

The Bedell/Boyle Lecture 1994

Why the Old Testament - then or now?

Revd Terence McCaughey

Response

Revd William Riley

NATIONAL BIBLE SOCIETY OF IRELAND

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INTRODUCTION

The Bedell/Boyle Lecture Series

The National Bible Society of Ireland has inaugurated an annual lecture series known as the Bedell/Boyle Lecture. It is intended that the series will provide an opportunity to promote the Bible and the effective use of the Holy Scriptures. Each year a speaker of stature will be asked to lecture on a topic relating some aspect of the Bible to current developments. It is hoped to publish each Lecture.

The Lecture series is named in honour of William Bedell (1571-1642) Bishop of Kilmore and Ardagh, because of his commitment to the translation of the Bible into Irish. Linked with Bedell's Irish Bible, published for the first time in 1685, is Hon. Robert Boyle (1626-1691) who ensured the publication of Bedell's Bible. Boyle was very committed to Bible distribution and he was a distinguished scientist known for Boyle's Law. Thus key elements of modern Bible Society work - translation, publication and distribution - were foreshadowed by these two men.

The 1994 Lecture was given by Rev. Terence McCaughey on 30 September 1994 in Dawson Hall, Dawson Street, Dublin. Terence McCaughey is Senior Lecturer in the Irish Department of Trinity College Dublin and also lectures in the School of Hebrew, Biblical and Theological Studies. The Response was given by the late Rev. Dr. William Riley who was Lecturer in Mater Dei Institute of Education and a Vice-President of the National Bible Society of Ireland. We are very conscious of our deep loss with the death of Dr. Riley in June 1995.

We are pleased to publish the complete text of the Lecture and the Response and believe that this will aid our reflection and response to the living Word of God in the Holy Scriptures.

Judith Wilkinson

Also in this series:

Alive and Active *Dei Verbum* and Ireland Today, Most Rev. Donal Murray (1992)

The Bible in World Evangelization, Rev. Tom Houston (1993)

THE BEDELL-BOYLE LECTURE 1994

'Why the Old Testament - then or now?'⁵

The question posed in the title of to-night's lecture would not have arisen for William Bedell. Like the good Calvinist he was, he saw the writings of the old and new covenants (what we call the Old Testament and New) as belonging to one another in a splendid complementarity. On arrival in Ireland in 1627 to be provost of Trinity College, Bedell was shocked to discover that, although the New Testament had been available in print in the Irish language since 1602, no translation of the Old Testament had even been attempted. During his short time in Trinity and later during the 1630s as bishop in Kilmore, he made it his business to ensure that such a translation was undertaken. That translation was completed before 1641, but the political upheavals of the mid-century ensured that it was not printed immediately. In fact, it did not appear in print till 1685.

Even if it had appeared in the early 1640s, there would still have been a considerable gap between the publication of the Irish New Testament and the appearance of the Old. There can be no doubt, indeed, but that the early reformers saw the publication of the New Testament as a priority. The Old Testament, however important, came second. So it would appear, after all, that the two were valued differently.

1. Why there is a problem, and what it is.

When the Old Testament comes up for serious discussion, really the first question that arises is concerned with what it is best to call this collection of thirty-nine books, if we are to avoid offending anyone. Christians regard them as the first part of their Bible and without a thought call them the 'Old Testament' — not necessarily considering for a moment the offence this may cause to Jewish neighbours, for whom this is simply 'the Bible'. They will tend to hear the word 'Old' in Old Testament as signalling 'transcended' or 'passé'. It is therefore often more correct and courteous, when speaking to Jewish friends to speak - not of the 'Old Testament', but of the Hebrew Bible.

However, that being said, the distinction between old covenant/testament and new covenant/testament is not one invented by Christians for it goes back to the Hebrew scriptures themselves, to the thinking of Ezekiel and Jeremiah. Jeremiah (31.31ff.) looked forward to the day when Yahweh would make 'a new covenant' with the people — not like the old one which the people had broken.

As the early Christians began to reflect upon the significance of the life and, particularly, the violent death of Jesus, they often from the very beginning spoke of that death metaphorically as the 'sealing' of the 'new covenant' foreseen by the prophets. This is clear from surviving fragments of their liturgy, e.g. 'This is the cup of the New Covenant, sealed in my blood', 1 Cor. 11. 23-6, or of their theology in 2 Cor. 3 and Hebrews 8 and 10.

For the early Christians, the 'Old Testament' was simply 'the Bible' (the only one they had). But the second generation had inherited also a body of Christian writings; so it is hardly surprising, if we bear in mind their thinking about Old and New covenants, that they came to call the Hebrew Bible writings the 'Old Testament' and the specifically Christian literature the 'New Testament'.

Even though they kept these two bodies of material separate, they were in no doubt about one thing. They affirmed that the two covenants were covenants of and with the same God. Indeed, it is precisely that continuity of experience, as between Jewish history and their own, which the Christians insisted on in the face of the 2nd century scholar,

Marcion of Sinope, who wished to dispense with the Old Testament altogether. In his book of Antitheses, which survives only in the samples from it which were quoted by those who wrote against him, Marcion took the view that the Old Testament revealed a God quite different from the one revealed by Jesus Christ — a God of law and wrath. He took those oppositions spoken of by the apostle Paul, between law and gospel, flesh and spirit, old age and new to mean that the Jewish scripture (representing law, flesh and the Old Age) was in hostile opposition to Christian faith.

We can understand, I think, how the earliest Christians who were almost exclusively Jewish, and nourished on the psalms and the Jewish scripture, took them for granted. But as the second and third generation came along, the majority of Christians were not Jewish; they were Gentiles, for whom the Jewish scriptures were just that bit more strange - even alien. And of course, they were open to the radical critique which Marcion made.

In the event, however, the leadership of the church decided against Marcion and in c.144 C.E., they expelled Marcion from the community and kept the Old Testament. But the decision to do so did not make the question which Marcion had raised go away. What exactly are Christians to do with those long histories of the Israelites or their laws or their liturgical texts - many of which start off with presuppositions which are unfamiliar to Christians? What authority do its texts have now for Christians? These questions did not go away the day that Marcion was expelled. They are at the centre of our reflections to-night; and they will still be there when to-night's lecture has been delivered, discussed and forgotten.

Indeed, it is probably true to say that, even though Marcion was declared a heretic and put out of the community, there survive in the church to this very day (even in pulpits!) quite a lot of crypto-Marcionites. Few to-day would excise the Old Testament. It is easier simply to leave huge tracts of it unopened and ignored, while making our own anthology of the bits we find acceptable or even rather edifying and beautiful.

Christians often work on assumptions like this:

- (i) they say that the Old Testament presents a stern, wrathful and vengeful God whereas the New confronts us with a forgiving God of love. That is defensible, but those who say it should perhaps remember such texts as the rather terrible words of the Spirit to Laodicea in Revelation (3.16): 'Because you are neither hot nor cold, I will spew you out of my mouth', from the New Testament - or should compare the tenderness of this from the Old:
'God shall feed his flock like a shepherd, and gather the lambs in his arms, and gently lead those that are with young.'
- (ii) Christians affirm that, whereas the Old Testament speaks of God anthropomorphically, i.e. as tho' God were a human person, the New transcends all that language and speaks of God as Spirit (John 4.24). But it is not as simple as that, for Jesus himself speaks to and of God as 'Abba'/'Father'. And, on the other hand, the Old Testament consistently prohibits the making of images of any kind. See Deut. 4.
- (iii) Christians are in the habit often of accusing the Old Testament of presenting God as the national deity, leading his own people into battle. Again, that presentation is to be found, all right. But Christians cannot claim to be the only ones to see God's activity in more universal terms. Cf. Amos 9.7, where God says:
'Did I not bring the Philistines from Caphtor, and the Syrians from Kir, as once I brought you out of Egypt?'

Christians have been too often in the habit of patronising or demoting the Old Testament and its insights in an attempt to magnify the treasure they believe themselves to have been given. But nobody who takes the trouble really to read the texts can do that. There is no more eloquent and poignant expression of faith in the New Testament than that of Job in the Old, who says: 'Tho' He slay me, yet will I pursue Him.' Or think of the story of Abraham's near-sacrifice of Isaac: Abraham does not take his stand on his own understanding of God's promise to him i.e. that in Isaac, his only son, all the nations would be blessed. Instead, he does the next thing he knows he must do in obedience to God, even though it runs completely counter to his understanding of God's promises. That is faith! And even the New Testament writers acknowledged that there had been and could be no advance on Abraham's faith.

However, you and I are the inheritors of the findings of a whole school of 19th century scholars who saw primitive Christianity as being the wonderful thing which emerged into the light when Judaism encountered the religion and culture of the Greek-speaking world. According to these scholars, Christianity certainly was not Judaism, but it needed there to have been Judaism. The emergence of Christianity required that Judaism should have encountered Greek religion and culture. But, as the synthesis which emerged from their encounter, Christianity was assumed to have transcended both of them.

Many of us have taken in (almost by osmosis) something of that line of thought, but even if we haven't, many of us share still in another way of thinking about the Old Testament which owes its origin to the theories of Charles Darwin which affected not only geology and biology but every other discipline as well. Many ordinary church members claim to discern in the Bible a sort of evolution of ideas and practices - a progression (if you like) from a primitive polytheism to a higher monotheism, a progression from the religion of cultic clean-ness and unclean-ness (as in the laws of Leviticus) to the moral religion of the prophets and to Jesus' proclamation of the fatherhood of God and the universal gospel.

No doubt a history of religion can be traced in the pages of the Bible, but too exclusive an emphasis on this way of reading obscures the thematic consistency of the documents. It does not allow for what Emil Brunner meant when he said: 'Ideas have no beginning and no end!'

Before concluding this section of the lecture, it should perhaps be added that there have been others in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries who reacted against the evolutionary or progressivist view of the texts which we have called Darwinian. For their part, they detected in the movement from early Israel to the period after the exile and on into the inter-testamental period and early and modern Judaism, a certain decadence. They claimed to discern a certain falling-away from the magnanimous insights of the earlier period of what was called 'biblical' or 'Old Testament' faith. So it was that 'Hebrew' had sound and good connotations, whereas 'Jewish' had inferior or decadent ones. The alleged deterioration of the tradition which they claimed to see in Judaism was, of course, understood to stand in a contrast with Christianity which was wholly flattering to the latter.

2. What of those who in the early centuries tried to maintain the link between old and new?

It is worthwhile to recall, even rather cursorily, some of the ways in which Christians attempted in the centuries after Marcion's expulsion, to hold Old and New together.

Of course, they had inherited from the New Testament writers themselves certain ways of reading the Old Testament texts. They were constantly on the look-out for texts which could be considered to have found their 'fulfilment' in the life of Jesus or the experience of the early community. To some of these we to-day would make very little objection; for instance, those passages which see Jesus' suffering in terms of those of the suffering servant 2nd Isaiah had spoken of (Matt. 12.4). But other uses of the text we cannot accept so readily. For instance, the verse from psalm 69 which runs: 'Let his habitation become desolate, and let no one live in it' is seized upon to justify the decision of the Eleven to elect someone to fill Judas' place among the Twelve.

Large tracts of narrative from the Old Testament were read as prefiguring the story of Jesus. Among many others that could be cited, is the story of Joseph. The young Joseph is sold into slavery among the heathen by his brothers, one of whom just happens to be called Judah (=Judas). The parallel is with Jesus, betrayed and handed over to the Romans by his own people. But God is with Joseph through his trials and in due course he is exalted to be Pharaoh's right-hand man. When famine strikes the Canaanite homeland, the brothers come to Egypt to buy corn. Like Caiaphas and others in the case of Jesus, they do not recognise whom it is they have to do with.

After a time Joseph reveals himself, forgives them and saves them. He explains that he had had to undergo this suffering in order that many should be preserved alive. Cf. the necessity of Christ's suffering emphasised in the N.T. Then consider the occasion on which Joseph warns the brothers that, when they come next time, they must bring their youngest brother, Benjamin, or else they will not see Joseph's face. This text ('Except you bring your younger brother with you, you will not see my face') has been used by those who see large parts of the O.T. as prefigurements of the New as a command to forgiven sinners to go out and bring in the 'younger brother' without whom they cannot themselves expect to see God.

Of course, the notion that figures from the Old Testament are of importance chiefly insofar as they pre-figure ones from the New is given expression in the New Testament itself. To give one example only, think of Melchisedek, that mysterious king and priest without father or mother or any forebears, who meets Abraham in Genesis 14. carrying bread and wine, and blesses him. To him Abraham offers a tenth of all his possessions. Here, says the writer of Hebrews, is a perfect prefiguring of Christ, son of the eternal God without beginning or end, king and priest, bearing already the elements of the eucharist, blessing us and due to receive our tithes.

Again, as with the story of Joseph, it is hard to imagine that the writer had Christ in mind as he wrote — unless we take about as far as it will go, the notion that writers can sometimes write truer than they know or realise themselves.

But the Old Testament text kept throwing up things which the Christian reader found it difficult to deal with. Crusaders or, later, those who engaged in the religious wars of the 17th century found no difficulty in the heat of battle, in singing a psalm which called on God to break the teeth of the ungodly. But, at times of less tension, Christians did find such a petition inappropriate. So they spiritualised the text, identifying the ungodly as the enemies of the soul. The Church Fathers, from early on, differentiated between the literal meaning of the text (which might not necessarily yield anything very edifying) and the spiritual, mystical or moral meaning, which usually did, or could be made to!

When all else failed, the text could be treated allegorically, i.e. every thing or person in it could be identified as standing for something else. So, over centuries, the poems of the Song of Songs were understood as a dialogue between the individual soul and Christ or

between the Church (which the New Testament sometimes speaks of as the 'bride' of Christ) and its Lord. By methods or (dare we say?) subterfuges like this, it was possible to bind the two testaments together for centuries - and, in some circles, still is.. But, after the Reformation and particularly after the Enlightenment, these methods came into question.

3. The historical-critical method breaks the old link between the testaments. Does it forge a new one?

Critical scholars, coming out from under the dogma of verbal inerrancy and such notions as e.g. that the Books of Moses were actually the work of Moses, soon demonstrated that the Old Testament was made up of a great variety of material — genealogies, liturgical texts, legal texts and jurists' interpretations of them, myths, legends and (as in the case of Ruth or Esther) romances designed to keep up the morale of readers in difficult times. They showed that these texts could be understood only by reference to the history of the Israelite people who had produced them over a period of 1500-2000 years — and not exclusively by reference to events which were not to unfold till centuries or millennia later.

So the Song of Songs, for instance, emerged into the light as what it had been all time - i.e. a sensuous cycle of love- poems.

So, she says: 'I slept, but my heart was awake.
Hark! my beloved is knocking.
'Open to me', he says, 'my sister, my love,
my dove, my perfect one!
for my head is wet with dew, my locks
with the drops of the night.'

[She says]: 'I had put off my garment...
My beloved put his hand to the latch, and
my heart thrilled within me.
I arose to open to my beloved,
and my hands dripped with myrrh upon
the handle of the bolt. I opened
to my beloved...'

Not, I think, the individual soul or the church-speaking, but a rare and beautiful expression of female sexuality - arguably quite worthy of emphasis in itself.

But the historical critics also called in question the facile way in which Old Testament texts had been read as prophecies. So it transpired, for instance, that whatever the prophet was talking about when he said 'Behold, a young woman (so the Hebrew, translated by a Greek word which usually means 'virgin') shall conceive and bear a son and call his name "Emmanuel"', he was not foreseeing Mary's pregnancy or Jesus' birth.

Or take another example. Psalm 2 was for centuries (indeed, from the time of the New Testament itself) seen as referring to Christ. So the words 'Yahweh said to me, "You are my son. This day I have begotten you"' Historical criticism establishes that these are the words said to successive Kings of Judah the day they were set upon the throne. They were given the title 'Son/servant', i.e. vice-roy of God, and given the task of ensuring that the people kept covenant with their God.

Now, if we take this finding of historical criticism seriously, the question arises: Can we still read psalm 2 as though it referred to Christ? I think the answer has to be 'Yes' and 'No'. But this is not all loss, or all negative. Quite the reverse! A critical historical reading

of the psalm enables us to understand what the apostle Paul means when he says (Romans 1.) that Jesus was designated 'Son of God' by the power of the Spirit by his resurrection from the dead. What Paul has in mind is the designation of Jesus at his death as God's representative-without-remainder. At the back of the apostle's mind is the inauguration of Kings of Judah and their designation as viceroys of Yahweh. So it is that a critical historical reading of the Old Testament enables us to understand better what a New Testament writer is intending to say in this case, when he uses the word 'Son'. It turns out that more has been gained than lost by giving Psalm 2 back its autonomy.²

This brings us to another point, which is not without importance if we are to allow one Testament to illuminate the other. The titles which the New Testament writers gave Jesus (e.g. Messiah, Lord, Son of Man) in their attempt to describe his significance, are titles which they found in the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, from which they quote extensively). Unlike the Dead Sea sect at Qmrân, they did not write commentaries on the books of the Hebrew Bible. What they did do was produce gospels, letters, apocalypses etc. of their own, in which they reflected on the significance of Jesus, but always with the Septuagint open in front of them.

We cannot suppose for a moment that they ever for a moment imagined that a time would come when members of their community would question the value of the Old Testament. From their perspective, they saw the Old Testament as 'the Bible'/the Text, and their own productions as reflections on that text in the light of what they deemed to have happened in and around Jesus. Reflection on the text of the Old Bible enabled them to understand more clearly just exactly what had happened and was happening in their own Christian present.

For them the Old Testament was the Text and the New Testament which they were producing (and in the 2nd century eventually fixed into a canon) was reflexion. In our day, and for a long time past in the Church, we tend to reverse that relationship, so that for practical purposes, the Old Testament becomes a kind of appendix to the New, even though we continue to print it as a single volume (i) Old and (ii) New Testament. As early as the 1820s the great German theologian, F.D.E. Schleiermacher, suggested that Christians should break with that tradition by printing the two Testaments in the opposite order. He even went so far as to suggest that the single volume should consist of the New Testament and then a second part, containing only the psalms and the prophets. He concluded that, for 'historical fidelity and completeness of view' at least this much should be done. Noting that the psalms and prophets contain 'premonitions' of what came to full expression in Christ, he nevertheless insisted that we Christians 'who have actual experience' do not really need 'these earlier premonitions'.³

Some later scholars took these views even further. The great Adolf von Harnack (1851-1930) took the view that even if it had been right for the church in the 2nd century to retain the Old Testament as scripture and the decision of the majority of the protestant reformers of the 16th century to confirm that decision had been 'a fateful necessity', this did not mean that we should do so. He thought that retention of the Old Testament in this century was 'a sign of religious and ecclesiastical paralysis'.

It is worthy of note that two years after Harnack's death, the Nazis came to power in Germany, and the churches were soon being asked with a quite new urgency what their relationship was to things Jewish. There is no time to sketch the story here, but it would be true to say that those who opposed Hitler from within the church, opted for the Hebrew scripture and regularly found in its pages sustenance for the struggle with the Nazi state which the New Testament alone did not always provide.

4. A new/old way of relating the testaments.

In concluding this lecture, I propose to suggest a way in which modern Christians may read and use the Old Testament. It assumes a critical approach to the text and it builds, I think, on the perceptions of New Testament writers - particularly those of the apostle Paul.

The apostle Paul, formerly a pharisee missionary but now an apostle of Jesus Christ, clearly believed that the same God was at work in Jewish history as is now manifest in and through Jesus Christ. His treatment of the figure of Abraham makes this very clear. Abraham may have lived 2000 years earlier, but in Paul's view, the call to faith to which Abraham responded is not different in character from the call to which he himself had responded that day in the environs of Damascus. Indeed it is clear that Paul thought of Abraham, the forefather of Israel, as a Gentile who came to faith by believing the promise of the God who justifies the ungodly.

So Abraham, for Paul as for at least two others of the N.T. writers, is the prototype of the 'obedience of the faith' to which Christians are also called. Does this mean that Paul thought of Christ as being operative, in some way, in the centuries before the birth of Jesus? Certainly, deploying a midrash or reflective legend which does not appear in the text of our Bibles, he speaks of a rock which (according to the legend) followed the people in the desert, just as the fiery pillar and the cloud led them night and day. Then he says: 'The rock followed them and the Rock was Christ'. Now it is clear that he is not saying that Jesus (before birth, disguised as a water-giving rock) followed the people, but rather that the pre-existent Son i.e. that in God which was so vividly brought into view in Jesus, was always there.

In his mode of speaking, Paul stands (as it were) half-way between two other N.T. writers:

1. John, whose Jesus says: 'Abraham saw me, and he rejoiced to see my day,
and

2. The writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews, who suggests that the heroines and heroes of the Old Testament sensed or glimpsed at a distance, a city which they died without seeing. The Christians, on the other hand, for whom he is writing, can actually 'look' to Jesus, as to the pioneer and perfecter of faith.

We could talk more of the differences between these writers, but what is in common is all that need concern us now, that is, that the God who called the universe into being, who was operative in the history of Israel, is now speaking very intimately and closely in 'the Son'. So Paul sees (Romans 4) a continuity between (i) the creation out of nothing, (ii) the call of Abraham and the birth of Isaac, (iii) the raising of Jesus Christ from the dead (iv) the forgiveness of sin and the new life of the Christian.

So then, if there is such a degree of continuity, as between the Old and the New for Paul, what is new? What is that new thing for which he was prepared to risk hostility and misrepresentation, the termination of old friendships, shipwrecks and beatings?

I think the answer is bound up in what he called the 'gospel', the good news whose 'truth' or 'integrity' he refused to compromise. And, when all is said, what is that 'gospel'? Surely this - that the God who had called Abraham the gentile out of Ur, made him the forebear of the Jewish people and made him relate to him appropriately by faith alone, was now clearly calling people everywhere - women as well as men, Gentiles as well as Jews, people of every race and colour - to the life of faith and obedience. The gospel is the good news of the universal call of God. And, furthermore, this that God is issuing it —

not through the media that people normally look to, i.e., church and state, but through the executed man, Jesus, put to death by the authorities of both.

The irony for Paul lies in the fact that God calls the human race in and through one who is condemned to death by the guardians of what we normally prize - law and good order, as represented by the Roman Empire, and the highest religion that the world had ever known.

Paul is quite clear, of course, that the call to faith is already there in the pages of Torah. Speaking sadly of his orthodox contemporaries, he says that 'to this day, when they read the old covenant a veil lies over their minds', so that they do not see what is actually there. This same way of thinking is found in Luke in the story of the two Emmaus disciples and the stranger who overtakes them on their way home. He 'opened to them the scriptures and showed them the things about himself' and their 'hearts burned within them'. The implication, in the Paul passage (2 Cor.3) is, of course, that if it were not for the 'veil', they would recognise the essence of the gospel in the pages of Torah itself.

One last point. It has to do with, on the one hand, taking historical critical methods seriously and, on the other, with courageously taking seriously the continuing operation of the Holy Spirit. Even in the New Testament, we are obliged to do what the New Testament itself calls 'testing the spirits'. Each of the twenty-seven writings of the New Testament is grappling with serious questions, the most pressing of which concerns the meaning of the death of Jesus. They are coping with the implications of their belief that God had vindicated Jesus by raising him from the dead. The implications they draw are not uniformly magnanimous. Even Paul and John are not wholly consistent in this exercise: it must always be rather a shock to the reader to find that the author of 1 John, who wrote as beautifully of love as anyone ever has, could also withhold it so coldly from those who had withdrawn from his own community or had been expelled from it.

The New Testament documents have a normative character for us which stems from their proximity to the beginnings and their primal concern for the questions raised by the events surrounding Jesus. What they have to say is not always consistent with their own most nearly adequate responses. Our task is to 'test the spirits' by using them side by side with and even against one another. In such a dialogue with them we may hope to catch the accents of the One with whom they were themselves in dialogue.

Now if the above is conceded with reference to the reading of the New Testament texts, it must also be true in our reading the Old. Its texts must be read according to their own intention, insofar as we can uncover that. Samson, Elisha, Isaac and Ruth will be there — not as prefigurings of events which were to happen later, but as figures of real historical life, undergoing real moral crisis, real pathos, real trust in God. Not all their responses can be recognised as adequate, nor can the representation of them by the writers. The Christian reader will not only test them, but will also compassionate with them in the light of that universal call to faith in and through the crucified Jesus which the Christian has no excuse for not hearing and responding to.

Footnotes

1. Emil Brunner, 'The significance of the Old Testament for our faith', in The Old Testament and Christian Faith, Essays by Rudolf Bultmann and others, ed. B.W. Anderson, London 1964, 264.
2. Of course, there are passages of the Old Testament which have for so long been received in Christian circles as referring to Christ that it is almost impossible for Christians to think of them as referring to anyone else, e.g. Lamentation 1.12: 'Is it nothing to you, all ye that pass by? behold and see if there be any sorrow like unto my sorrow...etc.' - a verse whose resonances are deepened further by the familiar setting of it by Handel.
There seems to be no reason, liturgical or devotional, why this should discontinue, provided at other times we recognise the original referents of such passages.
3. F.D.E. Schleiermacher, The Christian Faith, ET ed. H.R. Mackintosh and J.S. Stewart, Edinburgh 1928, 1969, 609-11.

Response

30th September 1994

Revd William Riley

On behalf of Bible Society and of all of us assembled here this evening, I wish to thank Terence McCaughey for his carefully prepared —and thought-provoking paper. In it he has clearly stated some of the problems and indicated some valuable solutions. Our speaker has put before us a very challenging topic for our consideration this evening. As he has indicated, we can even see it as a challenge to our honesty, as individuals and as churches: while proclaiming publicly that we believe in the Holy Spirit who speaks through the Scriptures of Israel, our reaction to the Old Testament in its private or liturgical use is less than enthusiastic and much of the sacred Text remains largely a closed book. Of course there are good reasons for this. The genealogies that once helped people to have a place in their community and its history now appear to be only interminable lists of unpronounceable names. The cleanliness laws and sacrificial directions that were once a central part of biblical religion, guiding the daily practices of Temple and household, seem strange and foreign to us. Not only can we not imagine following them, we find it hard to realise why such detail was ever a necessary part of revealed religion! Yet, paradoxically, there is another side to our reaction and our experience of the Old Testament.¹

We know that there are stirring stories, majestic poems, overflowing measures of wisdom and piercing trumpet blasts that summon us to justice and worship. The Ten Commandments and the Twenty-Third Psalm are not isolated gems shining among the mud: they are expressions of the heart-beat of Old Testament religion, a religion of the love of God and neighbour, a religion of seeking God with a whole heart, a religion which continues in the Good News of Jesus and reaches its fullness there.

But there are still those genealogies...

Since the Old Testament is such a varied collection of material containing poetry as well as prose, tragedy as well as comedy, the stories of ordinary folk as well as the tales of the rich and famous, any response to the "Why" posed in tonight's title must also be wide enough to embrace the whole range we meet in these Scriptures. Explaining what our "Why" means in practical terms might indeed mean that we are discovering a variety of answers contained within that single answer. In undertaking this exercise, I am drawing upon my own ecclesial tradition and the thinking evident in recent documents of the Catholic Church. Our "Why", of course, is traditionally expressed by referring to the Old Testament as the Word of God, a Word which is spoken to us in human language. Working out the implications of this meeting of divine and human realities in the Scriptures has close affinities with the working out of similar implications inherent in the

¹ I accept the reservations that Terence McCaughey has expressed about the designation "Old Testament" and its inherent problems. "Hebrew Bible" also has its problems. The determination of the actual text is not confined to the Massoretic Text, as that phrase may imply, nor is it confined to Hebrew manuscripts. Some churches, including the Catholic Church, recognise as canonical several writings that are not represented in the Hebrew Bible - the deuterocanonical books. "First Testament" and "Second Testament" are in use in some transatlantic circles, but this has not gained widespread acceptance and similar problems to those Terence McCaughey has noted concerning the common use lie in these terms, albeit somewhat further beneath the surface. Personally, I would prefer finding a solution in different nouns rather than in different modifiers - such as referring to the Old Testament as "the Scriptures" (as the New Testament writers have done) and referring to the New Testament as "the Testament" or some more appropriate term. I fear that any suggestion, no matter how laudable, faces the problem of two millennia of common usage.

mystery of the Incarnation.² Whatever the details, we must beware of the twin dangers of denying the Scriptures their identity as the Word of God (by classifying them as purely human documents belonging to a far distant past) and of denying their human expression (by minimising the effects of such things as background, literary convention, language etc. upon the sacred text).³ The Scriptures are, at one and the same time, something divine and something human.

The serious reader of the Old Testament seems first to encounter the human reality of the Scriptures - a dimension that at times seems more incomprehensible and more confusing than the divine! Mr. McCaughey has correctly emphasised the historico-critical approach employed by scholars from all traditions as the basic method in exploring this aspect of the text. Through this method we come closer and closer to being able to state what the original author actually intended to communicate in a particular writing. The historico-critical method as used today has the full backing of many churches and is deemed by the Catholic Church to be an essential means for discovering this original and literal sense of the Scriptures.⁴

But is the original sense the only sense a passage possesses? The historico-critical method tends to say that it is, but other ways of studying text suggest that, in this, the historico-critical method is mistaken. Modern ways of reading texts - secular texts as well as religious texts - have emphasised that written texts can contain far more than what the author intended.⁵

We do not depend upon modern literary theory for this insight when it comes to Scriptural texts. Other interpreters, such as St. Paul and Jesus himself, find that the most important meaning of a text is often something quite distinct from the meaning intended by the author. The most obvious example is Paul's allegory of Abraham's two sons.⁶

When Paul refers to Abraham's two sons as an allegory,⁷ he hardly meant to deny that the original author has intended any other meaning to the Genesis narrative. However, Paul was finding the relevant meaning of the passage in a new way and discovered that, at a different level, the text spoke of the Law, promise, persecution and belonging to God's People. There are times at which Jesus does not seem to identify the meaning of a text simply with its original meaning, as is evident in his discussion with the expert in the Law over the meaning of "neighbour". The original sense of that word in the Leviticus text can be identified (through the historico-critical method) as meaning another member of one's own community. Jesus takes that text forward so that the word includes far more; by saying that neighbour can mean someone from across political and religious divisions, Jesus is teaching that this text means more than the original author's intention.

Are Jesus and Paul misusing biblical texts? By no means! They are discussing something more than the original meaning; they are discussing the meaning for their own day as

² Second Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (Dei Verbum), §13; Address of Pope John Paul II "On the Interpretation of the Bible in the Church", §6 and 6.

³ Second Vatican Council Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (Dei Verbum), §12; Address of Pope John Paul II "On the Interpretation of the Bible in the Church", §7.

⁴ Second Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (Dei Verbum), §12; The Pontifical Biblical Commission, The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church (Rome, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1993), pp. 39-41, 79.

⁵ The Pontifical Biblical Commission, The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church (Rome, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1993) pp. 74-5- For further references and disaission, see William Riley, "Situating Biblical Narrative: Poetics and the Transmission of Community 'Values'", Proceedings of the Irish Biblical Association 9 (1985), pp. 38-52

⁶ Galatians 4:22-31

⁷ Gal 4:24

these texts spoke to themselves and to their audience; the same Spirit that once spoke through these texts in their original setting continues to speak in new situations, and above all, in the new situation of the Christ event.⁸ In the history of Scripture study, this is often referred to as the “spiritual sense” of a text.⁹ If “spiritual sense” conveys something that you make up as you go along, or something that is sentimental and individualistic, then it is a bad term.¹⁰ The spiritual sense has nothing to do with that. It is, rather, grasping the inner momentum of the text itself, so the spiritual sense must be firmly rooted in the original meaning.¹¹ However, recognising the importance of the spiritual sense liberates a text from the shackles that can limit its significance to the day and hour of its composition. To take an example, as students of the Bible, we must consider the Psalm 110 in terms of the Jerusalem Temple and the Royal Court; but when we pray it as Christians, we are celebrating the kingship of our Saviour. These senses do not contradict. As Terence McCaughey has indicated, they merge and blend in the great symphony of God’s Word.

As Christians, we need to rediscover the excitement and truth of the Scriptures of Israel, the Scriptures beloved of Jesus and his earliest followers. Perhaps no one should weep if an occasional genealogy is never read out on a Sunday morning or if the laws in Leviticus concerning leprosy are not taught in our National Schools — even though such texts do lead us into a fuller understanding of passages in both Testaments. But if we omit the stories and celebrations that capture this ancient questing after God, if we overlook the way in which God has spoken to his people Israel, then we have cut ourselves off from the very source of the faith and spirituality proclaimed in the Good News of Jesus Christ. To me, that seems a good enough “Why” for Then, for Now and Forever.

⁸ See 2 Corinthians 3:14-18 where the Spirit (as given to Christians) is identified as the principle of understanding for the Scriptures.

⁹ The Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* (Rome, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1993) pp. 81-83.

¹⁰ Sometimes proponents of this subjective and non-scientific approach have referred to it as a “mystical exegesis” - another misnomer. See Address of Pope John Paul II “On the Interpretation of the Bible in the Church”, §5.

¹¹ The Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* (Rome, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1993), pp. 80 and 82