

# EXPECTATION: JESUS IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

By NICHOLAS KING

THERE IS a detectable loss of confidence in the Old Testament among christian pastors and catechists. It is understandable, of course, that a minister or reader, faced with the prospect of inviting a congregation to say 'thanks be to God', in response to the account of the building of the Ark in Exodus 37, or (worse still, perhaps) the story of David's seduction of Bathsheba and murder of Uriah the Hittite in 2 Samuel 11, or the tale of Susanna, which in catholic bibles is found at Daniel 13, should cravenly evade embarrassment by taking the reading from the alternate year or the preceding day. It may be a mistake, of course, for such splendidly racy tales as the last two are guaranteed to make a congregation sit up and take note; but it is a pardonable one.

It is not merely anxiety about the *content* of the Old Testament, of course, that engenders this loss of confidence; a further problem is the fear people have nowadays of misusing it. In some ways this fear is well-grounded and salutary: we have a duty to treat the Old Testament on its merits, and not to regard it as a kind of optional foreword to the New Testament. Modern historical method has given biblical scholars a more disciplined grasp of the meaning of much of the Bible, and hence a stricter understanding of how it may be respectably used; so preachers and the like tend to look nervously over their shoulders in case Rudolf Bultmann should be watching and charge them with transgressing the laws of *Formgeschichte*.

There are therefore two types of anxiety about giving a positive answer to the question 'Is Jesus Christ in the Old Testament?': the feeling that the Old Testament may somehow be unchristian, with its anthropomorphisms, its occasional barbarities, and its broad (though by no means universal) consensus that virtue and prosperity are related; and the feeling that modern biblical criticism has demonstrated that most of the Old Testament's 'predictions' of the

events of Jesus's life are not predictions at all. It may be useful to consider these two questions separately.

*Is the Old Testament christian?*

Of the many distinguished scholars who would give a negative answer to this question, we may mention two. Marcion, one of the more engaging heretics the Church has thrown up (and out), in the first half of the second century, came to the conclusion that the Old Testament God was not the God revealed by Jesus, but an inferior God, who was nevertheless creator of the universe. He therefore took the logical step of scrapping it entirely, along with those portions of the New Testament contaminated by it. This did not leave him with very much, just ten of Paul's epistles and most of Luke-Acts, which is not a great deal. And there lies the problem, of course: if you try to tidy up the Old Testament threads that are to be found in the New, you very soon find that you have unravelled the whole garment.

Our other thinker is Rudolf Bultmann, the giant of twentieth-century scripture scholarship. Bultmann saw the problem that Marcion had not seen, and, though he shared many of Marcion's reservations, was not prepared to do such a thorough-going job with the razor. For him the Old Testament was too worldly and too legalistic to function as revelation for Christians; instead, it provides us, he thought, with a 'pre-understanding' of revelation, by indicating the plight in which we find ourselves without Jesus Christ, showing what he calls the 'inner contradiction' of Judaism, which positively demanded the resolution that came in Jesus Christ.<sup>1</sup> It must be said that Bultmann was not especially sympathetic to Judaism, which perhaps accounts for the way in which he has phrased this criticism; the very fact that God's promise to Judaism had miscarried demanded an alternative fulfilment. It is for this reason that the Old Testament is important to us, and not because it is particularly christian.

Can we go any further than this? It seems to me that we can; for many modern scholars, and for the tradition of orthodox christianity (though it must be said that Roman Catholicism has since the Reformation tended to neglect the Old Testament), the two Testaments belong intimately together as God's self-revelation to mankind. We symbolize this by binding the two into one volume and calling it the Bible. I would like to point to four reasons for regarding the Old Testament as properly christian.

First it is the working of God in human history. Marcion's

mistake was that his rigorist position involved the existence of two Gods, the inferior God who created the world, and the God who was the Father of Our Jesus Christ. (It must be confessed that we only know Marcion's position through the unimpartial testimony of his opponents, so we ought not to be too emphatic about what that position was.) For orthodox Christianity, God is one, and speaks in Old and New Testaments alike; and it is no good saying that the two Testaments contradict each other, for within each of them we meet with many different theologies. Each of them is the testimony of God's word in history, and the fact that we feel a little discomfited by the command to total extermination of Israel's enemies in (for example) Joshua 6, 17, or horrified by the remark in Psalm 137, 'O daughter of Babylon . . . happy shall he be who takes your little ones and dashes them against the rocks', or puzzled by mendacity among the patriarchs (Gen 12, 11-13; 20, 2; 26, 7; 27, 5-29), is not of itself a proof that God is not there. Nor, of course, on the other hand, is it to be taken as a commendation of ruthlessness in war, child-murder, or of lying out of self-interest. What we have to do is to endeavour to see what the author is about in recounting these tales: and for that, of course, we require the services of biblical scholars. But the mere fact that we are ill at ease with parts of the Old Testament should be seen not as a weakness in the Old Testament, but as a divine challenge: in particular we must allow the Old Testament to speak to us of the holiness of God and of his total involvement in our history.

A second reason for taking the Old Testament seriously is that Jesus and the first Christians did so. We should remember that they had nothing else in the way of Scripture, and that it was a part of them to a degree that we can scarcely grasp. Jesus must have known it intimately, and as he wondered about who he was, and what was his relationship to God (and if we are to take the doctrine of the Incarnation seriously we are compelled to say that he must have asked himself these questions), his formulation of the answers must have been virtually exclusively in the terms and categories offered by the Old Testament. Indeed, the distinguished English biblical scholar, the late C. H. Dodd, has suggested in a much-quoted passage that it was Jesus himself who first taught the early Church to bring together the songs of the suffering Servant from Second Isaiah with the ideas of Son of Man and the righteous sufferer of the Psalms, as the key to the kind of Messiah that he was.<sup>2</sup> This theory has not commanded universal acceptance among biblical scholars: no theory ever does! But if you accept that Jesus must have been

aware that he had some kind of religious significance without necessarily knowing precisely what that significance was, then his first theological port of call on the voyage of discovery must have been the Old Testament; and where he has gone before, we should be foolish not to follow.

Thirdly, it is very clear that the earliest apostolic preaching of the gospel, both to Jews and to gentiles, was couched in terms of the Old Testament. The reason is that the first Christians thought themselves to be Jews, and only began preaching to the gentiles after failing to convince Israel that Jesus was the Christ. Like Jesus, they would have had no other source from which to fashion a theological language. It is also clear from the New Testament itself: every book in that collection depends for its full understanding on a grasp of Scripture; and yet it is certain that most, if not all of them, are destined first for Jewish Christian readers, and then for the gentiles. Matthew's gospel is perhaps the most Jewish, and the one that most emphasizes how Jesus fulfils the Old Testament; but it also clearly embraces and presupposes a Gentile mission, as the final instruction to the apostles indicates. In a similar way, Luke's gospel rests upon the premise that God was working in Jesus Christ, and that to discover this all you have to do is to understand Scripture; and, of course, Luke-Acts is *par excellence* the apologia for the mission to the gentiles.

Fourthly, the Old Testament itself creates and expresses an expectation of which Jesus is the undiscerned object, at least for Christians. The promise to Abraham (Gen 12, 2-3, etc), the promise to David (2 Sam 7, 16), and the prediction of the root that would come forth from Jesse (Isai 11), as well as countless other assurances about the future that pious Jews regarded as still unfulfilled, created a mood of expectation, a feeling, detectable in many quarters of Judaism at the time, that now was the moment when God would act. This mood is a constant feature of Judaism between the heady days of 160 B.C. when the Maccabean revolt for a brief space restored Israel's independence, until the ill-fated but skilfully conducted rebellion of Bar Kokhba three hundred years later. It is also to be found in much Jewish literature of the period, in that group of writings loosely assorted under the title of Jewish apocalyptic, of which the chances of the Judean climate have preserved for us a splendid, if decidedly lunatic, example in the War Scroll from Qumran. All of these take their inspiration from faith in the Old Testament, which seems to promise something that has not yet come to fruition, something vague enough to be very variously described

in the writings, something that the first Christians were convinced was finally and definitively given in Jesus of Nazareth. Thus we shall not really grasp the impact Jesus made until we have understood the implied question to which he was the answer; and the terms of that question are set forth in the Old Testament.

A. T. Hanson has argued that the first Christians regarded Jesus as actually present at certain points in Old Testament history. He instances the reference to the Israelites in the desert drinking water from the rock, 'and the rock was Christ' (1 Cor 10, 4), and the suggestion in John (12, 37-41) that the vision in the temple recorded in Isaiah 6 was actually a vision of Jesus.<sup>3</sup> More recently the same author has made an interesting case for the view that John (1, 13-14) deliberately echoes Exodus (33, 12-34; 8) in order to imply that what Moses saw on Sinai was in fact a vision of the Word, rather than of God properly so-called ('for no one has ever seen God').<sup>4</sup> Whether or not we can follow Hanson all the way, it is at least clear in outline how it is possible for Christians to say that Jesus Christ is in the Old Testament, as goal, or as answer to implied questions. And of course the great advantage of this approach is that we do not have to say that Jesus is somehow its entire *content*, and so to start inventing unlikely spiritual meanings for passages which rightly repel us.

*Did the Old Testament authors foresee the details of Jesus's life?*

Having given the outline of an answer to the problem of whether the Old Testament can properly be regarded as Christian, we must now turn to the second aspect of the difficulty: whether modern biblical criticism will allow us to use the Old Testament. I take it as axiomatic that it must be allowed to stand on its own two feet, and that the academic elucidation of it is an autonomous discipline, with its own rules. It follows that we may not take the meaning discovered by the sacred authors in a given passage as the correct meaning, simply because it is to be met with in the New Testament; though of course evangelists and writers of epistles (or, for the matter of that, the rabbis who composed the Talmud) frequently offer us very helpful insights into the possible meanings of Old Testament texts.

It may be advisable here to enter a *caveat* against too unreflective a use of the term 'correct meaning'. Obviously, the prime sense of this phrase is 'what the author intended'. And in that sense, the use of Scripture in Matthew 2, 15 or 2, 18 is clearly 'incorrect'; neither Hosea 11, 1 nor Jeremiah 31, 15 can be made to mean what Matthew wants them to mean. What of Matthew 1, 23, where he employs the quotation from Isaiah 7, 14: 'Behold, a virgin shall

conceive . . . '? The word 'virgin' comes from the greek version of Isaiah; the hebrew word used in the original means merely 'young woman'; and Isaiah's prophecy refers simply to a woman, presumably in the house of King Ahaz, whose son will deliver the people of Israel. It is not therefore, as Christians sometimes imagine, a prediction of uncanny accuracy about Jesus's virginal conception. Nevertheless, Matthew's use of the phrase is not absurdly remote from the original sense of the text: for Isaiah is expressing a sense that God is working in history, and that there may be one born who will lead Israel into the promised peace and plenty. In that (admittedly somewhat restricted) sense, Matthew is using Isaiah 'correctly'.

We can, I think, widen this a little, Once written down, words take on a life of their own, and there is a defensible use of the term 'correct meaning' in the sense of an interpretation that does not take account of the author's intention, but simply starts with the Old Testament as it is written, and finds its justification in the religious experience of the interpreter and of those for whom he is interpreting. Let me give four examples:

(a) among the manuscripts discovered at Qumran there are two that are described as *peshet*-type. They are composed by taking the scripture text (Nahum and Habbakuk), and going through it verse by verse or section by section, at each step saying 'its *peshet* (interpretation) is . . .', followed by a reference to some event in the recent history of the sect. The Habbakuk-*peshet* makes explicitly the point that Habbakuk himself knew less about the meaning of his prophecy than the Teacher of Righteousness, from whom Qumran sectaries learnt their interpretation of Scripture, several hundred years later (1 Qp Hab 7, 1-5).

(b) In H. W. Baker's metrical translation of Psalm 23, a specific allusion to Jesus is introduced at four separate places. We may content ourselves with mentioning merely one of them. The Hebrew of the fourth verse can be translated:

Even though I walk in the valley of the shadow of death, I shall not fear evil, for you are with me; your rod and staff, they will comfort me.

Baker's version of the same verse reads;

In death's dark vale I fear no ill  
With thee, dear Lord, beside me;  
Thy rod and staff my comfort still,  
Thy cross before to guide me.

(c) In Psalm 46, 11 we read, 'be still and know that I am God', a verse that is frequently used by retreat-givers and others to encourage their audiences to quiet prayer; but the context of the passage, and the way in which the verb for 'be still' is used elsewhere, make it clear that the idea here is the rather different one of God trampling his enemies into submission.

(d) There is a mosaic in the church of *Santa Maria Maggiore* in Rome depicting the story from Genesis 14 of Melchisedek bringing out bread and wine, in which the artist has dressed Abraham's escorts as Roman soldiers; and there in the sky, looking down on the scene, is not God the Father, but quite clearly Jesus Christ. (This could of course be paralleled from many instances of christian iconography — I have mentioned this one only because I happened to be looking at a picture of the mosaic recently.)

Now in each of these instances there is a profitable use of an Old Testament text that takes no account of what the original author intended; and, as I say, I regard this as defensible interpretations. But it is worth noting that in the main, New Testament authors themselves display a far more restrained approach, and tend to respect the intentions of their Old Testament authors. It seems to me that this should be the aim of the modern preacher or catechist also. We do *not* need to twist Holy Writ in order to extract God's word from it, even though occasionally it may be possible to find a religiously profitable meaning that was not even dimly a part of what the original author intended.

There is one caution I should like to add at this point: since for the New Testament authors (as for us) Jesus Christ was the fulfilment of the Old Testament promise, it was evident to them (as it is less evident for us) that the whole Old Testament was in some sense or other about him. So, for example, they found it profitable to meditate on the Passion in terms of Isaiah 53 and Psalm 22: with the result that the accounts of the Passion slowly become influenced by those two passages (and many others besides), to a point where details from them become a part of the Passion-narratives. When, however, we put the two together, we are abusing the Old Testament, if we say, 'what an uncanny prediction!'. If, on the other hand, we see it as a testimony to the fact that Christ transcends history, and is the definitive speech of God to man, and therefore the event to which the Old Testament points, then we shall have a fair idea of what the later authors were doing. The distinguished scholar Gerhard von Rad puts it well: 'one must . . . really speak of a witness of the Old Testament to Christ, for our knowledge of Christ

is incomplete without the witness of the Old Testament. Christ is given to us only through the double witness of the choir of those who await and those who remember'.<sup>5</sup>

*Conclusion: Jesus Christ in the Old Testament*

In some manuscripts of Acts 18, 4, there is an interesting insertion which says of Paul that 'he went into the synagogue each sabbath, he held discussions, and putting in the name of the Lord Jesus [sc. into the Scriptures] managed to persuade not merely Jews, but Gentiles also'. This process of bringing the Scriptures 'up-to-date' by way of an insertion which makes explicit a reference understood by the interpreter to be implicit, is found also in the Targums, the aramaic translations of the hebrew scriptures, which may very well date back in part to New Testament times. Such a process would therefore be accepted as normal both by the evangelists or Jesus himself. In one sense this must be our attitude to the Old Testament, since there is a profound continuity between the two volumes of the Bible. For Christians, Jesus, as the Father's definitive utterance to mankind, does embrace and sum up the entire Old Testament; and in that sense the gospel is foreshadowed in the Old, and both belong together, for preaching and for study.

At the same time, of course, Christians believe that there is a radical discontinuity between the two. For academic as well as for devotional purposes it is essential to see the documents composing the Old Testament as standing by themselves and as capable of elucidation without reference to New Testament writings. Unless we are prepared to adopt this profoundly reverential stance to the Old Testament, we shall not be able to see it for what God and its human authors intend by it; nor shall we be in any position to hold dialogue with Judaism, our great parent religion. If we ransack the last twenty-five chapters of Isaiah for predictions about Jesus, we shall blinker ourselves to the profundity of Second Isaiah's religious insight. It is not down that road that we are to find the unity of the two testaments, but by listening, without straining, to the 'still, small voice' (1 Kg 19, 12).

<sup>1</sup> Cf Bultmann's contributions to, *Essays on Old Testament Interpretation*, ed. C. Westermann (London, 1963), pp 50-75; and to *The Old Testament and Christian Faith*, ed. B. W. Anderson (London, 1964), pp 8-35.

<sup>2</sup> C. H. Dodd, *According to The Scriptures* (London, 1952), p 110.

<sup>3</sup> A. T. Hanson, *Jesus Christ In the Old Testament* (London, 1965).

<sup>4</sup> A. T. Hanson, *The New Testament Interpretation of Scripture* (London, 1980).

<sup>5</sup> Cf his contribution to Westermann's *Essays on Old Testament Interpretation*, p 39.