-road leads to Doubting Castle; the King has his own quiet meadows and curious villages.

4. Pursuing this further, we find that the Old Testament has time for fuller treatment than has the New, not only of the domesticities just mentioned, but of some major matters as well. To take the most obvious, there is much to be learnt here about.

(a) God's control and discipline of nations – the rough justice whereby the divided and corrupt are allowed to fall victims to the disciplined and predatory, and whereby the predators themselves are brought down by their own ruthlessness.

None is weary, none stumbles...
 their arrows are sharp,
 all their bows bent...
 like young lions they roar;
 they growl and seize their prey,
 they carry it off and none can rescue.

Is. 5:27–29.

But soon it will be their turn, as Isaiah 10:5–19 magnificently shows. If we find problems here, so did Habakkuk. We hear him asking God why he does not do something about the moral state of his people; and perhaps we echo the question in our own day. God's answer was a shock to Habakkuk, and we face the possibility of a similar shock ourselves. 'Do something? But I am sending in the Eastern Block!' (A somewhat free version of Hab. 1:1–11, I confess; and I nearly called them 'the Russians'. But perhaps our hearers will be ready to listen to the rest of that conversation after this.)

Among other subjects that get this fuller treatment in the Old Testament we can briefly mention:

- (b) Social righteousness – a major theme of both the Law and the Prophets;
- (c) The problem and experience of suffering, explored in depth in Job and Jeremiah and the Psalms;
- (d) Sexual love – celebrated in the Song of Songs; assuring us that there is more to sexuality in marriage than might be inferred from the laconic expression, 'conjugal rights' in 1 Corinthians 7:3;
- (e) The doctrine of Man – the foundations of it laid in Genesis 1–3.

So far, we have looked at the value of going back to origins, or roots; of seeing God and men in action; of accepting correctives to our bias or imbalance; and of exploring matters that are mostly taken as read by the New Testament. But the two remaining reasons for preaching from the Old Testament are among the most important.

5. The Old Testament furnishes much of the language of the

New. This has often been pointed out. So we arrive at Christian doctrines from the New Testament's own angle of approach, not that of Greece or Rome or of our own culture. Righteousness, for example, will be seen not only as rectitude and honest justice (though it is indeed this: see, e.g. Leviticus 19:15 against dishonest favouritism to the poor or to the rich), but also as the generous impulse to rectify and rescue, which emerges in, e.g., the portrait of the righteous man in Psalm 112, and in the frequent coupling of righteousness and salvation in the later chapters of Isaiah.

Again, words like 'holiness' and 'spirit', which are pale and retiring in popular thought, have a divine energy in the Old Testament which is implicit also in the New. So too we could mention 'law' and 'covenant', 'prophet', 'priest' and 'king', whose meanings may seem self-evident, but are only rightly understood as God expounds them through his oracles and laws and psalms.

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6. My last answer to the question 'Why?' is that the Old Testament exposes to us what I would call the bones and sinews that underlie the fair surface of the New. This analogy expresses, I hope, an important aspect of the subtle relationship between the two testaments, by underlining the fact that the New has not simply left the Old behind as irrelevant. I have in mind the lessons in anatomy which used to be part of an artist's training, not to equip him to illustrate medical text-books, but to enable him to observe with greater truth and penetration the living, moving subjects of his art. In one respect those early studies would be left behind, but in another they would remain with him to give strength and depth to all that he produced.

In this sense I would say that the Old Testament gives us the anatomy of such great matters as atonement, worship and love, to mention no others.

On atonement: when the New Testament speaks of the Lamb, or of redemption through his blood, or of Christ our passover, or of his bearing our sins, it assumes a mass of detailed knowledge which should clarify and enliven these allusions, and should still have power to speak directly to the soul. Charles Simeon owed his conversion largely to some words of Bishop Thomas Wilson, to the effect that 'the Jews knew what they did, when they transferred their sin to the head of their offering'. 'The thought came into my mind', says Simeon, 'What, may I transfer all my guilt to another? Has God provided an Offering for me, that I may lay my sins on his head? Then, God willing, I will not bear them on my own soul one moment longer. Accordingly I sought to lay my sins upon the sacred head of Jesus...'¹

On the anatomy of worship, we may turn again to the sacrifices, this time not only to their atoning value but to their varied emphasis on gift or fellowship or hallowing or access; also to the Psalms with their great range from exuberance to lament, from

entreaty to thanksgiving, and their response to creation, to history, to the scriptures and to the end-time.

As for the anatomy of love, we are inclined to feel that love should have no such thing: that we may freely improvise and follow intuition in this realm. But the New Testament relates it to the law, as fulfilment, and uses that law to demonstrate its shape and character. The exposition of the Christ-like life in Ephesians 4–6 – that is, of living towards one another ‘as the truth is in Jesus’ and as we have ‘learned Christ’ – is built round the six ‘manward’ commandments of the Decalogue, clothing the bare bones of them with living tissue. We learn that love endorses every negative in that list, not merely as the forbidden but as the unthinkable, and so is set free for a creativity that has no seeds of destruction in it, and a freedom that has no trace of anarchy.

But it is high time to turn to the second of our two questions – the harder one.

How Should We Preach from the Old Testament?

For this, we have the best of all guidance in the New Testament, with its examples and its explanations.

Looking first at the way our Lord handled these scriptures, we find that he treated them:

(a) *as true, profound and relevant*. To say, ‘It is written’ was to refer not only his hearers, but himself to the very mind of God. This meant cutting through the traditions of men, at whatever cost to himself and his followers; but it also meant digging deeply enough into scripture to discover unnoticed implications in its most familiar passages. It was through no trick of exposition but through taking the words with complete seriousness, that he was able to show what must follow from God’s stated relation of himself to the patriarchs (*i.e.* nothing less than their resurrection); or what kind of Messiah was implied by David’s salutation in Psalm 110:1; what kind of Servant in Isaiah 53, or Son of Man in Daniel 7.

(b) *as material of many textures*. He distinguished between the Old Testament’s concessions, on the one hand, and its basic principles and commands on the other (Mt. 19:7, 8); also between the lighter and the weightier matters of the Law (Mt. 23:23), and between the temporary and the permanent (as his radical remarks on ritual defilement made clear (Mk. 7:18, 19; Lk. 11:41)).

(c) *as preparatory*. His ministry opened with the announcement, ‘The time is fulfilled’ (Mk. 1:15), and closed with the resolve, ‘Let the scriptures be fulfilled’ (Mk. 14:49). So his attitude to the Old Testament was what we should call Christocentric, insisting that the scriptures should be searched not as self-contained but as witnesses to him (Jn. 5:39f.); and that his death would replace the Old Covenant by the New (Mt. 26:28).

I shall return to this and its implications for our preaching, briefly at the end. Meanwhile there are expressions in the Epistles which help to explain the role of the elements in the Old Testament which the New has now transcended – for there is

little need for me to say anything about what is immediately accessible there: the doctrines of God and man, the devotional wealth, the wisdom, the preaching, the history; in fact, the great bulk of its material.

The Epistles

Of the few samples we shall be taking, the first must be the important statement in Romans 15:4, that ‘whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction’. The word ‘whatever’ involves us at once with the entire Old Testament – which denies us the right of censorship but holds out the promise of discovery – while the word ‘instruction’ indicates what is the abiding value of the time-conditioned regulations, permissions, structures and methods which we find there. It implies that what is no longer binding is still illuminating, as God’s own teaching-material: profitable (as 2 Timothy 3:16 would add) not only for doctrine but for ‘reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness’.

In what ways this superseded material keeps its teaching value, we can infer to a large extent from a group of words found together in a single verse, Hebrews 8:5, where they pinpoint the relation of the old priesthood, sacrifices and tabernacle to the realities of the new covenant. The words are ‘copy’ (*‘upodeigma*), ‘shadow’ (*skia*) and ‘pattern’ (*tupoß*).

The first of these, *‘upodeigma*, is well seen in John 13:15: ‘I have given you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you’. We might call it a ‘model’, almost in the sense in which scientists sometimes use the term, to mean not an exact representation but a means of visualising a concept. In this instance, Christ had washed his disciples’ feet; and thereby made a most striking visual statement. Some Christians try to use the model literally, with a ritual of foot-washing; but clearly it is meant to teach unforgettably a whole outlook and habit of life. So too, these other teaching-models, the institutions of the old order, give clarity and memorability to what would otherwise be as featureless and unmemorable as a written constitution – or a lecture!

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The second word, *skia*, ‘shadow’, has an important role in warning us against mistaking the appearance for the reality and drawing back into the past. This is the emphasis in Colossians 2:17: ‘These’ (sc. questions of food and drink and festivals) ‘are only a shadow...; but the substance is of Christ’. But there is also a sense of *skia* which brings out its positive aspect – for by its association with *skiagrafia* it suggests a ‘sketch’ towards the finished article. This is arguably the sense implied in Hebrews 10:1, where the law has a *skia* of the good things to come, not the very *eikwn*, or image. Calvin expounded this text in terms of a painting and its preliminary sketch, as follows: ‘Under the Law what is today expressed with a masterly hand and in living and varied colours was only *adumbratum* in rough and incomplete

lines'.²

In dwelling on this nuance we have to remember that whereas the artist's sketch clarified matters for his own benefit, with God it was to benefit the beholder. And we can appreciate the teaching value of displaying a picture in both its forms, side by side: in its bare outline and also in its final glory. The former, revealing its composition with special clarity, sharpens our observation and understanding of the latter.

The third word, *tupoß*, refers in Hebrews 8:5 to the pattern of the tabernacle and its furniture, 'which', said God to Moses, 'was shown you on the mountain'. So here is a pattern of a pattern, and we know how meticulously it was laid down, and how it has enabled enthusiasts to build models of the tabernacle in our own era as Christian teaching devices. Admittedly some of the lessons drawn from it have smacked more of the conjuror's art than the expositor's; yet there is a scriptural precedent for some such exercise, not only in the deliberately tantalising reference in Hebrews 9:1-5 to what might have been said had space permitted, but also in God's word to Ezekiel about using the plans of his visionary temple as a visual aid. 'Let them measure the pattern'³, he charged him – for its isolation of the profane from the holy should make its viewers 'ashamed of their iniquities'.

But in connection with *tupoß* I have one other passage to remind you of, one in which we find an Old Testament narrative treated first with extreme symbolism and then with extreme directness. This is 1 Corinthians 10, which opens with the Exodus miracles expounded in terms of baptism and of the supernatural food and drink that are derived from Christ, who was the reality we are to see in 'the rock that followed' Israel. Then, having declared that these things are *tupoi* for us (6), Paul goes on to deal with the specific sins and punishments of the generation concerned, warning us against each of these quite literally; for 'these things happened to them *tupikws*' (11), and are 'written down for our instruction'. So within a dozen verses we have the Old Testament preached from in both senses of the word 'typical': the sense which brings out the fact that God's smallest acts have on them the stamp – the *tupoß* – of his person and his ways, printing a family likeness, so to speak, on generation after generation of his works; but also in the sense in which we speak of what is 'typically human' from age to age, and therefore directly relevant to us now.

Here then is encouragement for our own preaching to be enriched by the object-lessons – in both senses – which lie everywhere to hand in the Old Testament, illustrating the kind of temptations we still face, the kind of faith that is still asked of us (think, for a start, of our predecessors in Hebrews 11), the kind of handling that God may have in store for us as he had for a Jacob, a Joseph or a Ruth. These are object-lessons plain and simple. But also there are those that act out in miniature or in diagram or parable⁴ the great doctrines and the pattern of redemption, and we are following the apostles, not merely the eccentrics, when we use them.

I need hardly stress, I suppose, the fact that this is not an invitation to a riot of allegorising – the kind of exegetical conjuring display which I mentioned earlier in passing, where the preacher produces from almost nowhere all the contents of the gospel (having first concealed them about his person). It is chiefly by way of light relief that I will quote from a commentary, which shall be nameless, where it deals with the death of Oreb and Zeeb 'typologically':

They slew Oreb on the rock Oreb. This is like bringing a sinner to the Rock of Ages that he may...lay down his life at the feet of Christ. Zeeb they slew at the winepress...Wine is one of the pictures of the Holy Spirit. They brought Zeeb under His power and influence, as it were, and he yielded his life to Him...They brought the heads of Oreb and Zeeb to Gideon. It is a wonderful thing to obtain trophies of grace...and bring them...

And I cannot resist reminding you of two gloriously opposite interpretations of a couplet in the Song of Songs, unearthed by F.F. Bruce from two commentaries which he described as 'recent' in a lecture which he gave in 1955⁵. The text was part of chapter 7, verse 4:

Your nose is like a tower of Lebanon, overlooking Damascus.

Professor Bruce tells us:

One of the commentaries has this to say: 'A saved soul's nose is an elevated sense of discernment of that which is fragrant or evil; a watch-tower against danger. Continually it is alert both to the sweet odour of Christ and likeness to Him and to the repulsive smell of sin. (Which is no doubt true (comments Bruce), but it has nothing to do with the Song of Songs.) But the other commentator views the passage far otherwise. Here, to his mind, is Antichrist addressing the Scarlet Woman. And so he says: 'The nose that is like the tower of Lebanon is really 'Babylon the Great'... But so intense is the sense of smell of this great organ, that the Holy Spirit names it as *looking* towards the object of its desires; and I should not be surprised if Antichrist were to present himself from or by way of Damascus.' (Which is equally irrelevant, (Bruce remarks) and has not even the merit of being probably true in itself.)

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In rejecting these endearing extravagances, however, we must not be scared away from recognising and expounding the genuine as distinct from the contrived anticipations of the new covenant, the deep as against the superficial continuity between promise and fulfilment. It was this unfolding of the scriptures that made the hearts of Cleopas and his companion burn within them as they walked with Jesus to Emmaus.

But it is time to gather up, if we can, what we have gleaned from the example of Christ and the comments of the epistle-writers. On this New Testament basis we can perhaps arrive at a few maxims for ourselves in relation to the Old Testament.

1. *Dig into it deeply and widely.* Widely, because of the 'Whatever' which we noticed in Romans 15:4, and the 'All' or 'Every' of 2 Timothy 3:16. Deeply, because of Christ's example. And if the psalmist could rejoice in this search, 'like one who finds great spoil', much more may we, to whom the scriptures have been opened.

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2. *Treat its people and events as real.* This emerges as a corollary of the warnings and examples which our Lord and the Apostles draw from these pages, even apart from other reasons. For there is little force in warnings drawn from judgments which never fell, or sins which were not in fact committed; nor in examples of faith which existed only in pious fiction. In our eagerness to follow the ups and downs of current theorising we may leave our hearers as disorientated in their encounters with Moses and Abraham as was Alice (if you will excuse the comparison) over the waxing and waning of the Cheshire Cat. We have a more sure word of prophecy than this, and more invigorating company to keep.

3. *Bring out the pattern.* In other words, treat it not as a quarry of unrelated texts and stories to embellish our sermons or get them off to a good start, but with its parts related to the whole. That is, asking what the story in question, or the ritual or the oracle, is doing where we find it, and what it conveyed in its own time; but also (since we are not giving history lessons) asking where it stands in relation to the finished pattern. The New Testament will guide us about this, as we saw from our sampling of the epistles.

4. *Relate it to Christ.* This will mean being faithful to both of his emphases on the subject: his saying 'Not to destroy but to fulfil', and his 'But I say unto you...'. From his teaching it is clear that the fulfilment which he brought meant in certain respects the old teaching being greatly enriched, and in other respects the old outgrown. This is clear concerning the ritual laws; it is also a corollary of God's action in time, whereby things that were once appropriate and even commanded may be irreversibly superseded, and a return to them become an act of apostasy. This is the burden of Galatians and of Hebrews; it is also illustrated in the incident where Christ rebuked the 'sons of thunder' for wishing to call down fire from heaven as Elijah had once done. That had been a day of judgment; this was the day of salvation. (Here, incidentally, seems to be the error of those liberation movements that would go straight back to Exodus or the Book of Judges in the raw, for their mandate. It is – to borrow Paul's

analogy in the Galatian controversy – a return to the time of Israel's childhood, or to their adolescence.)

As for the preaching of the Old Testament's Christology, in the sense that we see Christ present or prefigured there, we have already dwelt on some of the ways in which the vents and institutions of the old order spoke of him, and we have been reminded that we treat the Old Testament in this way by his example and express command. Not that we seek him in every stick of furniture in the house or in every turn of phrase (as we saw), but rather that we find in him the goal of the Old Testament and the sum and substance of the New.

We must draw no lines, whether doctrinal, liturgical or ethical, from the Old Testament to the present which would have to by-pass the person, work and teaching of Christ

Therefore – and this is crucial – we must draw no lines, whether doctrinal, liturgical or ethical, from the Old Testament to the present which would have to by-pass the person, work and teaching of Christ. All its material must converge upon that centre; all of it reach us as, in principle, it passes through his hands; all be baptised into him, for whom are all things, and in whom all things hold together.

Postscript

As a postscript, there is one question that may need answering in view of those final remarks. If all must come to us through Christ, have we not made the Old Testament superfluous after all? With God's definitive statement before us 'in his Son', do we really need the fragments that led up to this?

Perhaps a parable may be in order, in reply. The composer Sibelius sometimes constructed his symphonies by introducing first a wisp or two of a melody, a touch of orchestral colour, a snatch of recognisable rhythm, and from time to time new and perhaps alien turns of phrase, allowing these to make their momentary mark and develop some of their implications. The music at this stage had its own logic and its compelling character. But it was moving towards a fulfilment which the composer had had in mind from the beginning, when those fragments would flow together in a huge statement which united, reinterpreted and transcended them. It was the arrival-point and climax, vastly satisfying.

The point of the parable scarcely needs comment except by the question, what would the final statement have meant to any hearer, but for the fragments that it brought together and consummated? the tensions it resolved? the journey it crowned?

Thank God, we have in scripture a thousand pages of symphony. Let them be heard!